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A Vision of What Might Be: The Pandemic, Protests, and Possibilities

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Times of crisis offer us opportunities for radical transformation. The past two years of the Covid pandemic have laid bare, in glaring fashion, the social, economic, and judicial inequities in American life. Even so, some moral and religious leaders have provided us with teachings and guidelines for a new vision of what we might become. Here, based on my experience as a Professor of Religion and an African American Tibetan Buddhist scholar and practitioner, I draw on the teachings of two of these visionaries—the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Buddha—to help us to imagine the moral and spiritual transformations that might be possible.



Illustration by Andrew Glencross for *Lion's Roar*. Reprinted with permission.

I.

In 1963, as a fifteen-year-old tenth grader, I marched with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King during the Birmingham Civil Rights Campaign. Accepting rides downtown from our county school bus drivers, I marched as often as I could during those weeks of protests.¹ How sad and ironic then that now, some six decades later, we Black people (together today with more allies) have had to resort to such mass marches once again. My earlier experiences—of being raised in the Jim Crow South and of marching to bring about changes in that unjust system—have provided me with, perhaps, a unique lens through which to view our current societal, political, and spiritual situation.

It is my custom, nowadays, to begin my essays with a poem, or an excerpt from a poem ... so I hope you will indulge me here. In 1935 the great Harlem Renaissance poet, Langston Hughes, wrote in his well-known poem, "Let America be America Again," these words:

Let America be America again.
 Let it be the dream it used to be.
 Let it be the pioneer on the plain
 Seeking a home where he himself is free.
 (America never was America to me.)
 Let America be the dream that dreamers dreamed—
 Let it be that great strong land of love
 Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
 That any man be crushed by one above.
 (It never was America to me.)²

Sadly, the oft repeated, and plaintive, line in the poem, "It never was America to me," could be voiced by far too many of us people of

1 I have written more extensively about these events in my memoir, *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist—One Woman's Spiritual Journey*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2008.

2 From Kevin Young, ed., *African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle & Song*, New York: The Library of America, pp. 197-199.

color living in the U.S. during these present days. By Black people and Indigenous peoples; by Latinx people and by Asian-American folk and Pacific Islanders. I want to speak in this brief essay about why that is so. Actually, I want to speak about several themes: about Buddhism and what it can teach us about navigating these times, about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and what his life and testament of hope can teach us during these dark days, about where we are now during this dread pandemic, about the deep economic, social and racial divides that have been so painfully exposed as a result of it, about the protests which have erupted owing to such glaring inequities, and lastly, about how this particular historic moment of racial reckoning might actually offer us the possibility of making America actually America for the first time, making it a society that truly lives up to its creed of “liberty and justice for all.”

“We hold these truths to be self-evident . . . that all men are created equal . . .”³ Lofty words to be sure, but words spoken by White men who—even as those very words were spoken—kept Black bodies enslaved to bring them, the White folk, profit. We sit today amidst this grave paradox. For as this country proclaims freedom for all, it was founded on the genocide of Native Americans and the theft of their lands on the one hand, and on the forced labor of captured and enslaved Africans on the other. Once viewed only as chattel, degraded, denigrated, and denied full humanity, Black people have—for centuries—continued to be viewed here as being less than human, and as being “fit only to be slaves” by White men who see no shame, nor moral imperative, to view us otherwise.

This is a hard truth, one that is difficult for many to accept. But, as James Baldwin famously said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”⁴ White Amer-

3 These are the words beginning the second paragraph of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, signed July 4, 1776.

4 This quote comes from the unfinished book Baldwin was writing when he died. Its focus was on the lives and times of three Civil Rights icons, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcom X. Raoul Peck made the quote a central theme of his documentary on Baldwin, “I Am not Your Negro.”

icans must face their great “original sin”⁵ against people of color, a sin of their own, White, creation. And we must together—as a country of full-fledged *citizens*—recognize and speak this truth.

This truth puts a lie to the fairy tale of American democracy for all. It is our only way to salvation, to a true multi-racial democracy. Baldwin identified this original “lie” in a 1964 essay he titled, “The White Problem.” There, he wrote:

The people who settled the country had a fatal flaw. They could recognize a man when they saw one. They knew he wasn’t ... anything *else* but a man; but since they were Christian, and since they had already decided that they came here to establish a free country, the only way to justify the role this chattel was playing in one’s life was to say that he *was not* a man. For if he wasn’t, then no crime had been committed. That lie is the basis of our present trouble. (quoted in Glaude, 2020, p. 9)

II.

