

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. - Martin Luther King Jr., Strength to Love, 1963

"Dr. King wants the same thing I want -- freedom!"- Malcolm X

Martin & Malcolm

They were two of the most important figures in our modern-day civil rights era. They made changes in a world that fought against it. They spoke louder when it appeared their voices would be silenced. They were willing to give the ultimate sacrifice so we could enjoy the life we have today. America most likely would be a much different place today if there had not been Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X aka El Haaj Malik El Shabazz.

Do we take for granted the impact they made on our history? Have we really progressed in the forty-plus years since their assassinations? How would they feel about the state of Black America today?

Let's take a minute and examine their philosophies, strategies and hopes. We will also examine the scope of influence they have had on our history. This will give us an honest reflection of where we have come in the time since they were taken from us and how we can use their messages to change our destiny.

Malcolm X

There is not a holiday celebrating his birth nor are there many ceremonies or headlines around the country remembering the day of his assassination.

Despite these facts the death of Malcolm X was one of the most significant events of our modern civil-rights era.

In reality Malcolm spoke for the majority of Black Americans at a time when most of Black America was too busy trying to win approval from the “majority society”. Malcolm said what we were thinking but were too afraid to say out loud.

He sacrificed everything he had for everyone else. In reality, the other civil rights leaders were able to accomplish greater things because America was more afraid of what would happen if Malcolm became the defacto “black leader”.

They were willing to allow Martin to stage a few sit-ins, or conduct marches and boycotts scattered throughout the country.

What America didn't want was a regimented army of young, black, determined men standing at the ready to defend themselves with a relentless zeal to be recognized as full citizens of this country. If Malcolm had succeeded in galvanizing the blacks of the cities and counties of America at that time to become the strong-willed army that he envisioned, imagine the storm that would have created. Imagine the economic and political impact of such an army.

The very reason for the success of Malcolm and the Nation of Islam in the sixties was because they were people of action. While most of Black America was sitting and waiting to see who would be the victim of the next lynching or what church would next go up in flames, Malcolm was setting the stage for action. Not retaliatory, but defensive. He was letting us know we did not need to be pawns of the system, that we had a voice and we needed to make that voice heard.

Ironically it was not until Malcolm's transformation into El Haaj Malik El Shabazz did he realize that he too was a pawn, thus beginning the silencing of one of the most powerful voices for Black America in our modern history.

Malcolm once said, “I for one believe that if you give people a thorough understanding of what confronts them and the basic causes that produce it, *they’ll create their own program*, and when the people create a program, you get action.”

Our current “leadership” has not followed the pattern that was so carefully laid out for them by Malcolm, Martin and Medgar. They have failed to give Black Americans a vision, failed to give us our “program”, the one thing that would unite our community to fight for the freedom that we all say we want. That issue cannot be based on hatred or give us a “victim mentality”.

It must be one that inspires, awakens and pierces our thoughts and hearts which will move us to action.

Malcolm once said, “When a person places the proper value on freedom, there is nothing under the sun that he will not do to acquire that freedom. Whenever you hear a man saying he wants freedom, but in the next breath he is going to tell you what he won’t do to get it, or what he doesn’t believe in doing in order to get it, he doesn’t believe in freedom. A man who believes in freedom will do anything under the sun to acquire...or preserve his freedom.”

If you carefully look at the life of Malcolm X you will find that he was willing to fight for the freedom of every black person that wanted it for themselves. However what had to be understood by those who desired freedom was that in order to attain it necessary sacrifices would have to be made. Malcolm knew this and those around him knew this.

If you read his biography you will see that Malcolm enjoyed giving persons the knowledge needed to attain the goal. It is unfortunate that many spurned his message out of fear. There was fear not just of the unknown, but fear of taking the leap to release oneself from the leash of dependency. This fear did not allow some to change their own destinies.

Malcolm made the leap and I am thankful that he did for he shaped the thinking of millions of Americans, not just Black Americans.

After his Haaj to Mecca, and thus the beginning of his transformation into El Haaj Malik El Shabazz, he could see more clearly not just the hypocrisy of America, but the hypocrisy of his own people. His hatred for this hypocrisy, and his outspokenness about it, eventually led to his assassination.

I believe I can say with some confidence that if Malcolm were alive today he would not be satisfied with the state of Black America. Having experienced personally the struggles of the fifties and sixties and having been taught about the struggles of previous generations he would be deeply saddened that we have allowed ourselves to fall to this condition.

I believe he would say that we have not loved ourselves enough to demand respect from the majority population and each other. We have tolerated and endorsed mediocrity in our communities and our families.

Is there still prejudice and hatred towards our people? Yes. Are we still held to a different standard in some places for no other reason than the pigment that resides in our skin? Yes. Have we allowed alcohol, drugs and violence to take over many of our communities to the detriment of untold generations? Yes. Have we disrespected each other, abused each other and killed each other for no understandable reason? Yes.

Malcolm would not be pleased. He would be a leader working to help others change their destinies. He would not openly tolerate the buffoons who have deemed themselves “black leaders” in our communities. He would not remain silent while these “leaders” turn their heads to the everyday violence and mayhem that permeates our community yet run to the camera when an actor or disc jockey say the word “nigger”.

No Malcolm would tell each one of us “get up, educate yourself and learn to compete in today’s market.”

