

A RECURRING DREAM: The legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
His cry for a living wage 40 years ago reverberates for today's workers

by Catherine J. Rourke

There is nothing but a lack of social vision to prevent us from paying an adequate wage to every American, whether he is a hospital worker, laundry worker, maid, or day laborer.

– Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

America needed him then but it needs him now more than ever.

In his short life, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. brought to the forefront the atrocities that were tarnishing America's reputation as a democracy. He had a dream for a better America – where one could rise above the impositions of gender, race and class and receive respectable wages, affordable health care and a good education.

King gained notoriety as a young minister in 1955 while leading a transportation boycott on behalf of Rosa Parks, the black seamstress who refused to give up her seat to a white man on a segregated Alabama bus. For the next 12 years, he led endless campaigns in the streets of America and on the steps of the Capitol, not just for civil rights but for the sake of all people, especially the poor. "What good is the right to sit at a lunch counter," King once asked, "if one can't afford the price of a meal?"

His protest tactics incorporated a spiritual approach, with books, speeches and nonviolent marches for social justice. He adhered to Ghandi's path of action – the *satyagraha*, or "firmness in truth" – which combines civil disobedience and constructive service.

King knew fear and looked it squarely in the eye as he faced verbal and physical assault and even jail, admitting he was often afraid. "But, in that darkness," he said, "I found a radiant star of unity." He died while campaigning for the working rights of trash collectors in Memphis, Tenn., in 1968.

King provided this nation with a lamp unto its feet and a road map for positive social change. Now, as American society once again faces an onslaught of atrocities that threaten democracy, we must keep King's dream alive and follow his example of building rather than destroying.



Broken dreams

In his "I Have a Dream" speech during the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, King called for "a national minimum wage act that will give all Americans a decent standard of living." He believed that America's religious values call for a society in which all workers can share in the prosperity that they help create.

Since then, the minimum wage has increased by only \$3.55 while its spending power has dramatically decreased. It has remained frozen for nearly 10 years, the longest span in minimum-wage history.

King never dreamed that, four decades later, the American minimum wage would rank the lowest among the world's industrialized nations and that its value would decrease 41% while the cost of living skyrocketed. He never dreamed that, four decades later, more than 28 million workers would earn less than \$9 an hour. Nor did he dream that, four decades later, 36 million Americans would live below the poverty level.

And, certainly, he never dreamed that, in the 21st century, the sub-minimum wage of several million food service workers would be frozen for 15 years and permanently excluded by an act of Congress from any future increases.

Better or worse?

This is a different country than it was in the 1960s when King called on the nation to search its soul. Yet we live in a society that is now better off in some ways better and worse off in others than the one he tried to improve.

While today's social issues are subtler and harder to confront directly, they insidiously persist despite King's and other activists' efforts. Black workers are still paid less than equally qualified white workers, and blacks are arrested more often. Latinos are similarly discriminated against and Mexican immigrants face a barrage of imposing issues in Arizona and across the nation.

A simple stroll down any toy store aisle shockingly proves that gender roles haven't changed a bit since King's era. Girls still play with toy vacuum cleaners while society wonders why a female still hasn't advanced to the Oval Office. Likewise, boys still play combat games with violent toys while many Americans ask how soldiers can kill innocent civilians.

Political leaders preach for a return to morality and then cut social welfare programs in favor of military spending. To that, King would say exactly what he did nearly 40 years ago in his book *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community*: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

2005 by the numbers

The grim economic statistics released by the U.S. Dept. of Labor in its annual report earlier this month indicate that America remains in dire need of King's prophetic proposals for economic justice.

In 2005, corporate profits rose 87% while wages fell in eight of the past 12 months. As CEO compensation went up 23%, the national average hourly wage of \$15.46 saw a mere *three-cent* increase since 2003.

Furthermore, less than 25% of the nation's workers have jobs that pay at least \$16 an hour with benefits, and more than 45 million Americans lack health insurance. The end result is that 75% of American workers struggle in jobs that don't provide a living wage, pension or health care.

Finally, last November, Congress approved its own annual pay hike at a "barely acceptable" \$165,000 while rejecting the Fair Minimum Wage Act for the working majority and giving itself seven raises during a 9-year span.

"Unfortunately, life is getting tougher for the average American, not better," said Sen. Charles Schumer (D-NY), citing that prices for everything from gas to health care and college tuition rose drastically last year.

Arizona: 'stagnant in well-being'

In Arizona, as the dark clouds of inflation, low wages and regressing working conditions cast an even darker shadow, King's former cries for living wages seemingly fall on deaf ears.

A November 2005 headline in the *Arizona Republic* read: "Arizona stagnant in well-being." The article reported that despite its explosive growth, the state's median household income

continues to decline while its poverty rate remains in the top quarter of the nation. More than 74% of Arizona workers earning less than \$7/hour are adults over age 20.

