

Persevering

*Martin Luther King, Jr., Day Celebration
Smithsonian Institution, January 18, 1993*

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING wrote his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, in 1967 – the year before he was assassinated. Every page shows Dr. King’s humane vision: his sense of identification with people of every kind; his belief in the worth of every individual; his commitment to unify, not divide us; his ability to face the most difficult problems in a clear-sighted way, maintaining his determination while recognizing that any particular project might end in defeat or even disaster.

Many of the ideas that Dr. King expressed in the last year of his life speak to us even more forcefully now than before. I want to draw on a few of these ideas, as I discuss some of the difficulties faced by our country’s educational system.

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By 1967, Dr. King had come to believe that achieving social justice – overcoming racism, ensuring equality of opportunity in all spheres – would depend a great deal on addressing the problems of America’s cities.

Early in *Where Do We Go from Here?*, Dr. King mentioned the

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massive investment needed to address those problems. “The real cost lies ahead,” he wrote – and he cited predictions that, without such an investment, the nation would face “further deterioration of the cities, increased antagonism between races and continued disorders in the streets.”

A quarter century later, those words describe the state of many American cities all too well. And many of our urban schools, despite the efforts of teachers and other dedicated people, are in a discouraging state of disarray – in some cases, near collapse. Overcrowding is epidemic. Buildings are literally crumbling. In the City of New York alone, a recent report estimated that \$24 billion is needed to repair the city’s 1,053 school buildings – and to build enough space for the 300,000 *additional* students who will enter the system before the year 2000.

This situation is calamitous for everyone. But it takes a disproportionately harsh toll on the urban poor, including millions of minority students and their families. Another recent report, concerning a different urban school system, concluded that public education is failing completely under the double burden of poverty and racial isolation.

Consider the profile of a typical inner-city fifth-grade class described in a second report. Of twenty-three students, *five* were born to teenaged mothers; *eight* live in housing officially classified as inadequate; *nine* of the twenty-three have parents who are out of work; *fifteen* live with single parents; *fifteen* live below the poverty line.

The problems suggested by this profile – the joblessness, the housing, the family situations – affect and in many respects overshadow the problems of substandard school buildings, or the level of financial investment in the educational process itself.

In such an environment, schools can succeed only if they somehow overcome formidable odds. Dr. King saw all of this developing twenty-five years ago, and the urban situation he described has generally become worse, not better.

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Of course, not all the problems facing our system of education are caused by inner-city poverty or racial attitudes. Many are the result of broader cultural and other patterns in our society, and they have had an effect on virtually all young people, regardless of their background.

We know, for instance, that vast numbers of our students never learn to read or write or calculate beyond the fourth- or fifth-grade level, and even many high school graduates never advance beyond the eighth-grade level.

We also know that our students, nationwide, continue to do poorly on well-designed tests given to students from many different countries – especially in mathematics and science. We know that SAT verbal scores have fallen since 1967, and that science proficiency has declined among our seventeen-year-olds.

We know that fewer than half of the students who enroll in full-time four-year college programs directly out of high school manage to complete the requirements for a bachelor's degree within six years. And, according to a recent survey, only about one in three freshmen spends six hours or more per week on homework – a figure that puts studying roughly on a par with watching TV, and well behind such activities as exercise or sports, working at paid jobs, and socializing with friends.

By all sorts of measures, we are performing far below standard. Large numbers of our young people are now, in effect, educationally handicapped.

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This analysis leads me to another of Dr. King's basic convictions: many of our nation's most pressing problems affect all of us, and they ought to unite us in common cause. If we want to improve the conditions for education in our country – and certainly if we want to improve relations among people of different races and cultures – we can do so only if we work together collaboratively, recognizing our differences while remembering our very deep common bonds.

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In *Where Do We Go from Here?*, Dr. King describes the long civil rights march across Mississippi in 1966 – the march on which James Meredith was shot. After the shooting, some leaders argued that whites should be discouraged from participating further in the march. Some felt that whites had begun to exercise disproportionate influence over the civil rights movement and that blacks needed to regroup among themselves, so they could retain control over their own most important affairs.

Dr. King yielded to no one in his determination to create a stronger sense of group identity and maintain leadership among blacks. But when it came to dealing with the largest issues facing America, he believed that neither blacks nor whites – nor any other group – could hope to succeed alone. Real progress would require something more complicated than separatism, on the one hand, or a simple melting away of important individual or group differences, on the other.

Summing up the debate on the Mississippi march, he wrote:

[T]he answer ... was not to give up, not to conclude that blacks must work [only] with blacks in order for Negroes to gain a sense of their own meaning. The answer was only to be found in persistent trying, perpetual experimentation, persevering togetherness.

Like life, racial understanding is not something that we find but something that we must create. ... [T]he ability of Negroes and whites to work together, to understand each other, will not be found ready made; it must be created by the fact of contact.¹

These words offer no easy remedies. Dr. King describes the dilemma, and he relies finally on his own strong faith, declaring that the only answer to racial or ethnic conflict will be found in “persistent trying, perpetual experimentation, persevering togetherness.” Progress, as he says, will have to be “created” with great effort from the hard “fact of contact.”

