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“MLK’s Great Transformation: How to Benefit?”

Like Malcolm X (El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz), The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) also had a great transformation. For MLK it was the realization that economics is a tool with which nonviolent wars can be fought. He realized that Black America should not expect White America to acquiesce on the civil rights front of its own accord, and that change might be achieved through economic means.

In his “Mountain Top” speech in Memphis, Tennessee just before his assassination, he reflected his transformation by saying that Black Americans should not just perform peaceful protest marches to combat inequality, but that we should also fight the battle using economic weapons.

Everybody knows the part of the speech where MLK says: “I’ve been to the mountain top, and I’ve looked over and I’ve seeeen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But we, as a people, will get to the promised land!” But how did he propose that we get to the promised land?

First, hinting that desegregation or integration might not be our immediate answer, he said that Black America must stay together and maintain unity. Specifically, he said: “When slaves get together, it is the beginning of getting out of slavery.” He emphasized this point because it was through such unity that economic battles could be fought and won.

Second, he had strategic economic proposals. Simply put, he called for “economic withdrawal” to include placing our money in Black-owned banks, and not buying basic products (such soft drinks (Coca-Cola), milk, and bread) from White companies that did not treat Black Americans fairly. On the flip side, he said in essence “buy Black.” He took buying Black so far as to say that Black Americans should conduct our financial affairs, including obtaining insurance coverage, with Black companies where they exist.

Third, he reminded Black America in that day that we had annual buying power in the \$30 billion range (~3.5% of US GDP), making us the ninth largest nation in the world. Today, with access to over \$1.1 trillion (~5.6 % of US GDP) in buying power, Black America constitutes the world’s 16 largest nation.

MLK’s great transformation was late arriving, yet solid. Unfortunately, he and his leadership cohort were unable to forge a complete strategic plan that could be operationalized with or without his presence.

Therefore, sadly, and largely because of a lack of general and individual leadership, Black America failed to fulfill MLK's vision that was derived from his transformation. Consequently, we were ineffective in redistributing the acute pain of inequality from which we suffer to this very day. We were unable to exhibit a "dangerous unselfishness" to ensure that we continued to work toward our unified rise in America.

The result? Black America did not stay together, and we now find ourselves fragmented into four Black Americas. Some Black Americans are just fine with the status quo. Others continue to suffer the scourge of inequalities from which there appears to be no possibility of erasure.

As we head into the third decade of the 20th century, we have a choice. We can continue down the current path, which will lead to the end of Black Americans as we are known today. Otherwise, we can resurrect MLK's proposals that were derived from his great transformation, come together in unity, practice dangerous unselfishness, and fight nonviolent economic battles that can bring us to the table with White America to negotiate a direct path to our freedom, justice, and equalities.

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01/18/20

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