

New York Daily News - <http://www.nydailynews.com>

Wake from the dream

By GEOFFREY CANADA

Monday, January 15th, 2007

I was 15 when, in April 1968, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Those days, the South Bronx, where I was raised, was just another urban ghetto in America, but we had high hopes for King's strategy.

We were locked out of the American dream, standing close enough that we could almost touch it, but knew it was something we could not have - yet. King was our prophet, our Moses leading us to a promised land. He never got there and we never got there.

In the 1960s the enemies were clear. There were laws, such as poll taxes and Jim Crow. There were people, such as Lester Maddox, Bull Connor and George Wallace. There were cities, such as Selma and Birmingham. They had their tactics - water cannons, police dogs, batons and murder. We had our tactics - marches, sit-ins and, above all, nonviolence.

There were some African-Americans who advocated violence, but prior to King's death they were a relatively small minority. Many of us thought if we could just stop the racism, end prejudice, and gain our civil rights, all would be well. It turned out not to be as straightforward as that.

Thirty-nine years later we find no appreciable improvement in the lot of African-Americans in America. In many ways things are worse off. The old enemies, racism and inequality, still exist, but in many areas the blame must be placed right at our own doorstep.

Our children are often not getting the education they need, so they are growing up in a world that they are unprepared to compete in, and we are not acting as if it is a crisis. More African-American men are in prison than college. Our children are being raised without fathers; they are slaughtering each other on the streets. And we act as if this isn't a crisis.

What is it going to take for us to realize that we are a major part of the problem and the solution? We must mobilize as a people with the same urgency and intensity as we did in the 1960s.

If King were alive today, where would he lead the tens of thousands in protest? He might lead them to the radio stations and recording studios where millionaire rappers, who are black, encourage our youth to embrace crime, drugs and violence. He might call for a sit-in in the parks and playgrounds where our children are killed by other black children not for civil rights, but for a pair of sneakers.

Alas, King is not alive to lead us in a new movement and I don't expect a new King to show up any time soon. How many Kings, Mandelas or Gandhis does any one group get?

So the hard work is going to be left up to us. If we get the values - hard work, honesty, integrity - right, and we get the terrain - our homes, our schools, our places of worship - right, and we take advantage of the real progress that has been made in the courts, the business world and the military, then King's dream can become a reality in our lifetime.

Canada, president and CEO of Harlem Children's Zone, is author of "Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence in America."