

# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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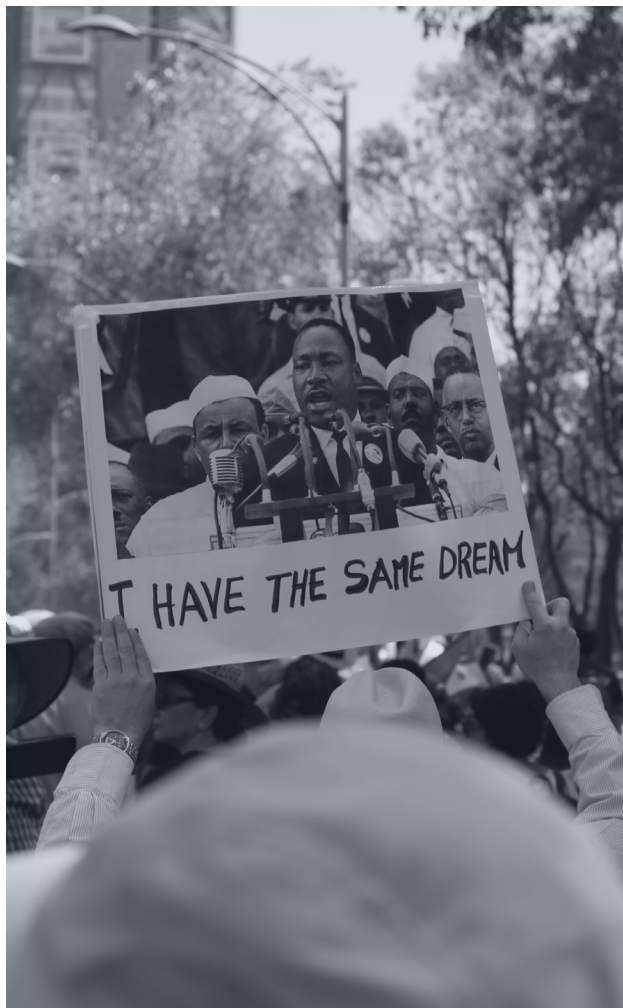


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A racial divide at home, a foreign war with mounting American casualties (with people of color dying in alarmingly disproportionate rates), an economic disparity expanding across the nation like a raging wildfire—from inner city streets to Native American reservations, the sweltering backroads of the Deep South, and the Appalachian trails of the Northeast—all amidst a political divide offering little hope for a triumphant future.

The year was 1967, and these were the conditions our nation found itself in. It's the context in which Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his consequential book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* King spent the last full year of his life warning the nation of what he referred to as the evil triplets: militarism, racism, and poverty. King argued that America had taken its focus off the growing cancer of abject poverty because of its engagement in Vietnam. As early as 1965, King called for a ceasefire and withdrawal from the conflict. King believed he had a "prophetic function" to share his views despite stringent objection from civil rights organizations,

major newspapers, and a legion of political pundits. "My conscience leaves me no other choice," King argued, as he believed the price being paid for the war was too high in terms of lives lost and economic impact.



King saw a nation at a crossroads; he believed a "radical revolution of values" was needed in order to meet the challenges of the day. Only love nestled in the blossom of justice, King argued, should be central in these unprecedented times. King believed that policies and laws, formulated from that foundation of love and justice, were the way forward. But King never completed his campaign to confront those evil triplets. His tragic destiny—death from an assassin's bullet—took him at the age of thirty-nine.

It's been fifty-two years since King walked this earth, but his prophetic question of chaos or community remains the most consequential question of our time. King spoke out against a war that

was costing both lives and our moral standing worldwide: men were dying to liberate citizens from the grip of communism, while being deprived of their civil rights at home, based upon the color of their skin.

Today, we face another war. Not on the battlefields of Southeast Asia, but in nursing homes and local hospitals, to save the lives of people afflicted with COVID-19. Our soldiers are not armed with weapons of war, but with personal protective equipment, medical training, and a commitment to their Hippocratic oath: do no harm. As of this writing, over 76,000 Americans have died from this pandemic, with over 1.28 million Americans infected with the virus. The death toll is on a fateful course to exceed the number of all American soldiers killed in the Vietnam War. Campuses nationwide have been reduced to online learning. Professional sports have been sidelined, beaches and malls are closed, and most American businesses, deemed “not essential,” remain out of service. Houses of worship have moved from large gatherings in buildings to sermons delivered online.

Drastic tensions have mounted as protests have erupted in Michigan, Ohio, and Minnesota. A false dichotomy, otherwise known as a false choice, has taken center stage: the health and welfare of our nation’s citizens versus bringing the economy back from a financial abyss. This debate divides neighbors within local communities, civic leaders in local municipalities, and members of the private and public sectors. One Congressman has argued that the economy is not worth sacrificing over COVID-19, implying that the economic cost of fighting the virus is too great a price to pay, even beyond human lives. As I write, several states have no statewide mandate to shelter in place; others are moving toward incrementally re-opening for business, even against the advice of healthcare and scientific communities—without a known vaccine or cure on the horizon. These realities have revealed a growing fracture within the nation, on all fronts.

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King did not face a pandemic; he did, however, live in a period which presented a choice to leaders as well as everyday citizens, one that would advance the nation further into a dark abyss or lift us up to new heights of civility and human decency. For King, the choice was clear: community, not chaos.