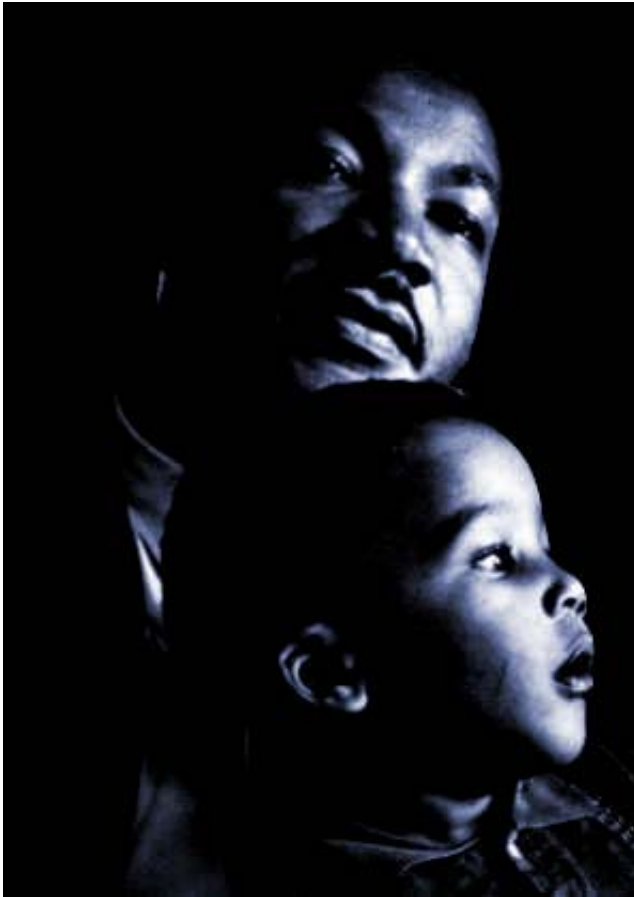
In addition, more than one million Arizonans lack health insurance; personal bankruptcies rose 54%; and the statewide average household income continues to decline each year.

Statistics become even more perturbing in Yavapai and Coconino counties, where workers face some of the highest housing prices in the state – as well as the nation.

According to the Arizona Dept. of Commerce Governor's Council on Workforce Policy, the median hourly wage in Yavapai County remains the lowest of all the state's rural counties other than Yuma and La Paz. At the same time, the education level of the average worker, who surprisingly possesses a bachelor's degree at minimum, far surpasses most in the entire state.

In other words, in Yavapai County, the American dream is still just a dream for an educated but grossly underpaid workforce. What's behind this disturbing disparity?

Gov. Napolitano, in a recent address to Sedona businesswomen, claimed the solution for increasing wages was to enhance workers' educational levels. But with the average worker in Yavapai County already in possession of advanced degrees, state economists remain at a loss to explain the low wages of professional workers in the fastest growing community in Arizona.



What would King say?

If King was here with us today, what would he say about regressing wages?

Would he agree with the economists who claim that big business can afford to pay better wages, as proven in the labor crunch of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath? In New Orleans, fast-food chains are now offering workers \$6,000 sign-on bonuses and more than \$20,000 in wages. Likewise, housekeepers in the Gulf's casino hotels are also receiving significantly higher wages.

The hurricane's catapult of the average take-home pay of Louisiana's low-wage workers from minimum wage to \$8 an hour indicates that these industries had the money all along to offer prevailing wages, notwithstanding Bush's suspension of the 1931 Davis-Bacon Act. This means that Sedona's retail clerks can now earn more at Popeye's Chicken & Biscuits than at local counters with gorgeous views – and find more affordable housing to boot – if they were willing to live in the Gulf instead of the red rocks.

Would King agree that the need for affordable housing, health care and living

wages is even more critical now than in his time? Would he chalk it up to a lack of moral responsibility in America? The answer lies in his "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he said:

"We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights ... which must be the era of revolution. We must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power ... this means a revolution of values and other things. The whole structure of American life must be changed. America is a hypocritical nation and (we) must put (our) own house in order."

The call for living wages

Shortly before his death, King pressured the government to redirect its budgetary priorities to support living wages rather than waging war.

"Millions of people are making inadequate wages," he said. "Not only do they work in our hospitals, they work in our hotels, our laundries and in domestic service. But no labor is menial unless you're not getting adequate wages. What makes the work menial is the income."

Today that menial work is no longer limited to farms and garment factories. It includes big box stores and supercenters, large companies and even offices and newsrooms, as well as hospitals and hotels. It now includes white-collar office administrators who often toil 12-hour days without overtime and without proper breaks.

King's speeches and books lead us to examine our personal values regarding work and income. Does running a successful business hinge on paying low wages? Does being an underpaid worker mean living in fear of retribution for speaking up at work? Do we participate in community meetings to try to make a difference in our lives? Are we willing to give up Monday Night Football and "Desperate Housewives" to do so?

As Americans, do we believe in democracy until it means giving up our own agendas? When addressing wage issues, we can no longer remain consumed with our individual slice of the pie but with a piece of it for everybody.