The Buddha taught that every living being and, indeed, every thing depends for its very existence upon some other thing and/or condition. Hence, every existent thing comes into existence based upon the existence of something else. This means that no thing exists independently,

5 This characterization of slavery was advanced by James Madison, one of the nation’s “founding fathers” and its fourth president. But one description of Madison’s ambivalence states the following:

Madison’s antislavery thinking seems to have been strongest during the 1780s—at the height of Revolutionary politics. But by the early 1800s, when in a position to truly impact policy, he failed to follow through on these views. In February 1801 Madison Sr. died, leaving Montpelier and more than one hundred slaves to James Madison, as his eldest son. The following week, Thomas Jefferson became President of the United States and appointed Madison as his Secretary of State. Madison managed Montpelier from afar yet took no concrete steps toward freeing his slaves or changing the plantation system. Upon becoming the fourth President of the United States in 1809, Madison brought slaves to serve him in the White House.

stands on its own, without dependence on others. We are here because others have been here. We are here in dependence upon others. We are, hence, all connected beings; connected to causes and conditions; connected to one another. This is our interdependence (Sanskrit, *prati-tya-samuttpada*, literally, “arisen owing to another”).

The Rev. Dr. MLK, Jr., you might know, said something quite similar. He said:

All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.⁶

Once we have deeply realized this fact—of our intertwined and interconnected reality—we ought to look out for, and be responsible for, one another. This pandemic should certainly have taught us this. We saw how, at its outset, it could not be contained and how it quickly spread around the globe. We know now that it will do no good to wipe it out here in the U.S. if it still exists in some other place in the world. We, today, can see this circumstance, this condition. And I am reminded of what the great “engaged Buddhist,” Thich Nhat Hanh, said, namely, “Once you see, then you must act.”⁷

Today we sit amidst *three great crises*: the Covid-19 pandemic itself, the economic collapse and reordering of things that has resulted from it, and the great racial and social inequities which have been laid bare, even more for all to see, because of the pandemic.

The pandemic did teach us some good truths. For example, we

6 From Rev. King’s sermon titled, “The man who was a fool.” See King’s *Strength to Love*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981 (1963). Dr. King used some version of this quote in many of his writings.

7 Thich Nhat Hahn (b. 1926), the Vietnamese Zen master, is regarded as the founder of the modern-day Engaged Buddhist Movement. His life has been one of sharing peace and love, but not shying away from action. Like Dr. King, whom he knew, he taught a kind of loving, non-violent activism. He often made this comment, in his many talks and numerous books.

learned early on that we needed far less to sustain ourselves than we had been led to believe by the constant advertising telling us we needed it. If we were fortunate enough, food, clothing, shelter, and heat were about it. The other stuff was luxury. Moreover, we saw the skies become bluer again, less polluted by the smog of our excessive use of fossil fuels. These were some of its positive benefits.

But then, we began to see the glaring social and economic inequities in our society. Not everyone had the luxury of working from home. Not everyone had enough food. Not everyone had broadband and Wi-Fi and so could not do school virtually, fully online. Not everyone had the genuine necessities of life, or even the bare necessities of life.

We learned at the beginning of the pandemic, who was a so-called “essential worker” for our well-being: the hospital, EMT, and nursing home workers, for example, who have been, and remain, on the frontlines,⁸ the postal and delivery people, stock-clerks in grocery stores, our vegetable growers, and meatpackers. Now, just consider: these people are the very ones who cannot miss work because they are deemed “essential,” but (apart from the doctors in hospitals) they have the lowest paying jobs, not nearly a living wage, and they are nearly all the *dispensable* and disposable ones. They are the ones who contracted the virus most easily and early on—because they had to be in contact with many people, they could not work from home, and often they live in multi-generational homes without the luxury of space to keep themselves safe. In short, we have seen the paradox that the most essential workers—for all of us fortunate enough to be able to stay in, isolate and shelter in place—are the very ones we might typically consider the most “dispensable” or “disposable” ones, this society’s “nobodies.” (I am

