

## Martin Luther King Day, 2006 Stan Stahl, Ph.D.

*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood. ... I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

My son, Jonathan, teaches high school at the Millpond Campus School in Springfield, Massachusetts. His students are not like your children and mine. They are different. They don't share in the American dream.

Most of the students at Millpond are on the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Most are from broken homes. Many have been physically abused by one or both parents. One of Jon's students spent Thanksgiving with his mother, who took him back to his group home on Sunday night. She then went home and killed herself. Now he has no family. It's not surprising that these students suffer from severe behavioral, social and emotional problems.

According to Jonathan, his students are all extremely intelligent with the means and abilities to have academic and social success. Yet few, if any, will. For it takes dreams to have success.

And most of Jon's students have no dreams. Oh yes, a few dream of college. A few more dream of hitting it big as a hip-hop star ...or maybe being the corner drug dealer. The rest simply have no dreams.

They have no dreams because they see no opportunity.

The reality is that some of our children grow up believing America is the land of opportunity and others grow up believing they have no place in the American dream. The tragedy is that both are right.

It's not news to observe that opportunity in America is not distributed equally throughout the population. The children of the rich have far more opportunity than do the children of the poor. Children growing up with loving, responsible parents have far more opportunity than do Jonathan's students.

It is not only the child who suffers from a lack of opportunity. America, too, is the poorer.

For how is America to realize its potential unless all who live here have the opportunity to realize their potential? It is the manifestation of opportunity that generates the *blessings of liberty*. America's greatness depends upon people perceiving opportunity and, having perceived it, turning it into reality.

Every child who fails to realize his or her potential subtracts from what Liberty's blessings could be. Every child who fails to realize his or her potential diminishes us all. America's future can never be better than our dreams.

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this. He saw that America could only realize its promise of *liberty and justice for all* if every one had a place in the American dream.

Sadly, too many of our sons and daughters are still left out of the dream. Too many *at-risk* children fail to have parents, teachers, mentors and other role models able to open a child's imagination, allowing dreams to flow in.

Martin Luther King, Jr. showed us the possibilities of leadership. He gave my generation the power of a dream and with it we overturned 100 years of Jim Crow, opening up the political system to all.

Where is today's leadership that won't rest until everyone participates in the American dream?

Instead of leadership we have political squabbling. The left wants social programs because "it takes a village" while the right argues against government involvement because "it takes a family."

Both sides insist on being right with the obvious result. Nothing gets done. The children suffer. And the American dream weakens.

There is another way, one exemplified by King's leadership. King's faith in the American dream and of everyone's place in it was so strong that he gave others the courage to dream. And by holding fast to non-violence, the justice of his dream for racial equality could become part of the American dream.

Dreams are perhaps the cheapest form of capital. Dreams are free. They don't require big social programs. They don't require large bureaucracies to manage. They can't be mismanaged to a lowest common denominator.

Dreams come in all the colors of the human rainbow. Dreams cross the cultural divide. Heartfelt dreams for ennobling the human spirit live in the secular left and the religious right, and everywhere in between. Dreams that carry within them the heart and soul of America.

If life, liberty and pursuit of happiness is our birthright, then so too must be the power to dream.

King has been gone for nearly 40 years. And the current leadership in Washington doesn't seem to get it. So it's left to you and me, *We, the People*, to keep the dream alive. Bottom up democracy ... the ultimate check and balance.

Every one of us has the opportunity to carry King's dream in our hearts and our minds, sharing it with others, particularly America's children.

Every one of us has the opportunity to vote for those who are passionate about including everyone in the American dream, and who have the political courage to actually do something.

Every one of us has the opportunity to work for the day when all peoples throughout America find their dream in the freedom that is America.

*This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."*

*And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.*

*So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California! But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee! Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.*

Let Freedom Ring.