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Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

Understanding and Empathy1

by Albert Gore Jr.

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Editors' introduction: Albert Gore Jr. spoke on January 19, 1998, at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, where civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. had served as pastor. With affirmative action policies and practices throughout the country being challenged in the courts and in the Congress, Gore used this historic setting to advocate a new initiative by the Clinton administration on civil rights. In an uncharacteristic, emotionally charged delivery, Gore opposed those who would "roll back equal opportunity." "Let us not weary," he urged, "as we address the unfinished agenda."

What is racism? Is it merely a mistake in reasoning, an erroneous conclusion based on faulty logic which, once corrected, can be banished from human society?

Albert Gore Jr.'s speech: Today, we honor the memory of Martin Luther King Jr., and rededicate ourselves to his work. Thirty years ago, the first eulogies to Dr. King recalled what was said in Genesis by the brothers of Joseph: "Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit ... and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

Thirty years later, that is still the question: what will become of Dr. King's dream?

It is ironic that some of the modern apostles of apathy now misappropriate Dr. King's own words to support their belief that the struggle for justice in which he led us is nearly over—and that the time has come for our policies to be, in their phrase, "color-blind."

Let's start at the beginning: what is racism? Is it merely a mistake in reasoning, an erroneous conclusion based on faulty logic which, once corrected, can be banished from human society? Or is it something deeper and more powerful, more threatening and more persistent?

Dr. King taught us that as human beings, we are vulnerable to the sin of racism. As a young man, he studied the teachings of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who had written that it is foolish to regard racism, in his words, "as a mere vestige of barbarism when it is in fact a perpetual source of conflict in human life." Niebuhr criticized those who "wrongly drew the conclusion ... that racial prejudice is a form of ignorance which could be progressively dispelled by enlightenment. Racial prejudice is indeed a form of irrationality;" he said, "but it is not as capricious as modern universalists assume."

What is it about human nature that creates this persistent vulnerability to the sin of racism?

First and foremost, the Bible teaches us, in the words of the Apostle John: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

In creating an integrated society, it is foolish and naive to imagine that our differences will disappear.

But the Bible also teaches that we have the capacity to overcome evil with good. We're called upon to choose. In the words of the famous hymn:

"Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide
In the strife for truth and falsehood
For the good or evil side."

There is a tendency, rooted in human nature, to group up with those who look like ourselves. In the Apocrypha, which is part of Catholic scripture, it is written: "flesh consorteth according to kind, and a man will cleave to his like."

So even though we understand that diversity is an enriching and ennobling strength, in creating an integrated society, it is foolish and naive to imagine that our differences will disappear and relinquish their claims upon us. Indeed, our challenge is to appreciate and celebrate our differences, as a necessary prelude to transcending them in order to join together in celebrating what we all have in common as children of God.

That does not mean that we ignore difference. Indeed, we ignore it at our peril. Dr. John Hope Franklin has taught that the most important lesson of his long single life of scholarship is that race is always present. Pretending it isn't is naive. But if properly acknowledged and sensibly dealt with, race can be transcended.

It is far from easy to acknowledge and celebrate differences while simultaneously transcending them, because differences among people automatically carry the potential for unleashing an impulse to compare, to magnify whatever feelings of insecurity, or abandonment, or loss each individual feels in his or her soul.

Why did Cain slay Abel?

He felt "disrespected"—because God regarded his offerings *differently* from those of Abel. "It came to pass ... that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him."

Why was Joseph, resplendent in his coat of many colors, thrown into that pit and left for dead by his brothers?

They felt "disrespected" because their father regarded them *differently* from Joseph. Why do so many young men on the streets with empty lives and loaded guns slay their brothers? They tell us time and again that their brothers "disrespected" them. And often what they are really feeling is that their fathers disrespected them by abandoning their mothers and them.

Rival gangs adopt rival colors. The slight difference between a blue bandana and a red bandana has led to the senseless loss of many lives.

Those who are quick to feel disrespected often have a spiritual vacuum in their lives, because they feel disconnected to the love of their Father in Heaven. False gods force their way into the hole in their hearts. They search for meaning and respect in trivial forms of group identification. Rival gangs adopt rival colors. The slight difference between a blue bandana and a red bandana has led to the senseless loss of many lives.

What is the difference between Hutus and Tutsis? Outsiders who visit Rwanda have difficulty telling them apart. But their slight differences have served as a trigger for an horrific genocide.

Look at Bosnia. There, too, outsiders can't tell the different groups apart. Look at Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Chechnya, Nogorno-Karabakh, and a hundred other places that dot the broken landscape of our hurting world. In all these places, slight differences have served as an excuse to unleash the evil that lies coiled in the human soul.

Sometimes it seems that the smaller the difference, the more explosive the violence. At the beginning of this century, our greatest scientist, Albert Einstein, taught us that the most powerful and destructive force on earth is found in the smallest container so small we can't even see it with the naked eye—the atom. Controlling our vulnerability to racism is every bit as crucial to the future of humankind as controlling the atom.

Our nation was founded on the basis of a highly sophisticated understanding of human nature, which took our vulnerability to sin into account. That's why we have checks and balances, in a Constitution that has been emulated by freedom loving people all over this earth.

One of our founders, James Madison, wrote these words: "So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities that ... the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts. ... The latent causes ... are ... sown in the nature of man; and ... cannot be removed. ... Relief is only to be sought in ... controlling its effects. ... The majority ... must be rendered ... unable to ... carry into effect schemes of oppression." As we have struggled throughout our history to perfect our union, slavery and other manifestations of virulent racism have stained our national conscience.

When the Cherokees were forced on their fateful trail of tears. When Mexican-Americans were forcibly removed from farms and ranches. When Irish immigrants escaping famine encountered signs in Boston saying "no dogs or Irish allowed." When innocent and loyal Japanese-Americans were imprisoned at the outset of World War II, and when Hispanic heroes of World War II—who helped all our soldiers end the Holocaust against millions of European Jews and the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Chinese—came home, they were denied burial in military cemeteries.

We've left Egypt, but don't tell me we've arrived in Canaan.

But in the aftermath of that war—a war in which Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds joined together to defeat the racist rulers of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan—minority groups were emboldened to insist that America live up to our values. Thurgood Marshall led the charge in our courts. And the mass movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave us a chance to redeem our nation's soul. And much progress has been made.

Yet now we hear voices in America arguing that Dr. King's struggle is over—that we've reached the promised land. Maybe they're just carried away by the arrival of the Millennium. Maybe they are deluding themselves that when the calendar turns to the year 2000, man will be perfected.

These people who now call for the end of policies to promote equal opportunity say there's been so much progress that no more such efforts are justified. But they fail to recognize that the tap root of racism is almost 400 years long.

When I was eight years old, in Carthage, Tennessee, my family and I lived in a little house on Fisher Avenue, halfway up a hill. At the top of the hill was a big old mansion. One day, as the property was changing hands, the neighbors were invited to an open house. My father said: "Come, son, I want to show you something." And we walked up the hill and into the front door.

But instead of dwelling in the parlor, or the ornate dining room, or on the grand staircase, my father took me down to the basement and pointed to the dark, dank stone walls— and the cold metal rings in a row.

Slave rings.

We've left Egypt, but don't tell me we've arrived in Canaan.

Don't tell me that our persistent vulnerability to racism has suddenly disappeared, and that we now live in a color-blind society.

What would Dr. King see if he were here with us and walked out of this church, taking us on a tour of America in 1998?

I believe Dr. King would be proud that in the past 30 years, we have cut in half the gap between black earnings and white earnings. But I believe he would not let us forget that the wealth of black and Hispanic households still averages less than one-tenth that of white households.

I believe he would be proud that African-American employment is at its highest level in history, and African-American poverty is at its lowest level in history; Thanks to President Clinton, all Americans are rising with the tide of a stronger economy. But I believe he would not let us forget us that African Americans earn roughly 62 cents on each dollar that white Americans earn; he would not let us forget that black unemployment is still twice as high as unemployment for whites.

I believe Dr. King would be proud that the gap in high school graduation between blacks and whites has now been virtually eliminated—and that more African Americans are going to college than ever before in American history. But I believe he would not let us forget that the drop-out rate among Hispanic Americans is still eight points higher, with barely half finishing high school, and far fewer going on to college.

If he were here today, I believe he would be proud that this administration has appointed more blacks, more Hispanics, more Asian Americans and Native Americans to Cabinet positions and judgeships and other high posts than ever before in our history. But I believe he would not let us forget that in so many places and professions, the glass ceiling still has not been shattered.

I believe he would be proud to see how much we have done to banish discrimination from our laws. But I believe he would tell us that we still have much to do in banishing discrimination from our hearts. And I believe he would tell us that we still have much to do to enforce the laws that are on our books.

That is why I am pleased to announce today that President Clinton and I are proposing, as part of his initiative on race, the largest single increase in the enforcement of our civil rights laws in nearly two decades. Through new reforms and through heightened commitment to enforcement, we will seek to prevent discrimination before it occurs, and punish those who do discriminate in employment, in education, in housing, in health care, in access for those with disabilities.

I believe Dr. King would be proud of how diverse American culture has become—with people of all races and ethnicities listening to each other's music, reading each other's books, living and working together. But I believe he would be disappointed by how destructive and dangerous some of our culture has become—with guns, drugs, and violence against women too often taking the place of family, faith, and community. I think he would find unacceptable the number of broken homes and the failure of too many fathers to accept responsibility for their children. I

think he would be heart-broken to see the devastation in too many inner-city communities, with boards still covering the windows and doors of some places burned in anger and grief three decades ago.

