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Martin Luther King Jr. and the 21st Century

We give thanks to the Creator God, to Ndugu T'Ofori-Atta (George Thomas), a brother for more than 20 years, who asked me to pinch-hit or substitute for Lerone Bennett, and to Roseanna Brannon, administrative coordinator for PACCC I.

I want to first start with my relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr. It was thirty years ago *today* that I met Martin. Indeed, 30 years ago, three Blacks and two whites, from different backgrounds, made a commitment to stand up for justice together. We all piled into a station wagon—starting off in Little Rock, Arkansas and driving throughout the south. That was 1958 and you can imagine what happened. Also, in 1958, we went to his house while he was recovering from a stab wound that occurred in New York City. This was the beginning of my relationship with Martin.

We all know men and women who were and are great, so I'm not just talking about Martin King, I'm talking about the movement, the people. The people who made him great. The Spirit that called forth the time and leaders such as Jesse Jackson. The movement also brought people of color and allies to a greater day. From Martin, Jesse, Rosa and Fannie-Lou and so many others knew how to transform the fear and hatred into positive and creative energy. Our role is not to be reactors, but to be creators. For that I think is what is meant by being created in the image of the Creator God. We are to create. We can remember the words of one of Martin's

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teachers, Mahatma Gandhi, who said, "Anything that I have done, any woman or man can do if one submits self to the same discipline." Then we remember also what a greater teacher taught who said, "There will be some who will do greater works than I have done." There is power in us. King is the example of that.

There are five aspects that I think we should remember as we move toward the twenty-first century: first, as living sacrifices; second, organizing the poor; third, the urban challenge; fourth, the problem of violence, and fifth, the issue of racism. Martin did not live long enough to handle all the problems of sexism or drugs and others now left for us to engage.

Let's start where King ended. King's life ended in Memphis, not to give glorious speeches or receive an award. The first issue: King was there to stand up with the garbage workers. From the time when Dr. King stood on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol in March, 1965 and delivered the speech which officially ended the great Selma-to-Montgomery March, he also signaled the focus of the next stages, the final stages, of his life. "Let us march on segregated housing...segregated schools, on poverty, on ballot boxes,...until decent housing,...socially healing classrooms, children may eat, men work...racists silenced. I choose to give my life...If it means sacrificing, suffering, dying, "I'm going that way, because I heard a voice saying, "Do something for others."

The second issue: Martin wanted to know how can we organize the poor? How can we teach the poor to organize themselves? King wrestled with that during the last few years of his life, more so with poverty and economic injustice: Poverty that is enforced on people by those who are called the oppressors. King looked at how poor people were powerless. Anyone who thinks about the 21st century knows that economic exploitation is/will be the issue of our time. There is no way to deal with anything unless we deal with economic injustice. We here are among the economic elites and have forgotten the pain of being poor. So the question in the 21st

century will be with whom will the economic elites stand? King went to Memphis to stand up for the garbage workers.

The third issue of the twenty-first century is the tremendous challenge of the urban experience in the world. The dislocation that industrialization has caused against people and the contradictions in the urban context. For King, in his last years, the northern cities were the place of the crucial struggle for the future of America. Therefore, he was saying, "I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor, the hungry. So the streets of Chicago and Los Angeles, Detroit and Washington, Philadelphia and Harlem were the new points of challenge! King was deeply concerned about the young people of these cities and the increasingly alienated, unemployed and undirected lives they led. He was concerned about the poor of the cities and the rural areas. King went to Memphis, to an urban context in crises.

The fourth issue that we must deal with in the 21st century is the problem of violence. Martin King knew that we could not exist if we trust in war. He knew that one people's security cannot be built on other peoples' insecurity, for we are interdependent. People who believe in violence cannot go around singing, "Jesus loves the little children," if he/she kills little children. Martin King said, "Anyone who is a Christian should be a conscientious objector." He also understood that the vast sums of money required to provide the housing, schooling, urban renewal, employment and community services we needed (and still need and will need to provide for the well being of our nation) were in competition with the build up in Vietnam and more...the constantly increasing military budget. King felt that prosecuting the war in Vietnam, at the expense of America's people in need, was damaging not only to the cause of the poor but to the nation's spirit as well. "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

The fifth issue that needs to be reckoned with is racism. That's what

Jesse was trying to tell us last night (at the Atlanta Democratic Convention, 1988), that we must find a common ground so that we can relate to each other. That is how we deal with racism. King had said, "To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious...they do not know that the Good News was meant for all men—for Communist and Capitalist, for their children and ours, for Black and white, for revolutionary and conservative." King claimed an even more fundamental identity as a child of God. "Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed," he said, "is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood." What does it mean to be daughters and sons of the living God, who is also Parent of all the daughters and sons we call enemies? Martin was more clear on South Africa in the '50s and '60s than some of us are in the '80s.

The last thing we need to deal with in the 21st century is finding the answer through community. We need to understand that Martin King tried to teach us that we have the power in ourselves. And so, I would like to end remembering another brother, Franz Fanon, in the *Wretched of the Earth*, who on his dying bed, challenged us not to copy Europe but renew some of the communal lifestyles of our ancestors. We are to create ways to live out the divine nature in us. Martin knew that was true for the first century and would be true for the last century.