

Honoring the Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King



by Sharleen Leahey



TO HONOR of the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. I recently presented an exploration of the civil rights movement through song and stories to a high school history class in Central New Jersey.

The class presentation, focusing on economic aspects of the civil rights struggle, began with students reading excerpts from Dr. King's famous "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail" written on April 16, 1963. In the letter Dr. King urgently described the plight of African-American citizens "smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society."

We began with the provocative and upbeat song "It Isn't Nice" by Malvina Reynolds. Describing the dramatic marches and civil disobedience actions taking place throughout the American South, Malvina castigated the critics of civil disobedience:

"You were quiet just like mice . . . now you say we aren't nice . . . But if that is freedom's price, we don't mind."

We next turned to the classic "Blowing In the Wind" written over 50 years ago by the folk legend Bob Dylan. Performed from the same platform where Dr. King famously delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech in August 1963, Dylan presents the listener with a series of questions:

"How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see?"

The final song, "The Ballad of Martin Luther King" by Mike Mellius, chronicles Dr. King's 13-year career beginning with the 1955 Bus Boycott in Montgomery, Alabama and ending with his assassination in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968.

Reflecting on the last year of Dr. King's life, the students were moved to contemplate that he died while standing up for impoverished sanitation workers who were being denied a living wage. Unable to fulfill his plans to lead a Poor Peoples Caravan to Washington D.C., one of the greatest leaders in American history was killed in the prime of his life leaving a traumatized and divided nation.

Through powerful stories and songs which chronicled Dr. King's courage and compassion, students revisited a time in American history when millions of oppressed people were empowered to lift themselves out of despair and poverty. As the nation prepares to celebrate Dr. King's birthday the students were challenged to consider the relevance of Dr. King's words and deeds for our citizens living in America today.

A great poet once said, "when truth is replaced by silence, silence is a lie." Today in America, our mainstream media pundits constantly focus on gang violence and crime in our cities. Is it not a crime that politicians bought and paid for by powerful corporate interests are draining our communities by denying funds for education and jobs for our young people? Is it not a crime that TRILLIONS of our tax dollars, over half of our annual budget, are wasted on endless, illegal wars? Is it not a crime that over 800 U.S. bases across the globe are swallowing our resources, causing huge debt and crushing the dreams of our children? As Martin Luther King once said:

"There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war."

A Revolution of Values

from "The World House"
by Martin Luther King Jr.*

The stability of the large world house which is ours will involve a revolution of values to accompany the scientific and freedom revolutions engulfing the earth. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing"-oriented society to a "person"-oriented society.

When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy.