



Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?

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1967 was a tough year to be a leader/activist for human rights and social change in our country. It was also an exhilarating time to be alive because we were in the middle of a societal transformation of major proportions whether our country was ready for it or not. This was a turning point year on many fronts. 300 years of overt brutality and oppression combined with 100 years of second-class, phony, apartheid-like citizenship for a whole racially identified group of people was coming to an uncertain end. At the same time a war that was destined to rip our country apart socially and morally was escalating out of control while the forces of progress and reaction were lining up in opposition to each other marking the battle lines of ideology, class and race that still exist today.

It was also a time of unprecedented prosperity--so much so, that the President of the United States declared that it was within our reach to eliminate poverty within the next generation. There was that much material wealth that we could actually envision a society without poverty. Illusory as it seems today that was a common vision held by many. One of President Johnson's advisors said, "The poor can stop being poor if the rich are willing to become even richer at a slower rate." That statement was true then and still is true today. We were optimistic, energetic, arrogant, and very naïve about what forces lined up for and against such utopian visionary thought. The forces of reaction and conservatism were strong but they were responding in more of an instinctual way not in a sophisticated ideological way. I remember listening intently to the music of these times (because music in the 60s had become the sound track of our revolution) from folk and jazz/blues to pop and acid rock. One song that stood out for me from the Jefferson Airplane captured this sense of how trapped the mainstream of our society truly was. The Airplane proclaimed that we were the "Crown of Creation," but "We've Got No Place to Go!" I doubt that Paul Kantner and Grace Slick truly understood the profound nature of that statement because they

were just as drunk from the excesses of our societal wealth as everyone else (at least everyone else in White “middle class” America).

For human rights leaders and activists like Martin Luther King the stakes were extremely high for themselves personally and for the survival of their vision of a just and humane society. They were on the cutting edge of a social change movement that suffered tremendous resistance and repression from the forces of racial privilege and injustice. King in his prophetic 1967 book, *Where do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* said that it really hadn't cost White America and our government very much to allow Negroes the right to vote or the right to drink from the same water fountain. But to even get that far the movement for social justice had paid a terrible price in human life and dignity. He went on to say that the next steps for true racial and economic justice were going to be very expensive for everyone and he was praying that the process could still be a relatively non-violent one. He still had hope, but as the title of his book indicated, he also had his fears that the White backlash to true social justice and reconciliation would lead us down a path of mutual destruction.

King was standing just as Moses stood before his people in today's Deuteronomy reading proclaiming that we do have a choice in this world. We have life and death, prosperity and destruction, blessings and curses and our future depends on what we choose. Or as King put it, we have the choice between Community or Chaos. We are either in this together seeking a common solution or we are choosing to destroy each other physically, morally and spiritually. White reaction and repression were creating their own opposite violent forces of reaction inside the Civil Rights Movement. This is precisely why King and Maurice McCrackin, from here in Cincinnati, both publicly opposed the reactionary nature Black Power Movement as espoused by Stokely Carmichael and others. It is important at this point to step back and look a little closer at the events and debates of this controversy within the Freedom struggle.

As King noted in his writings and speeches White America never really put much skin in the game of racial justice and human rights for all Americans and it really didn't cost much to grant voting rights. Of course there were the exceptions to this observation and they were the core of White activists working very like McCrackin, Clarence Jordan, Anne & Carl Braden, Myles Horton, Pete Seeger and the nameless young and older volunteers who risked and sacrificed their lives for the cause. But by and large White America was a fair weather supporter of the Civil Rights movement and once voting rights were won many open minded and liberal supporters of the movement began to question why King and others would continue to press for more change in areas of economic, social and political equality. The White response was often, “Slow down here, you're moving way too fast. What more do you want from

us?” Combined with the overt racist reactions in both the south and north the lack of mainstream support for human justice laid heavily on the shoulders of Black activists in SNCC, SCLC, CORE, and the NAACP. Keep in mind the last recorded lynching occurred in 1968, there was a massive white exodus to private schools north and south (some of the growth of private education here in Cincinnati can easily be traced to this time period), and there was a huge white resistance to integrated housing all over the country.

