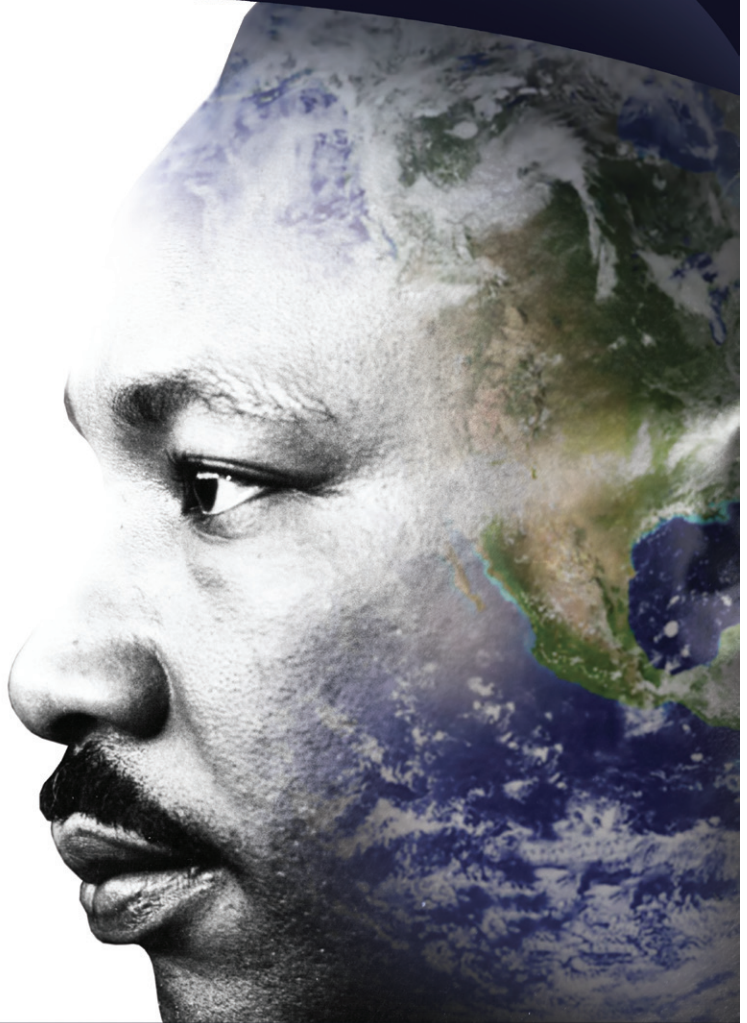


# COMPANION GUIDE

for

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE: CHAOS OR COMMUNITY?



PRESENTED BY

THE MLK COMMUNITY BUILD

"WE ARE ALL TIED IN A SINGLE GARMENT OF DESTINY."

*"All I'm saying is simply this: that all mankind is tied together; all life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. For some strange reason 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."*

*Commencement Address for Oberlin College by  
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., June 1965, Oberlin Ohio*



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. arrives in Ithaca, New York, 1961.  
(L to R in back) Dr. Ed Hart, Rev. Lowery, Dr. King, Kenneth Hagood and  
(in front) children Edward Hart and Janet Hart. Photo Courtesy Dr. Ed Hart.

# MLK Community Build Companion Guide

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## Preface

*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* is one of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most important writings. In collaboration with the Estate of Martin Luther King, Jr., Beacon Press has printed a new edition (2010) of *Where Do We Go From Here*, and added an introduction by noted historian Vincent Harding. The Martin Luther King (MLK) Community Build Committee hopes this companion will be used as a guide to gain a better understanding of the issues raised in Dr. King's book.

The MLK Community Build committee was established in May of 2008 in Ithaca, New York. The group's aims are to address issues of inequity, to bring people together and open up a dialogue across racial, economic, political and geographical backgrounds, and to promote widespread shared readings and explorations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s writings – particularly his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* We hope to engage people in realizing, as Dr. King said, "We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."

The idea for this shared reading grew out of a series of workshops entitled "Achieving Equity: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Now, and Where Can We Go?" at the Tompkins County History Center that were held in March and April, 2008. At the last "Achieving Equity" workshop a diverse group joined together to work to republish and distribute this book. That group, along with many others, became the MLK Community Build committee. Words taken from the back cover of the 1968 edition may best capture what this committee believes about the book and The Build:

His [King's] vision extends beyond today, beyond the hard issues facing the Negro rights movement, to the common cause of all the disinherited—white as well as black—in a world where poverty, racism and

militarism are still rampant. Here are Martin Luther King, Jr.'s specific plans for action – realistic programs and suggestions for what should and can be done now.

With this book, we hope honest discussions will take place, and that they lead to actions that will bring us closer to King's vision of a "beloved community." We understand people will not always agree, but it is impossible to build community without talking and working together.