Malcolm would call out those “leaders” that are using and abusing our communities for their own financial gain while not contributing to the stability of the environment. He would not stand for those that arrange the high-dollar “summits” and “focus panels” yet still have never implemented a viable plan for Black America.

Malcolm would not be satisfied with the antics of today’s athletes, actors, rapper and superstars. He would not endorse the disrespect that is directed towards our women.

Malcolm would not be pleased with the fact that more than sixty (60) percent of black men in cities will not graduate high school and our “leaders” only solution is to ask the government for more money.

The late Ossie Davis gave the eulogy at the funeral of Malcolm X. The words he spoke in 1965 have just as much if not more relevance today:

“There are those who will consider it their duty, as friends of the Negro people, to tell us to revile him, to flee, even from the presence of his memory, to save ourselves by writing him out of the history of our turbulent times. Many will ask what Harlem finds to honor in this stormy, controversial and bold young captain – and we will smile. Many will say turn away – away from this man, for he is not a man but a demon, a monster, a subverter and an enemy of the black man – and we will smile. They will say that he is of hate – a fanatic, a racist – who can only bring evil to the cause for which you struggle! And we will answer and say to them: Did you ever talk to Brother Malcolm? Did you ever touch him or have him smile at you? Did you ever really listen to him? Did he ever do a mean thing? Was he ever himself associated with violence or any public disturbance? For if you did you would know him. And if you knew him you would know why we must honor him.

“Malcolm was our manhood, our living black manhood! This was his meaning to his people. And in honoring him, we honor the best in ourselves. Last year, from Africa, he wrote these words to a friend: ‘My journey’, he says, ‘is almost ended, and I have a much broader scope than

when I started out, which I believe will add new life and dimension to our struggle for freedom and honor and dignity in the States. I am writing these things so that you will know for a fact the tremendous sympathy and support we have among the African States for our Human Rights struggle. The main thing is that we keep a united front wherein our most valuable time and energy will not be wasted fighting each other'. However we may have differed with him – or with each other about him and his value as a man- let his going from us serve only to bring us together, now.”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Born of humble beginnings, the son of a Baptist preacher, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. energized and shaped a generation and left a bonfire of hope that still shines today.

Dr. King attacked the philosophies of “Jim Crow” and “Separate but Equal” head on without reservation. He was more than just a good speaker; he was a leader among leaders.

America had become satisfied with the status quo and had no intentions of extending the rights that were due blacks at that time. Most of the country had developed a “separate but equal” policy and felt good that their intentions were to make a show of extending services to the “coloreds”.

However conditions were not equal and Dr. King knew that in order for us to be truly “free” we could not tolerate the current policies of many states.

He used the strongest institution in the community at that time; the Black church. If there was any way to begin a movement, any way to galvanize our people at that time, it would come through the church. The church was the cornerstone of the community. It became the cornerstone of a movement that would change this country forever.

What made Dr. King the force he became in the sixties? What drove him to not settle for what he was given and induce him to change his destiny and that of his people?

I can think of one word: fear. The fear mentioned is not that of fright or terror. No it was the fear of the unknown. What kind of country was America becoming? What kind of country would it be for his children? Would his children endure in this country?

I believe Dr. King not only wanted to change today, but he was looking to make a better tomorrow. Dr. King wanted an America that would make him proud, one that would not “judge him by the color of his skin, but the content of his character”. He was willing to die for this dream America, and sadly he did.

There are those looking to tarnish the legacy of Dr. King, stating that he might have engaged in behaviors that would question his morality. These statements might be true, I don't know. What I do know is that had Dr. King not surrendered his life for the cause of civil rights, America might be a much different place for Black people.

If he were alive today how would Dr. King feel about the condition of blacks in America?

No doubt he would be pleased with the accomplishments of so many blacks today. He would walk proudly that he helped spearhead the changing of policies regarding services and opportunities. He would most certainly bask in the glow of the election of our first black president. He would also be pleased that so many of us have taken advantage of the opportunities extended to us in business, sports, television, movies, music and education.

However I feel Dr. King would be saddened with the declining morals of the black church. He would feel dismay that we allow some of the very things that plague our community into a place that should provide sanctuary for troubled souls.

Many of the church ceremonies have turned into talent shows. The only mention of God is during prayer and the giving of tithes and offering.

Many of the “mega churches” have simply become businesses that funnel cash into the pockets of the pastors and his entourage.

Dr. King would not appreciate how the black man has all but deserted the black church. Looking at any church service on any given Sunday you will find the audience to be at least 80% female. Where have all the men gone? Away from the church and it's a shame.

Dr. King would be ashamed that we are placing more of our men in cells and caskets and the root cause of this tragedy is ourselves. It would mortify him that after the struggles and turmoil of his era experienced by so many, we still fight and kill each other for no sane reason. He would be embarrassed to have his representation placed upon awards that honor men who denigrate the queens of our nation.

Dr. King knew in the early sixties that we could do better. He attempted to create a model to show us how we can do better. Currently we don't have enough “soldiers” in place who are not seeking publicity, but seeking to change the destinies of their people.

It's the twenty-first century and we still can do better. For our own survival we must do better.

How do we rekindle the fire that was started by Dr. King and Brother Malcolm? How do we stir the masses to action? How can we change the mentality from one of entitlement and victim to self-determined preservationist? How do you ultimately change the destiny of a people?