In a 1967 speech, King said: *"Let us lift up those who live on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. I look forward to the day when all who work for a living will be one...the day when we bring into full realization the American dream...a dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a nation where all our resources are held not for ourselves alone but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity."*

Putting words into action

Strategic action begins with individual accountability, by asking ourselves critical questions: Am I concerned merely with my own needs? What am I willing to sacrifice for positive social change? How do I treat others? What is the foundation of my belief systems? Are they steeped in scarcity and deprivation?

According to the ethical values of most Americans, it is unacceptable to pay workers less than a living wage. Even the Bible says: "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads the grain; the laborer *is* worthy of his wages (Timothy 5:18)."

King directed Americans to act upon that moral responsibility by creating new paradigms that uphold living wages, integrity and dignity in the workplace for the benefit of all.

We are all sailing on the same ship. When there's a storm, it affects all passengers, whether they're eating steak in first class or peanuts in third class. When the ship starts to sink, first class will go down with steerage, unless we tell those at the helm to change direction.

King would strongly urge us to resurrect the Poor People's Campaign by supporting the current federal and state initiatives to raise the minimum wage. He would encourage us to support federal legislation, such as the **Fair Minimum Wage Act** and the **Employee Free Choice Act**, by sending letters to political representatives, meeting with congressmen and religious leaders, and exercising our right to vote.

For more information on federal wage campaigns, visit www.livingwagecampaign.org and www.americanrightsatwork.org. Two organizations, **Interfaith Worker Justice** (www.iwj.org) and **Let Justice Roll** (www.letjusticeroll.org), offer many resources for living wage and minimum-wage campaigns.

King would remind Arizonans that it is their moral imperative to support the "**Raise the Minimum Wage for Working Arizonans Act**." This initiative would increase the minimum wage to \$6.75 on January 1, 2007, thereby giving 145,000 workers - 58% of whom are women and 25% of whom are single mothers - their first raise in 10 years. While a far cry from a living wage, it represents one small step in the right direction and a healing gesture for Arizona's exasperated workforce.

Approximately 200,000 registered-voter signatures are required by July 2006 to place this initiative on the November ballot for Arizona voters. Petitions can be obtained by calling 602-999-

5299. For more information, call Gail Tuzzolo at the **Arizona Minimum Wage Campaign** at (702) 242-3558 or log onto www.workingarizona.com.

'Soul-utions' for change

Change begins in turning off the TV and coming together as a community in *constructive, strategic, solution-oriented* dialogue that embraces all walks of life and gives every voice a chance to be heard in a state of grace, without any whining.

King strived to forge a common ground on which all people could join together to address community issues. If he was here now, he would remind us that we have to release our complacency. We can't lie around like sleeping dogs hoping that things will change or that elected officials will throw us a bone. As Dante wrote: "*The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their mediocrity in times of crisis.*"

No one can deny that we are in crisis, especially when it comes to low wages. King would urge us to identify its *spiritual* root cause – one based on lack of trust in a higher power and on fear. The turnaround begins with the dismantling of our own scarcity-based mentalities and self-centered, personal agendas.

Prosperity will not result merely from a change in wage laws but from a spiritual shift within ourselves...when we allow ourselves to get out of our heads, where fear lurks, and into our hearts, where courage soars...when we end the fragmentation that divides us as a community... when we realize it's not about personal loss or the demise of corporate profits but about everyone prospering – employees as well as their employers.

When we commit to an ethical life, we are no longer ruled by the changing conditions of the outside world. When we identify a thread of meaning in our lives, we find new definitions of happiness. When we exchange scarcity consciousness with trust in a guiding force, then prosperity graces our world. When we serve others, we find that our own lives flourish. It is this spiritual foundation of courage, of replacing consumption with compassion, that we must establish.

We can start this process by joining together in building positive relationships between all strata of society – business owners, political leaders and the low-wage workers – stepping outside of the box and out of the boat so that together we can walk on water.

Living the dream

"How can I best serve others?" King's legacy reminds us of the call to service, which he regarded as the great equalizer. "Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve," he said.

Are we willing to step out of the comfort zone or are we going to wait for the last drop of gas or the next American debacle, such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina, to spur us into action?

Together we can make our community, county, state and country a better place for all citizens, in accordance with King's dream – if we get off our cell phones and computers, out of our cars and cubicles, and off the couch into strategic action. Like King and Rosa Parks, we can turn rage into "cou-rage."

In his book, *Strength to Love*, King wrote: "***We must combine the toughness of the serpent and the softness of the dove, a tough mind and a tender heart.***"

In this manner we can begin to clear the social debris of a heinous system that thrives on racism, poverty, class oppression and war. Together, with the toughness of the serpent and the softness of the dove, we can focus on service and turn it into the kind of force King hoped it would become. This was his dream, one that we must keep alive.

This holiday in King's honor should not just be a day off; it must be a day ON to continue his dream of peace, justice and equality fueled by positive, nonviolent action. Perhaps the greatest way to honor him is by performing individual acts of kindness through service to others. In doing so, we can make that dream a reality.

Copyright January 2006, Catherine J. Rourke,