8 On April 8, 2021, the *Guardian* published the findings of a year-long study that provided the latest data on healthcare workers. It reported that 3,607 healthcare workers had died in the first year of the pandemic and that, of that number, two-thirds of the deaths were of people of color. The study’s data reported that 21% of deaths were of Asian American/Pacific Islanders, 26% were Black, 15% were Hispanic, and 36% were White. It noted that “Asian/Pacific Islanders and Black people account for about 20% of the U.S. population, but nearly half of health care worker deaths.” See article at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/08/us-health-workers-deaths-covid-lost-on-the-frontline>.

reminded here of Marc Lamont Hill’s artfully crafted book, *Nobody: Casualties of America’s War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond.*⁹ In our state and federal prisons, for example, prisoners were forced to make our early supply of PPE (personal protective equipment) but were not allowed to use it for themselves. Something is wrong with this picture.

And then, because most of us were sheltering-in-place, on May 25th of 2020 (which just happened to be Memorial Day in 2020), most all of us got to see on TV or on our mobile devices, the slow and brutal, torturous death of George Floyd at the hands of police officer, Derek Chauvin, one who was sworn to “protect and serve.”¹⁰ We watched. We witnessed. We were forced to see, and to be complicit with, the



9 Hill, M. L. (2016). *Nobody: Casualties of America’s War on the Vulnerable, From Ferguson to Flint and Beyond.* Atria Books.

10 The words “Protect and Serve” often appear on the side of many police cars and is the motto of most police forces. The words have come generally to define the mission of the police, which is to “protect” citizens and “serve” the public. Historically, for Black people, this phrase has additional echoes of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Ratified in 1868, the Amendment gave newly freed slaves the right of citizenship and along with that, guaranteed all citizens “equal protection under the law.” Black people continue to await this most important right of citizenship.

system of unequal justice that has been a hallmark of this nation since its very inception being imposed upon a Black man—once again. We were shown directly the State’s total disregard for Black life in this country. We were forced to watch the death throes and wails of the “gentle giant,” George Floyd, and the steely, calm, and callous demeanor of White supremacy’s representative, Chauvin, with his knee on Floyd’s neck. We watched then for what we were told was 8 minutes and 46 seconds. (Now that the trial is being aired, we have learned that the actual time of the assault was 9 minutes and 25 seconds.) And as the trial is being publicly aired and video of the homicide is being constantly replayed, we are all being once again daily traumatized by this cruelty.

But because we all *saw it together*, saw it and the *injustice* of it, and the *cruelty* of it, many of us stood up and said, “Enough is enough!” And we began marching once again, carrying placards that said “Black Lives Matter.” (The #BlackLivesMatter Network¹¹ and movement was the creation of three Black women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi—following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2013. It was rekindled in 2014 after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and it emerged powerfully once again in 2020 immediately in the wake of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.)

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, I had marched like this before. It was in 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama when I marched, as a teenager, with Dr. King, Jr. during the Civil Rights Campaign.¹² I was raised during the era of Jim Crow segregation when everything was

11 From their website: “BlackLivesMatter was founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer. Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. is a global organization in the U.S., UK, and Canada, whose mission is to eradicate White supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives.” Two of the three young women founders have authored essential books. See Patrisse Khan-Cullors’ *When They Call You a Terrorist* and Alicia Garza’s *The Purpose of Power*.

12 A fuller description of these heady days can be found in my memoir, *Dreaming Me; Black, Baptist and Buddhist; One Women’s Spiritual Journey*, Somerville, MA, 2008 (2001).

separate and *unequal*. The water fountains were marked “White” and “Colored.” During those days of the Campaign, many of the signs read “I Am a Man” and “I Am Somebody.” In other words, like today, the signs *stated the obvious*. They stated the obvious *facts*. Black men who, regardless of their age, had been called “boy” all their lives by White segregationists sought to take back their manhood and their humanity. Of course, Black lives matter, we might think; some of us going on to quickly add, “All lives matter.” But precisely because, so far in the history of this society, those “obvious facts” that all lives matter has not been agreed to, or acceded to, by *all* the citizens of these United States of America, we were then, and we are today, forced to carry such signs again.¹³

We keep repeating the *facts* that we have long known, but no one else seems to be listening. For example, for all its talk about “freedom,” the United States is a callously punitive nation. The U.S. has the largest prison population in the world and the highest per-capita incarceration rate. “The prison population has increased from 300,000 in the early 1970s to 2.3 million people today. There are nearly six million people on probation or on parole. One in every fifteen people born in the United