This all came to a head when James Meredith was shot and seriously wounded in June of 1966 as he attempted a solo freedom walk through Mississippi. Very few leaders of the movement supported or approved of Meredith’s self promoting walk through Mississippi because they knew it was a suicide mission that did not have much true organizing behind it. Regardless, the event called everyone’s hand forcing the rest of the movement to finish what James Meredith had started. Behind the scenes of the Freedom Walk Carmichael representing SNCC and Floyd McKissick, the director of CORE, confronted King with their new strategy of Black Power that would promote self defense against white violence and would forbid white participation in future civil rights actions. They argued that White America only understands the power of counter violence and that it was essential that Black people win their own freedom by themselves without a dependence on the phony white guilt of liberal America. After all the charges of White condescension and racism from within the movement rang very true in King’s ears as well. In many ways King must have felt like he was holding back a dam that was about to burst.

As word of the Black Power movement and program spread it sent shock waves through the movement and created polarized camps inside the Civil Rights Community and within the rest of society. Because he had devoted so much of his life in the past 15 years to the cause of the movement Maurice McCrackin decided he had to weigh in on the community debate regarding Black Power, the policies of racial exclusion and violent self-defense. Operation Freedom, co-founded by Mac, had raised somewhere over $\frac{3}{4}$ of a million dollars (in 1960s dollars) for support to activists who were being punished for registering to vote or other activities. These dollars were used as part of a revolving loan fund for people in trouble. King joined the Board of Directors of Operation Freedom earlier in the decade and he referred to Operation Freedom as the Red Cross Unit for the Civil Rights Movement. Operation Freedom activities brought Mac into close contact with many other leaders and activists ranging from Mae Bertha Carter and Fannie Lou Hamer to Ella Baker and other leaders in SNCC. Mac had credibility in the movement because he paid his own price for his civil rights and anti-war work through imprisonment in Tennessee to the removal from his church and the revocation of his ordination by the national

Presbyterian Church. He was not about to walk away from the movement without putting up an argument and a plea for Black and White unity.

In the debate that ensued in the fall and winter of 1966-67 Anne Braden, Co-editor of the Southern Patriot newspaper, engaged with Mac in an open letter discussion in the pages of the Southern Patriot about the pros and cons of the Black Power positions. Anne defended Carmichael's positions and Mac, while acknowledging the grievances Carmichael leveled at White activists, challenged the movement to look at the larger implications of racial exclusion and the long-term damage that would be done with the use of defensive violence. He argued that the movement could not survive this division and it would only prove to further isolate the Civil Rights Movement from the rest of America. King picked up both of these arguments from Mac and added his own thoughts in his Chaos or Community book later in 1967.

In the final analysis both positions uneasily co-existed with each other, but Mac's and Martin's prediction of disintegration did happen during the long summer of 1967 when cities like Detroit, Baltimore, and Cincinnati went up in flames. Furthermore, without the support or at least the sympathy from a broader base of White America the Black Power and Black Panther movements were, as King predicted, isolated. They suffered tremendously from the extremely violent, relentless and merciless FBI and Police assaults on their members and their leaders. Our country still lives with the scars of those violent days. Here in our congregation we have chosen to deepen our work and relationship with South Avondale as this community still unpacks the damage that was done that summer 42 years ago. It is the right thing for us to do and it is a serious attempt to build community where disunity has been the operative word. The urgency of the work is real for in Cincinnati for we still have a race and class segregated education system and opportunity is still nearly non-existent for anyone of color growing up or living in South Avondale, Evanston, Coreyville, Walnut Hills or you name the neighborhood.