In the movie *Grand Canyon*, the character played by Danny Glover surveys a desolate portion of South Central Los Angeles and says, "It's not supposed to be this way."

Two thousand years ago, the Apostle Paul explained why it is this way: "All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong."

So it is appropriate on this day for us to focus on the work that remains to be done.

I believe Dr. King would urge us to get busy and that he would be proud that for people of all races, creeds, and colors, his birthday is a day of national reconciliation and service. But I believe he would be genuinely surprised that, as mayor Campbell said, some who actively oppose his agenda roll his words and phrases off their tongues even as they try to roll back equal opportunity.

The phrase "the content of our character" takes on a different meaning when it is used by those who pretend that that is all we need to establish a color-blind society. They use their color blind the way duck hunters use a duck blind. They hide behind the phrase and just hope that we, like the ducks, won't be able to see through it.

They're in favor of affirmative action if you can dunk the basketball or sink a three-point shot. But they're not in favor of it if you merely have the potential to be a leader in your community and bring people together, to teach people who are hungry for knowledge, to heal families who need medical care. So I say: we see through your color blind.

Religious, political, and economic freedom [is] the natural birth-right of all men and women.

Amazing Grace also saved me;

Was color-blind but now I see.

The Gospel of Luke tells us of Jesus's reaction to people who willfully refuse to see the evidence before their eyes: "When ye see a cloud rise out of the West, straightway ye say, there cometh a shower; and so it is. And when ye see the South wind blow, ye say, there will be heat; and it cometh to pass. Ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky and of the Earth; how is it that you do not discern this time?"

"Man sees on the outside, God sees on the inside."

I believe God has a plan for the United States of America, and has since our founding.

Our mission has always been to advance the cause of liberty and to prove that religious, political, and economic freedom [is] the natural birthright of all men and women, and that freedom unlocks a higher fraction of the human potential than any other way of organizing human society.

I believe in my heart that our nation also has another, closely-related mission—one that we did not fully understand when we counted each slave as three-fifths of a person—a mission we began to glimpse through a glass, darkly, as the terrible Civil War approached.

I believe that God has given the people of our nation not only a chance, but a mission to prove to men and women throughout this world that people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, of all faiths and creeds, can not only work and live together, but can enrich and ennoble both themselves and our common purpose.

We learned in school about the "lowest common denominator"; America is about the highest common denominator.

That is why Dr. King loved this country. He often spoke about "the glory of America, with all its faults." Even as he was persecuted, even as he was jailed, even as he was hunted, he spoke of the "glory of America, with all its faults." During the bus boycott, he said, "We are not wrong, God Almighty is wrong."

When the Supreme Court then struck down segregated transportation, Dr. King said: "That wasn't a victory for colored folks. Oh no, don't make the victory that small; that was a victory for justice and goodwill!"

And from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he told us of his dream that America would "live out the true meaning of its creed."

He was a patriot who always believed, as we do today, that America is indeed, the last, best hope of humankind. So just as we reproach the apostles of apathy who tell us our work is done, let us condemn those who spread hatred of America—those disciples of division who preach a

separatist philosophy and call people of a different race “devils.” To them, I commend the words of Dr. King when he said: “Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.”

We learned in school about the “lowest common denominator”; America is about the highest common denominator.

The alternatives to bitterness and hatred are understanding and empathy. And we must rise to the challenge with our hearts as well as our minds. We must use, in Niebuhr’s phrase, “every strategem of education and every resource of religion” to promote understanding and mutual respect. And in our hearts, we must nurture empathy.

In 1957, Dr. King quoted Gandhi in saying that “the appeal of reason is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man.”

Dr. King said of his approach to the white majority: “The Negro all over the South must come to the point that he can say to his white brother: We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force.” We will not hate you, but we will not obey your evil laws.

Many ridiculed his reliance on what he called “the weapon of non-violent protest.” But the white majority, I promise you, came to understand his humanity and the justice of his cause through his reliance on “soul force.”

In my tradition, we believe the world has been transformed by the willingness of Jesus Christ to suffer on the cross. Suffering binds us together, and enables us to see what we all have in common, and what we are called upon to do.

It can be summed up simply, as it was in the Gospel of Matthew: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

So let us not be weary in well-doing as we address the unfinished agenda. Let us make Dr. King’s dream our agenda for action. And remember, in the words of the hymn he loved:

“In Christ there is no East or West, In him, no South or North, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth. Join hands, disciples of the faith, whate’er your race may be, who serves my father as a child is surely kin to me.”

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