FORUM

Tradition of black truth-tellers



Otis Moss Guest Columnist

All my life I have been inspired by the work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and my father, a King adviser, Dr. Otis Moss Jr. The prophetic brilliance of Dr. King to speak about democracy and the divine in the same breath to this day sends a chill up my spine.

I have asked my parents often: "How did you handle the pressure?" "Did you real-ize you were in the middle of the delivery room as America, with deep labor pains, gave birth to democracy

My parents usually replied with smiles and southern humility before adding, "We were on the right side of histo-

As the new pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, I sense the labor pains of democracy are once again forcing America to give birth to a new sacred dialogue about race and class, because a doctor/preacher has pushed us as a country into a painful but long overdue labor and delivery.

I am convinced that much of the recent controversy stems from the deep racial and social divisions and misunderstanding of African-American sacred rhetoric.

The words of Dr. Jeremiah

Marc

Morial

Guest

Columnist

I was only 10-years-old the

day a single bullet was perma-

nently lodged into the psyche

of the United States of

and the admiration of millions

under his belt, Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr. was already

the nation's undisputed cham-

pion of freedom. But, on April

4, 1968, Dr. King became a

martyr for a global movement

that continues to strengthen

since our great "drum major

for 'justice" was assassinated

on the balcony of the Lorraine

Hotel in Memphis. But his drum beat continues to call us

to the march of freedom, not

only in the United States, but

all over the world. Dr. King's

legacy of non-violent resist-

ance has played a part in the

end of apartheid in South

Africa, the fall of the Berlin

Wall, as well as the continuing

fight for equal opportunity

King's life and legacy have

special significance. He sym-

bolizes that moment in time

when America was compelled

to come to terms with the

hypocrisy of a constitution that

proclaimed all men as equal,

except us. His relentless

For African-Americans, Dr.

here in America.

Forty years have passed

With a Nobel Peace Prize

America.

over time.

A. Wright have provided the American people an opportunity to give birth to a new conversation about race or abort the dialogue and substitute it with truncated rhetoric about what should and should not be said from behind the sacred desk. If we examine briefly the tradition Dr. Wright follows, we get a closer glimpse of the dialogue I believe our

country is trying to birth.

Dr. Wright stands in the prophetic tradition of Biblical truth-tellers, such as Amos and Micah. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King preached from Amos 5:24 (KJV), "But let judgment run down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream." Dr. King was assassinated 40 years ago because he preached the tenets of Christian love against the social injustices of the 20th century. Dr. King's prophetic, cutting, abrasive and loving words forced America to confront her birth defect and orig-

inal sin-racism. Drs. Wright, Joseph Lowery, Fred Shuttlesworth, Jim Wallis, Carolyn Knight, Gardner C. Taylor, James Forbes, my father and other preachers have been carrying the legacy of the Christian prophetic social justice tradition rooted in love and criticism made popular by Dr. King, the greatest prophetic voice of the 20th century.

I am convinced that much of the recent controversy stems from the deep racial and social divisions and misunderstanding of African-American sacred rhetoric. African-American ministers are mas-

demand for civil rights and

universal human rights put the

face of dignity on an Alabama

woman just trying to take a bus

ride home after a hard day's

work. It put the heart of

humanity into the struggles of

Memphis. It gave moral

authority to leaders in

Washington who knew the

sanitation

workers

40 Years Later

ters at hyperbole, metaphor and the use of subtext to speak to a community familiar with their rhetorical vocabulary.

African-American preaching uses what some call "the blue note" to place before the people tragedy and sorrow during the preaching event. It should be noted that this "blue note" is always paired with "good news;" the sound of sorrow must be played before the chord of the Gospel can be introduced into the composi-

The "blue note" of preaching raises questions about the report by the Centers for Disease Control regarding how "The Tuskegee Experiment" used more than 300 illiterate African-American farmers in Macon County, Ala., as guinea pigs from 1932 to 1972 to test the affects of the syphilis virus.

This is a tragic chord of American history. The "blue note" of preaching lifts up information in the March 23 issue of the New York Times, disclosing that America spends \$5,000 per second for the war in Iraq while Americans are losing health care. The "blue note" of preaching puts before the people of God human acts that cause God to weep and humanity to hang her head. If the only portion of a sermon heard in the African-American context is the "blue note," it leads the listener to wonder, "Where is God?" and "What kind of Word is this?" There is more to African-American preaching than the tragic moment, but it's through confrontation with tragedy that we come to grips with the fullness of God's love. The bloody, tragic, horrific moment of the crucifixion of Christ's humanity puts us face to face with the deep abiding grace of God wrapped up in the "blue note" of Christ's humiliation.

The critical issue we are being challenged to come to grips with at this moment is our ability as Americans to be bi-cultural.

Are we willing to look through the lens of shrouded liberty lifted up by Dr. Wright? Or, will we choose to assume that our faith tradition, political perspective and cultural vantage point is the only perspective worth engaging? What an incredible gift to give our children, if we choose to be bi-cultural Americans instead of ethno-centrists locked in our own limited worldview of humanity. The pain of this "manufactured" controversy is that our democracy is birthing a new conversation into the civic arena on race, or the grief of our democracy is crying because our cynicism aborted her child. When the history of this moment is written, I pray we will all be standing on the right side of history.

The Rev. Otis Moss III graduated from Morehouse College with honors and earned a Master of Divinity degree from Yale University. He is pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, of which Sen. Barack Obama is a member.

we are in the midst of a historic presidential campaign in

which, for the first time, an African-American and a woman are leading contenders

for the White House. But, if

Dr. King were still alive today,

he would not be silent in the

face of the prevalent and tragic

disparities in jobs, homeown-

ership, entrepreneurship and

the well being of our children

that continue to impede

African American progress.

For 98 years, the National

Irban Leagues has stood with

those who have fought for

equal opportunity. Our own

Whitney M. Young was one of

the "Big Six" civil rights lead-

ers, along with Dr. King, who

organized the 1963 March on

Washington. And we are very

proud to be a part of keeping

uplift the African-American

community is through our

Opportunity Compact, a com-

prehensive set of principles

and policy recommendations

designed to expand economic

opportunity and bridge the gap

between the promise and the

reality of the great American

hope to accomplish is Dr.

King's refusal to believe that

there are "insufficient funds in

the great vaults of opportunity

honor his memory by refusing

and CEO of the National

to give up on his dream.

Forty years later, let us

Marc Morial is president

Underlying all that we

Dream.

of this nation."

Urban League.

One way we continue to

the dream alive today.

And neither should we.

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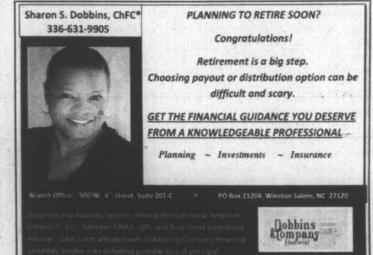


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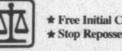
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time for change had come.

Four decades later, my own

three children are growing up

in a much different world

thanks to the movement Dr.

King led. The number of

African- American college

graduates and political leaders

has grown significantly. The

Black middle class is now a

major force in America. And,

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