13 On this particular point, I am reminded once again of the work of Marc Lamont Hill. In his latest, short, book, *We Still Here; Pandemic, Policing, Protest, & Possibility*, pp. 96-97, he stridently argues the following:

America has had four hundred years to say “All Lives Matter.” When Black people were stolen and enslaved, White people could have abolished the project of slavery by saying, “Wait, no, all lives matter.” Whites could have interrupted the lynch mobs and stopped the extrajudicial killing of innocent Black people by saying, “Do not hang these people from trees because all lives matter.” When Black people were subjected to legalized apartheid from 1896 until 1954, from *Plessy v. Ferguson* to *Brown v. Board of Education*, U.S. citizens could have intervened and said, “No, we need an equal legal system because all lives matter.” There have been numerous instances in U.S. history when White people had the ability, with complete moral authority, to say all lives matter—but they never did...It is only at the moment when Black people assert the specific legitimacy of their lives in response to the systemic devaluing of their lives that we want to become universal in response to a very specific problem.

States in 2001 is expected to go to jail or prison; *one in every three Black male babies born in this century is expected to be incarcerated*" (Stevenson, 2014/2015, p. 15). Black and Brown women fare no better in the U.S. prison systems, their numbers of incarceration being far higher than those for White women. Class and race meet at the intersection of justice. If one looks solely at drug offenses, for example, one can see that there seem clearly to be two different justice systems in place, with the "poor man's drug," crack, usually drawing sentences far longer than "rich man's drugs" like cocaine. The prison and legal systems in this country, says Bryan Stevenson, "treats you better if you are rich and guilty than if you are poor and innocent" (TED, 2012) And he has often repeated the phrase, "The opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice" (2014/2015, p. 18).

III.

Can We Imagine What America Might Be?

I sit here in Georgia, not only a place where the pandemic has taken and continues to take its toll, but a place where—against great odds, but with the stalwart support of people like Stacey Abrams and her organization, Fair Fight—a slim majority of voters here turned the state from red to blue,¹⁴ voting in a Democrat for president and two Democratic senators, a Black man and a Jewish man, to the United States Senate. And where we hardly had time to celebrate those victories when our national Capitol was stormed by right-wing, pro-Trump, White supremacist rioters. And where, immediately after that storming of the Capitol,

14 One must applaud here the extraordinary work of Stacey Abrams and her group, "Fair Fight." Ms. Abrams is a Georgia native and a long-time political leader and activist. She served eleven years in the State legislature, seven as Democratic leader. She was the first Black woman to be a gubernatorial candidate. She ran in but lost her gubernatorial bid. Fair Fight's website states that, "After witnessing the gross mismanagement of the 2018 election by the Secretary of State's office, Abrams launched Fair Fight to ensure every American has a voice in our election system through programs such as Fair Fight 2020, an initiative to fund and train voter protection teams in 20 battleground states." Stacey Abrams has also authored two best-selling books: *Lead from the Outside* and *Our Time is Now*.

Georgia lawmakers began furiously to enact voter restriction/suppression laws. According to the latest statistics, there are currently more than 360 bills dedicated to suppressing or restricting the vote in 47 states in the U.S.¹⁵

Why? Because, for many, the idea of this country can only be conceived of as a White country, founded by, and intended for White men alone. This was the coded message of Trump's campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again." It meant "Make, and Keep, America White Again." When census demographics showed that the country would become majority "Brown" in just a few decades, White supremacists lost their minds! "What?" they asked each other. "Will we lose our power? Our wealth? Our right to rule over everyone with injustice and without accountability?" This is why the nation's Capitol was stormed. This is why voter suppression bills have appeared so fast and furiously. White supremacy is being challenged like never before. Indeed, sometimes, it appears to be in its death throes. But it will not relinquish its power easily. Power is never handed over willingly.

This is where we are. Many among the younger generations in this country have seen what is happening. When I marched during the Civil Rights Campaign, there were thousands and sometimes even hundreds of thousands of marchers, the vast majority of them Black folk. But today, following the killing of George Floyd, millions of young people, Black, Brown, and White, took to the streets. It is reported that more than fifteen million people took part in the 1,470 protests throughout the U.S. during the months of the summer of 2020.¹⁶ In the wake of George Floyd's murder, the Black Lives Matter movement spread throughout the globe, with marches and protests in countries worldwide. During the writing of this essay, on April 20, 2021, Derek Chauvin, the police of-

15 The Brennan Center for Justice's "State Voting Bills Tracker 2021" reported on April 1, 2021 that "As of March 24, legislators have introduced 361 bills with restrictive provisions in 47 states."