In the larger picture the Vietnam War ultimately consumed America's attention and it eclipsed the internal struggles among Civil Rights activists. It aborted Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty, and it deeply sabotaged the progress of the Civil Rights Movement by making it nearly impossible for the United States to address the long term social inequities created by 300 years of racial oppression and violence. King, realizing the inextricable link between the war, the Civil Rights Movement and the efforts to end poverty joined with the leadership of the Anti-War Movement at the same time he continued work on his Poor People's Campaign and other social justice issues. Some even believe that King's attempt to broaden the Civil Rights Movement into something larger that also embraced the Anti-War Movement caused his assassination. It is undeniably true that he would have been more of a threat than

ever to conservative and reactionary notions of national security had he succeeded in mobilizing Black America against the war.

Because of this arrested progress due to the Vietnam War we have the legacy of an unfinished revolution and an aborted mission to create a truly just and equitable society. Our nation stood on the edge of great and lasting change and we, as a nation, failed to deliver. Our church, our immediate community and our city have inherited that ugly legacy of failure. The other part of that legacy is that since that lost opportunity our country has been engulfed by an entrenched national conservative ideology that opposes all collective efforts to address societal problems. Along with that ideology has come the mythology that government, by its very nature, cannot be an effective agent of positive social change. Conventional conservative wisdom in the United States now says that only the private sector can solve our social problems and that, in the final analysis, all change is centered on the individual and the responsibility of the individual. Unfettered and unregulated free enterprise, they claim, will raise all boats. No wonder the gap between the rich and the poor is greater today than at any other time in our nation's history.

This philosophical and ideological position reaches its logical extreme today in the daily ranting of talk radio and conservative cable news networks, but it was never expressed in a more absurd fashion than when Margaret Thatcher justified her efforts to dismantle the British social welfare state in the 1980s by stating as a matter of fact that, "there is no society there are only individuals." Grover Norquist stated similarly when he declared that the conservative mission is to shrink the size of government so much that it can be drowned in a bathtub.

If we truly believe that all we are is a loose collection of individuals pursuing our own greedy self-interest then we have truly destroyed the idea of community in our age. This way of thinking has surfaced time and again in our health care debates and in the way we discuss national education reform. The conservative position on health care is that each individual should be held totally responsible for his or her own state of health. If you are not healthy it is because you made poor personal decisions and the rest of us should not be responsible for paying for your mistakes. If you are poor you deserve to be poor because opportunity for improvement was always there for you to choose. You should not rely on anyone but yourself to find a way to fund your own prosperity and your own good health.

In education it is a bit more complicated but there is a very similar message. In the King reading on education today he clearly states the need for greater educational support for children in poverty. Not much has changed since 1967 in our poorer communities. We still need much greater support for children living in poverty, but

so far, it is just not happening. Ever since the Brown V Board Supreme Court decision that required racial equality in public education middle and upper class families have fled to private or segregated suburban education whenever they had the chance so they could avoid the realities and consequences of a society that chose to not end poverty and oppression when it could have. And so it has become very easy to point a finger at urban educators everywhere and say this is your fault not ours. You're not working hard enough or smart enough. It does not matter that urban educators did not create the injustices or the poverty that is so overwhelming for our children as they struggle to get an education. No other industrialized developed nation on earth has the number or percentage of people living in abject poverty or in prison, as does the United States. Those other societies chose to place a priority on community building not individual greed in the post World War II era. They constructed national social support systems for health care, education, mass transportation, and job displacements instead of amassing a huge military machine. The United States, unfortunately, did not and we are left teetering on the edges of chaos.

But we are also left with the choices that Moses and Martin both presented to us. They have set before us the choices Life or Death--Community or Chaos. It is the litmus test we should take with everything we do. Am I choosing community or am I choosing chaos with this decision? What are the long-term implications of our personal and congregational decisions? We know that if we are to survive we must choose life over death, prosperity over destruction, blessings over curses and, yes, community over chaos. There are still beacons for this kind of hope in our society and there are some among us who believe we elected one of these beacons as our president. But we must realize that these beacons of hope and change cannot and will not succeed without a conscious and concerted effort from all of us choose life over death and community over chaos. Let us hope that we are not too late.