

KEEPER OF THE DREAM – “Certain Basic Questions”

January 20, 2020

At this time every year, we renew Dr. King’s faith in the dream he had for this country. I believe Dr. King would point to the many pressing and troubling issues today and ask: What is each of us doing to improve the condition of our community, America and the world?

In 1967, nearly a year before his death, Martin Luther King, Jr. was planning another march on Washington – a march to demand better jobs, better homes, and better education.

It was Dr. King’s strategic way of elevating the public conversation about the economic inequities perpetuated by institutional and societal racism, and by a political system where those in power too often disregard their responsibilities to address the many pressing issues of the powerless.

I recall those days as a time of urgency. There were protests against the Vietnam War, and nightly television broadcasts about the struggle for civil rights.

And, I recall how the drama played out in our family.

In March, 1965, my father, Rabbi Richard Hirsch responded to Dr. King’s call for clergy of all faiths to join him in Selma, Alabama for a pivotal voting rights demonstration.

I recall my mother wasn't exactly excited by my father walking into that dangerous situation, but she responded as she always had, telling my father he had to do his duty.

I recall my father describing how he stood with thousands in Selma listening to Dr. King. When Dr. King finished his remarks, he turned to my father and said, "You're next, Rabbi Hirsch." Surprised and unprepared, my father quickly gathered his thoughts, drew upon his faith and spoke of the wisdom of the Torah.

My father told the crowd: "According to Jewish tradition, God created man using dust from the four corners of the earth....so that no person would ever be able to say, 'The place from which I come is better than the place from which you come.'"

The crowd burst into overwhelming applause.

The lesson was clear: the struggle and campaign for social justice requires all of us to participate.

In 1967, Dr. King said: "I think it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights....(and) we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society."

The issues that Dr. King tried mightily to address during his life today remain largely unsolved, and in some cases, unaddressed. Is it because of a lack of understanding? A lack of will? Or have we become complacent with our own civil rights progress?

Important questions demand our attention.

For instance, while the unemployment rate is often cited as an indicator of the quality of life of Americans, why are too many Americans living in poverty?

As of November 2019, the unemployment rate stood at 3.5 percent in the U.S., and 4 percent in Michigan. By most economists' accounts, a lower rate means that more people are working. Having a job means that we are "doing well."

Yet what often does NOT get discussed is that 5.3 percent of the population – or 17.3 million people – live in deep poverty.

Today, we must ask a range of certain basic questions, such as:

- Why is it that there are Americans who cannot afford medical care?
- How many children are undernourished?

- How can it be that the U.S. ranks 33rd out of 36 of the so-called advanced economic countries in the (OECD¹) infant mortality rate?
- And, why have we allowed the unchecked practices of industry and obsessive consumerism to diminish our health and the health of the planet?

Fifty-five years after Bloody Sunday in Selma, how is it that an equally tragic event occurred at a white nationalist rally in 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia?

Why is there an increase in hate crimes against blacks, immigrants, transgender people and Jews? And, why are we inept at stopping these heinous crimes from happening?

What would our world look like if more of us heeded Martin Luther King's call to "raise certain basic questions about our whole society?"

If history teaches us anything, it's that the American Dream is strengthened when we ask questions – certain basic questions – about the quality of justice and opportunity.

Start asking those questions today.

1 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development includes Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, and 15 others.

- Start demanding answers to those questions.
- And then, maybe each of us can answer: What are we doing to make the world a better place?

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