16 *The New York Times* reported on July 4, 2020 that "Over the course of the demonstrations, protests have occurred in over 40% of the counties in the United States... Polls suggest between 15 million and 26 million people participated, which would make these demonstrations the largest in United States history."

ficer who cold-heartedly murdered Floyd, was found guilty on all three charges against him. He is currently awaiting sentencing. The jury's verdict in this case gave some measure of justice to the family of Floyd and to those who had marched in protests in his name. There was, at least, some accountability. But accountability in this one case is not yet "justice for all." As Vice President Kamala Harris publicly remarked shortly after the verdict was reached, "A measure of justice isn't the same as equal justice for all." There has been no justice for Sandra Bland or Breonna Taylor, none yet for Eric Garner or Tamir Rice, nor for the countless others whose names appear on Black Lives Matter posters or on "Say Her Name" ¹⁷ banners. Perhaps our country's legislative body will pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act.¹⁸ We will have to see.

Today, we stand at a crucial time, a possible turning-point, a possible tipping-point for all of us. For here, during this moment of historical racial reckoning, we have a choice: Will we live up to the promise that this country was founded upon and choose to become a truly multi-racial democracy where each and every citizen is valued, loved, safe, and treated with dignity and respect? Or will we devolve once again into fierce tribalism and long-simmering hatreds?

Martin Luther King, Jr said, "We must learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] or perish together as fools."¹⁹ When hatred wins, everybody loses. Dr. King had a vision about a society based on justice, equal opportunity, and love of one's fellow human beings.²⁰ Some have

17 The #SayHerName movement was founded as a response to the Black Lives Matter movement and the mainstream media's tendency to sideline the experiences of Black women in the context of police brutality and anti-Black violence. The hashtag was coined by the African American Policy Forum headquartered at Columbia University and co-founded by Professor Kimberle Crenshaw.

18 The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2021 is a civil rights and police reform bill drafted by Democrats in the United States Congress, including members of the Congressional Black Caucus. The legislation was introduced in the United States House of Representatives on February 24, 2021. Introduced by Congresswoman Karen Bass, it is officially known as H.R.1280.

19 This is an often-repeated quote by Dr. King. He used it in sermons and as the title of a short talk he gave in St. Louis in 1964.

20 For more on some of the details of the Beloved Community, see <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>.

viewed it as a schmaltzy, and sentimental idea. But, I believe, it is a radical vision of what we might become. He, and others, called it simply the Beloved Community. But its realization calls for a true *transformation*—in both our thinking as well as in our institutions. In this regard, its creation is both a moral and a spiritual practice.

We simply must find a way to live together, in a community of equal justice and liberty for all, in a society where each of us feels valued, loved, and safe. We have not gotten there yet. We will have to call upon our deepest wisdom and compassion to envision this new world. Can we use our Buddhist training and meditations to help us here? I think we must.

The Buddha said in *Dhammapada* verse 183:

Do no harm.

Practice what is good.

Discipline the Mind.

This is the teaching of all the Buddhas.

To me, this simple verse says it all: We are here on this earth to help others, to cause no harm, to do what is good—for others as well as ourselves—and to discipline our minds so that we can effectively carry out those first goals. We are here, as Dr. King said, to serve. And, in serving others, we also serve ourselves.

The Zen master Suzuki Roshi said, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s mind, there are few” (1970, p. 21). At this point in our history, we must all become “beginners” again. We need new and creative possibilities, new and previously unimagined solutions. The issue is this: How do we make the dream of America, *a fact*? How do we wipe the slate clean of the multiple racial divides and inequities in this country and make of it a truly multi-racial democracy? The solutions proposed in the past have not succeeded in making this a “land of the free with justice and liberty for all.” So, how can we now, together, make that ideal a reality? This is what, I believe, we are called upon to do. This is our most urgent challenge. If we do not do it now—if we do not imagine a new world and begin to create it—we may never again get the chance. Now is the time. Now is the time.

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