Chaos offers little in the moment or the prolonged future. Chaos is a thief of time; it robs us of energy, resources, passion, creativity, and our focus on the best interest of the whole. Chaos stumbles towards the future blinded by ego, with a reverence for temporary things that fluctuate daily. Chaos does not consider what’s in the best

interest of others; instead it operates with a head planted above the clouds, ignoring the cries below. Chaos is the priest or Levite who ignores the bruised and beaten person on the Jericho road (Luke 10:30-37).

Chaos focuses on “self” rather than what scholar Juana Bordas emphasizes as the “we.” It is as a collective sum that we have the best chance to defeat the enemies confronting us and what divides us as a nation. The notion of “we” is based on the love-ethic of community. It is the charge of every person who is part of this global community, but especially those entrusted with the responsibility of leadership, to

*“ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You go, and do likewise.’”  
Luke 10:37*

act and serve with community at the forefront of their decisions. As King argued: our destinies are not singular, but are tied together. When leaders act with the mindset of community, they look not to point fingers but to partner with people committed to find a way forward. They take responsibility for their actions and make decisions not based on poll numbers or ratings; instead, they act as King said all true leaders must: not as seekers of consensus but as molders of consensus. When leaders act with community as their focus, they

do what scholar Harvey Cox argues in his classic work, *When Jesus Came to Harvard*: identify the moral crisis, take into account what needs to be done to confront it, and then summon the courage to do what needs to be done.

An individual operating in community acts courageously to reject the false choice between a hemorrhaging economy and the life and welfare of its citizens. They recognize that neither paper currency, stock values, barrels of oil, or minted coins—but only people are made in the *Imago Dei* (Genesis 1:26; Psalm 139). Therefore, the first and foremost priority must be to give care to the sick, comfort the grieving, and find ways to relieve medical workers and support staff on the front lines.

Community is where faith leaders act with compassion—not out of compulsion to satisfy their egos, not placing public policy and science on the back pew. When King stood in the pulpit of Riverside Church in the spring of 1967, he stood with prophets of old who bore witness to suffering, injustice, and inequality. He was trying to save lives in speaking out against the Vietnam War, not shore up the New York Stock Exchange. King was not only focused on getting people to heaven; he was committed to address the hell they faced on earth. With an unquenchable fire in his inner man and the Spirit of God upon him, King preached good news to the poor, proclaimed freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18).

To be clear: there have been and will be times when spiritual leaders must obey the moral law of God above the natural law. No one knew this better than King. He

endured nights in jail, beatings, humiliation, intimidation, and ultimately gave his life disobeying laws that were in conflict with the teachings of Jesus. This is not one of those times, however. Health and science matter. Death tolls matter. Infection rates matter. COVID-19 is deadly serious.

So what is community? It's healthcare workers risking their lives on the front lines; it's volunteers who partner with local restaurants to serve meals to the needy; it's grocery store clerks enabling patrons to shop for necessary food; it's teachers partnering with parents to formulate engaging curriculum to propel students forward in academic progress; it's police officers and firefighters who put their lives on the line daily, irrespective of a pandemic, in order to protect and serve communities across this country.

When we choose community over chaos, we recognize the disparities that exist for people of color, not only with respect to COVID-19, but in healthcare as a whole. Such disparities have been identified by health departments within our nation for years. This cannot stand. Failure to understand and appreciate such disparities (certainly during a pandemic that has an adverse impact upon one people group more than any other), only inflicts violence upon that historically disinherited group. Such inaction forfeits the progress made to reject devaluing one people group over another. Charles Blow, an award winning author and columnist, argues that to not acknowledge racial disparities



and divisions along race in our society perpetuates the cycle of racism. Denial has never been a cure for this, our nation's prolonged sin.

In recent days, we've heard the drumbeats from fellow citizens: When do we get back to normal? But the truth of the matter is that we can never be the same; there cannot be a return to normal after what this chapter has brought us so far. If normal is more than forty percent of American households having less than \$400 in their savings, we cannot return. If normal is American citizens more concerned about paying for a doctor's visit than getting the medical care they need, we must find a new way. If normal means students and families must amass unbearable debt to reach educational goals, we cannot return. If normal means we tolerate leaders who fail to display empathy or lead with the values and ideals envied around the world, we must find a new path. We cannot return to normal if this November, citizens are forced to stand in line to vote, even at the risk of compromising their health, rather than mail in ballots. A return to this "normal" would be a return to chaos where spiritual, physical, racial, financial, and emotional bondage awaits, rather than the embrace of the promised land of community, where equality, justice, mercy, forgiveness, and love abound.

Martin Luther King Jr., lived his life as a prophetic witness to the teachings of Jesus, and exercised those teachings to the fullest expression of the love-ethic. That love-ethic compelled King to stand with sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee in April 1968, in their appeal for adequate pay and safe working conditions. King's life ended that evening of April 4th, but the question he penned over a year before his death, the question he continued to raise until he met the Creator, is very much alive and demands an answer for this hour and our time. King knew his choice. He invited us to make our choice, both collectively and individually. He believed that "we as a people would get to the promised land." That land where there would be no division between rich or poor; where color of skin would not divide us; where the lion would lay down with the lamb; where plowshares and not swords of violence would be the tools in our hands; where war and conflict would not be the focus of our studies; where there would be no more death; where everyone would sit under their own fig trees, unafraid. This is where we go from here. This is community, and by God's grace and wisdom, we shall call it home.

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