

# FORUM

## Tradition of black truth-tellers



**Otis Moss III**  
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 realize 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 history."

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

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 original 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-

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 composition.

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 con-

frontation 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.*

## 40 Years Later



**Marc Morial**  
Guest Columnist

I was only 10-years-old the day a single bullet was permanently lodged into the psyche of the United States of America.

With a Nobel Peace Prize and the admiration of millions under his belt, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was already the nation's undisputed champion of freedom. But, on April 4, 1968, Dr. King became a martyr for a global movement that continues to strengthen over time.

Forty years have passed 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 resistance 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 here in America.

For African-Americans, Dr. King's life and legacy have special significance. He symbolizes 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



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 sanitation workers in Memphis. It gave moral authority to leaders in Washington who knew the

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,

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, homeownership, entrepreneurship and the well being of our children that continue to impede African American progress. And neither should we.

For 98 years, the National Urban League has stood with those who have fought for equal opportunity. Our own Whitney M. Young was one of the "Big Six" civil rights leaders, along with Dr. King, who organized the 1963 March on Washington. And we are very proud to be a part of keeping the dream alive today.


One way we continue to uplift the African-American community is through our Opportunity Compact, a comprehensive 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 Dream.

Underlying all that we hope to accomplish is Dr. King's refusal to believe that there are "insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation."

Forty years later, let us honor his memory by refusing to give up on his dream.

*Marc Morial is president and CEO of the National Urban League.*

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The Chronicle was established by Ernest Pitt and Ndubisi Egemonye in 1974, and is published every Thursday by Winston-Salem Chronicle Publishing Co., Inc. The Chronicle is a proud member of:

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