

COME OUT OF THE WILDERNESS !!!

ED BIEGERT

On Friday, April 4, 2008, we regrettably mark the 40th anniversary of the death by assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. You may recall that it happened in the city of Memphis, Tennessee. King had come there to address a rally of the city sanitation (garbage) workers and their families and supporters who were on strike for higher wages, shorter hours, family health benefits and various other labor grievances. In the year or two leading up to the Memphis visit, against the advice of many of his more conservative advisors, King had started to speak out on the more controversial social and economic issues and was addressing matters of international and economic injustice and human rights, rather than simply talking and writing exclusively about racial bigotry, its implications and the more obvious discriminations faced only by black Americans. He was fond of saying to those who desired that he remain the

poster boy' and voice for a narrowly-defined civil rights movement in the U.S. that was based solely on racial issues and grievances:

'No, I refuse to be stereotyped in this or in any other way. Obviously, I am dedicated to the struggle of the negro in America, but the point is that while we rightly take pride in our race in America, our final commitment is to the human race – the point of our struggle for justice and freedom is to empower all God's people.' (NOT A DIRECT QUOTE)

It wasn't that the black power' movement of Stokely Carmichael and other so-called militants was too radical for King; indeed, it was not radical enough . MLK, you see, understood that he was not merely to be viewed as a spokesman for blacks in America; but essentially as a spokesman for America and, yes, for the entire human family, a spokesman who happened to be black. Of course, King was proud of his race and dedicated to its struggle; however, he had the vision to understand that we are all one, that we are all on the same journey, that we all have the same basic needs and desires, that we are all called to move out of the wilderness into a land of compassion, equality and peace.

No doubt, King was on that mission and message from an early age, some would say that he was pre-destined and foreordained for such a role while still in the womb. But certainly his philosophy/theology had crystallized by the time of his student days at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University. He became a man for all seasons, but he was born in and responded to the particular “season” in which he found himself -- the season we all know of as the American Civil Rights Movement.

Leadership asks that the one who would be leader respond at the first to the context which they are given in life, before they seek out issues and concerns that are more global and universal in nature. The significance of King is all the more profound and convincing because he did not, at least at first, seek out the limelight of the powerful leader. He only reluctantly accepted the presidency of a bus boycott movement in Montgomery, Alabama , which became the Montgomery Improvement Association. This protest began, of course, when Rosa Parks refused to take a seat in the back of a city bus. King accepted this position only when he

was given the assurance by the black community that the bus boycott campaign would be non-violent. This embryonic movement achieved national recognition and political success in a year and set the non-violent, direct-action style of his movement for the next fourteen years

It was not an easy struggle for King, his associates and the people of the movement. Tried, tested, beaten and jailed, they sometimes bent, but never broke. The bus boycott was successful, but only the beginning. King and a colleague, Fred Shuttlesworth, founded the Southern Leadership Council on Civil Rights, creating an extensive movement throughout the South by establishing a network through the black churches. He extended the movement's reach from beyond Montgomery to the whole state of Alabama, then to his native Georgia and the entire south and then extending the movement to the nation as a whole. He battled for public accommodations, for voting rights and for fair housing. While he also worked to achieve racial equality in public education, that issue was, in law and theory, if not in actuality, resolved before his work began. He won many battles—his movement brought about many new laws that made many forms of racial equality possible, but, despite advances, he knew that

the people were still not out of the wilderness-not by far. With each step he took in furthering the cause of justice and equality, he became more controversial to more people and alienated some people and structures which gave him tacit support when the issues were “black and white”(no pun intended). For instance, King and the movement found great resistance when he brought the issue north of the Mason-Dixon line to the urban areas of Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, etc.

But the divisiveness was not just because of white racism that existed in the urban North, as well as the rural South. King encountered divisions within the black membership of the civil rights movement. King was not captive either to the traditional black civil rights leadership that had its dominant base in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the NAACP and the Urban League nor, even more so, the more “risk-taking” black college and university students of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as well as many unemployed urban blacks. While a few of the early King supporters kept arms length from him when he began to “flirt” with and exert leadership in non-traditional American Civil Rights areas

such as economics (poverty and the redistribution of wealth) and foreign policy (Vietnam), he never wavered in his non-violent approach to social change. While the “ends” of his vision matured, the non-violent “means” he was committed to always remained a constant. The wilderness journey he led was long and difficult, but he saw that the land of promise was within reach, if not apparently his.

Like Moses, King did not reach the “promised land”. He did not live to see the vision of a society in which the fullness of justice and equality was realized. But he lived with the assurance it would happen—by insight he ‘saw’ that we would reach the destination, King was optimistic that change would happen and the life-affirming spirit would win out, but he was realistic in understanding that the time was not yet here. He was unsure of the immediate future and doubted if he would be delivered from the wilderness himself. Just hours before the assassin’s bullet ended his life, he ended his final speech with these prophetic words:

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve seen the mountaintop. I’ve been to it. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life.

Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now.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. I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. For mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” (the closing paragraph of King's final speech at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee on the night of April 3, 1968.)

The next day King was dead. But as he said the dream did not die with him. It's there for those, like King, who have the eyes to see the reality that is on the other side of the wilderness. I am not one that believes in the spiritual significance of numbers. However, you do not need to claim to be , like I heard one T.V. evangelist call himself, 'a doctor of biblical numerology', to understand that whenever the number '40' is used in biblical literature, it denotes a time period of trial and testing – i.e., the 40 days and nights of Noah's flood, Moses on the mountaintop for 40 days, Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days and nights, (which explains the Christian Lenten period), Israel wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, etc.

I am not interested in promoting these number stories as literally true, but is it not interesting and worth noting that

this is the 40th anniversary of King's death and we still have not come out of the wilderness. We are a little closer-maybe, but it is still over the river. Maybe this is the 40th year for us. King is waiting in the promised land.

COME OUT OF THE WILDERNESS !!!

Ed Biegert and his wife, Jan, are both Coordinators at ICL and have been members for 7 years Ed marched, worshiped and/or met with Dr. King at least 7 times in the 1950's and 1960's.