Maine Voices: Martin Luther King Jr. showed us how to achieve equality and justice

His moral pragmatism drew from our founders' ideals and the certainty that work was required.

BY JOSEPH W. MCDONNELL SPECIAL TO THE PRESS HERALD JANUARY 18, 2016

We celebrate the life and legacy of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. this year against a disturbing background of racially related events – police officers killing unarmed young black men in Baltimore, Cleveland, Madison, Minneapolis and Chicago, sparking demonstrations in those cities; an avowed white supremacist slaughtering nine congregants at the Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina; and college students protesting racial discrimination on many college campuses.

Martin Luther King inspired the nation by his words, his actions, his character and his courage. On this national holiday, nearly 50 years after King’s death, we pause to reflect on today’s social injustices.

King drew upon three traditions: the Judeo-Christian teachings of Jesus and the prophets; the American Founding Fathers, especially their proclamations on equality; and Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence as a method of social change.

As an ordained Baptist minister, King preached a gospel of social justice, confident that God was guiding him in creating a more equitable society. After a white supremacist threatened his life, King prayed for strength.

He said he experienced the divine presence and heard a voice saying, “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever.” With that support, King led without fear in the prophetic tradition of dissidents – refusing to surrender God’s truths to man’s unjust laws.

King identified with the Israelites’ flight from persecution in Egypt, their wandering in the desert and their longing to enter the Promised Land.
The night before he died he prophetically proclaimed, “I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!”

King’s Promised Land breaks down all human differences and brings all God’s children together at the table of brotherhood without distinction of race, creed, color, gender or status.

It is an idealized moral community that values the content of character more than the color of skin or the size of a wallet.

In the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial, King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, which he envisioned as a second Gettysburg address to remind the nation of the Founding Fathers’ declaration of equality for all people.

King shared with his adversaries the belief in the Judeo-Christian creed and the American promise of inalienable rights – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He held up a mirror to society for all to see where the country, its laws and its leaders fell short of their own ideals.

King complemented his idealistic vision with a thoroughly pragmatic approach to change. In adopting Gandhi’s method of nonviolent resistance, King saw passive resistance as an extension of his Christian beliefs and a middle ground between acquiescence to the status quo and the futile pursuit of change through violence.

He knew that real change required not just a change of laws but also a change of heart. The unearned suffering of those practicing nonviolent resistance, he preached, was redemptive because it gave the sufferer a higher moral purpose.

After King’s death, some conservatives usurped King’s colorblind vision to buttress their opposition to affirmative action, while ignoring King’s demands for compensatory measures to achieve a colorblind society. On the other end of the political spectrum, the hope of integration failed to resonate with some African Americans living in our cities’ bleakest ghettos. Black militant groups repudiated King for his patience, pacifism and pragmatism while they pursued a revolutionary path to social justice.
At the end of the Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march, King told his followers that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” King believed it bent not on its own but bent because people worked hard to move society toward justice.

Children born today into the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, whether black, brown or white, are trapped in a cycle of poverty with little chance of climbing out.

Too often, the ladder has no rungs at the bottom.

King recognized that economic inequality was at the root of social injustice. He called for a Marshall Plan – a crash program in education, housing, child-rearing, job-training and health care to address the crisis of the underprivileged.

Martin Luther King has bequeathed to us his philosophy of moral pragmatism – an invitation to become instruments in bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

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