Remembering and Renewing Dr. King’s Work

A few weeks ago we celebrated the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King. I am always happy to celebrate Dr. King, partly because I've spent a lot of time in Atlanta, Dr. King’s birthplace, but mainly because I believe he happens to be one of the greatest Americans to ever have lived. For undergraduate studies, I attended Morris Brown College, one of the institutions that makes up the Atlanta University Center. Although I arrived in Atlanta twenty-one years after Dr. King’s death, his presence was still deeply felt all over the city. In fact, my first real involvement celebrating MLK Day took place in Atlanta. Much of the sentiment surrounding his legacy centered on his work to assist people struggling with the conditions of poverty. Dr. King understood that the country would be much stronger if it focused more resources on our poverty-stricken brothers and sisters.

One of my biggest takeaways from Dr. King’s work is that we shouldn’t consider it normal that millions of people, mainly Black and Brown people, live in abject poverty or in neighborhoods wrought with hopelessness and despair. This mindset has contributed to the fact that, in spite of countless years of work to level the economic playing field, the field remains noticeably uneven. I believe that we have not properly assessed our country’s history in our efforts to address the shortcomings of present-day. We are quick to blame today’s citizens for the failings of yesteryear. When history is truly considered, we discover that the winners’ circle has not been drawn wide enough. An honest reflection of our country’s past will also cause us to conclude that America became the world power that it is today through collective effort. Our country’s success is the result of the blood, sweat and tears of ALL of its citizens. Those who have realized a semblance of success have done so with the help of an amalgamation of others. Thus, our aim as a country should be that of shared prosperity.

America’s economic well-being lies in how it defines poverty and how it treats those who are impoverished. A shift in how we view poverty can serve as the linchpin to a better tomorrow. Those who suffer from the conditions of poverty are not only blamed for those conditions but are often treated as less than human because of those conditions. The end result is a people void of hope and negated the opportunity to fully support themselves. What’s left are communities, many teeming with immense but untapped talent. This creates, in some, a sense of hopelessness.

The very definition of despair means “a loss of hope.” Many of our communities simply lack hope. I believe that individuals and communities respond internally to how they are treated externally. Tell a people that they aren’t valuable and, in time, far too many of them begin to believe it. We must provide more opportunities for poverty-stricken communities to operationalize their talents and intellect.

In the end, poverty is far more than a lack of income or a shortage of resources; it represents an absence of compassion on the part of those of us who are in position to help. Much of our national response to poverty has been a business-as-usual mentality, where we proceed through life as though hardship and despair are natural aspects of life. I understand that all of us won’t be millionaires, but that shouldn’t justify complete destitution for some in our society. This is the very reason Dr. King shifted his attention to the Poor People’s Campaign just prior to his death. He understood that, together, the country would be much stronger if it espoused shared prosperity.

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