His choice of words – persistent... perpetual... persevering... trying... experimentation... creation... contact... – suggests that there will be no obvious end to this process, and that we must

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press forward even if there are moments when we seem to be losing ground. Indeed, as we look around the world today, “the fact of contact” among people of different races and cultures appears to be generating at least as much conflict as understanding. For every act of liberation we have witnessed in the last few years, every stride toward freedom, every increase in the measure of human dignity, we can find a contrasting example of violent – even barbarous – religious, ethnic, nationalist, or racial strife. Many people in our world – perhaps a great majority – appear to have no special interest in learning to live with others who are different from themselves; often, it seems, they would rather be rid of them.

In America, and not least in our schools and colleges, many of the signs are also deeply troubling. We hear and read about more acts of racial harassment and more instances of hateful speech. According to one study, attitudes on racial issues have recently tended to “harden” – to become less tolerant, not more – as many students pass through college. A large proportion of students now regard race relations on their campuses as “generally bad.” And we know that on some campuses there have been severe racial crises in the last few years – serious enough to bring entire institutions to a standstill.

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Surveying the landscape of 1967, Martin Luther King might well have lost heart or drifted into cynicism. Instead, he reaffirmed his principles and framed proposals for change. As we think about our problems today, especially in the field of education, we should ask how to answer Dr. King’s question for ourselves: Where do we go from here? Are there steps we can take to address the problems that confront us? What realistic alternatives are open?

First, although no single, all-encompassing solution is likely to emerge – at least not soon – we must still keep in mind that the problems of the schools cannot be separated from those of our families, our communities, our cities, and our towns, or from the

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state of our national economy. This is no less true in 1993 than in 1967: without the kind of major investment in our cities and in our more general human environment that Dr. King called for in his last book, we will inevitably face staggering problems as we try to improve the schools themselves.

An added difficulty, of course, is that our nation's available resources at this moment are so much scarcer now than twenty-five years ago. We also have less confidence in our ability to produce long-term structural changes, changes that will actually create healthy economic conditions, better opportunities for employment, and decent housing and neighborhoods where people have some genuine sense of ownership and pride. Yet until some significant renewal of this kind takes place, many of our public schools and whole districts will continue to function under immense pressure, pressure that intensifies as we ask the schools to provide more of the services, and to solve more of the problems, that are fundamentally the responsibility of whole communities and the larger society.

In the meantime, what other actions can we take? Let me suggest two.

First, the last decade has shown that the country as a whole has a strong and continuing interest in the predicament of our public schools. There has been more experimentation, more investment of private funds, and more volunteer time committed to the problems of the schools than anyone might have dared to imagine fifteen or twenty years ago.

But while we have to continue to experiment and be receptive to new ideas, the time clearly has come to take stock, and to pay much more attention to those programs and approaches that have begun to yield good results. For example, if the effort to rebuild the school system of an entire state shows evidence of success – as in Kentucky, or South Carolina – then we must study such situations in detail, to see which elements are critical and are making a difference.

In other words, this is the moment to identify and capture not

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every latest new idea, but the best ideas that are being tested and carefully evaluated. We need to adopt a more systematic and long-term approach, investing in programs that are working, trying to understand the ways in which lasting results can be achieved, and building as much as possible on what we have already begun to learn. And we need to support good programs over a period of many years, so that they have time to develop and reach maturity.

Second, at the level of the individual school or district, we have to help teachers, principals, and superintendents perform an almost impossible balancing act.

To begin with, there is the day-to-day work with students who often do not want to be in school at all. Many teachers rise to the challenge. But the work is draining and exhausting, with relatively few visible triumphs and only modest material rewards. Nothing less than excellent leadership from principals and superintendents can help to motivate and strengthen the work of teachers and students, creating schools that are communities rather than simply facilities.

Then there is the even harder – and perhaps the most important – challenge. Our greatest educational problem is not that our schoolchildren fail to master basic skills, skills that are often the product of memorization and routine. Whatever shortcomings we may have on that score, they are far overshadowed by the fact that we are not managing to teach our students how to analyze new situations and problems, how to use facts as evidence in order to produce logical and persuasive arguments, how to take different points of view into account rather than simply expressing personal opinions without ever examining them.

All the tests show that the point at which our students fail is just that point where they must write – not simply a sentence or two, but a coherent paragraph or essay – or where they have to think through a “word problem” in mathematics. These are the moments when active learning and the real use of the mind begin. Yet it is just at these moments that so many of our students falter.

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We need to find more effective ways of teaching – using much more interesting and stimulating curricular materials, using real books, but also drawing on the help that interactive technology can offer. Our communities and schools need to convey the message that academic achievement is absolutely vital: it certainly is not the only priority, but it must be the highest priority of any school. We have to begin with the premise that even our youngest children are already very skillful as well as talented, and they have managed to master extremely complicated processes – such as speaking and understanding a language – even before they arrive at school.

If we do that – if we take our children and their abilities very seriously from the earliest stage – there will be a far greater chance that they, in turn, will begin to take themselves seriously and to strive for real achievement. Unless they know that we have confidence in them and are willing to devote time and attention to them, it will be very hard for them to have the kind of confidence in themselves that is absolutely critical.

This will not happen easily. Students and their teachers face situations every day that are discouraging enough to demolish months of patient work and progress. But I see no other way, except to move ahead with the assumptions and attitudes that I have just tried to describe. In this effort, colleges and universities can help, by building cooperative programs with schools and communities. Corporations and foundations – as well as others – must continue the work they are already doing. Everyone will have to be prepared for setbacks, and for a very long voyage. But unless we stay the course and aim high – and find ways to help our students to aim equally high – there will be no real progress.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 28.