On Behalf of the MLK Community Build Committee,  
*Eric Acree*, Africana Library, Cornell University  
*Elizabeth Field*, Multicultural Resource Center  
*Kim Fontana*, Ithaca City School District  
*Sarah Glogowski*, Tompkins County Public Library  
*Brigid Hubberman*, Family Reading Partnership  
*Brenda Kuhn*, Ithaca Resident  
*Andrew Yale*, Ithaca Resident

**MLK Community Build is a collaborative effort** between many not-for-profit and educational institutions, including:

- Africana Library, Cornell University
- Center for the Study of Culture, Race & Ethnicity, Ithaca College
- Family Reading Partnership
- Ithaca City School District
- Multicultural Resource Center
- Tompkins County Public Library
- Village at Ithaca



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in front of Willard Straight Hall  
at Cornell University, 1961.  
*(L to R) Kenneth Hagood (Cornell University student) Dr. King,  
Rev. Joseph Lowery, and Dr. Ed Hart. Photo Courtesy Dr. Ed Hart.*

## Report to Martin

Dear Martin,

You ask a powerfully penetrating question in this, the last book you wrote. Because you were not only my best friend, but the person under whose inspiration and motivation I was able to do the work I felt called upon to do, I want to make a few comments on your insightful analyses and highlight a major event that has occurred since you were taken from us. Martin, please consider this letter a “*Report*” to you.

In this wonderful volume you assess the journey we were on in the 1950s and 1960s, but you also point to the direction in which we should proceed. Though you have been gone from us 41 years as I write these words, the challenging question you raise still stirs and motivates – not only people of our own land, but people around the globe: “Where, indeed, must we go from here?”

Here you helpfully analyze specific struggles we had, even in the ranks of the committed freedom and justice fighters. Your summation of the emergence of *Black Power* is a good example of this. Your understanding of the source of *black power*, indeed the need for this concept, is brilliant.

As is always the case, you permit us to see the downside of a concept while understanding our need for it. Martin, it was always you who proclaimed that our ultimate vision for a society must be structured in a way that no one group seeks power only for itself. In your beloved community, the only color is humanity.

Many of us still learn from your ability to inspire the transformation in our views that enhances our ability to work for a better world. I’m glad to report that I see this transformation at home and in the other lands to which I have travelled.

Not everyone is there yet, but we are getting closer and closer in our willingness to discover new ways of being together. This includes our ability as well to live with others – even as that experience may project the need to be as *healers*.

Your section, *"The Dilemma of Negro Americans,"* explains in very helpful detail how we got to the state we've been in for many decades.

I am most pleased to report a greater openness in our *dialogue* relative to the experience and the plight of "Negroes." Since you were taken from us we have claimed the original native land of our ancestors by experimenting with different designations. Before that day in April 1968, we spoke of ourselves as "Negroes." Since then we have been on an evolutionary track in terms of what we call ourselves. We've been doing this by experimenting with designations as *Afro American, Black, African American, and People of Color*. Seldom do we hear ourselves referred to as "Negroes." Even this struggle, I believe, shows a new and helpful consciousness. I think you would see this as heightened consciousness and perhaps be pleased.

You speak, in the "World House" chapter, of our need to learn to live together. You say that because *"we can never again live apart we must learn somehow to live with each other in peace."* I am delighted to report that we are indeed beginning to have a substantive dialogue that will move us closer to this goal. Our new President of the United States is a person of several cultures. I don't want to speak of him as a "Black President" for he embodies more than one culture. I think it diminishes him to project only one aspect of his being. Even his name Barack Hussein Obama bespeaks this multicultural heritage.

Most importantly, our election in 2008 reminded many people around the world of exactly what you said in your "World House" chapter: We must learn to live together or we will perish together. Martin, I'm glad to report that this new American President often quotes you; some people even dare to say they think he "channels you" in that he is building on the "Dream" you so beautifully rendered. Time will tell.

In this important book, you are very specific in describing the areas of our lives that desperately need our attention. So I know you would find great hope in the road we have already travelled. You know that "we the people" can see, feel, and

appreciate relevant, transformative leadership. You would have hope because you know that even the most brutal systems can change. After all, you led us through one of most powerful ethical revolutions from which the whole world continues to learn.

This book you left us is a wonderful challenge and guide. We must continue to hold fast to the goals and the dream of creating a better world. We would do well to study it.

*Ms. Dorothy Cotton*  
Ithaca, NY  
Former Educational Director,  
Southern Christian Leadership Conference



*Dorothy Cotton and the staff of the Southern  
Christian Leadership Conference.*

## A Response to the Question...\*

6:01 p.m. April 4, 1968. The time. The date. Bang! ... a single shot. The dream and the dreamer were gone.

It has been more than 40 years since Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. It is important to recall the date because for many, the death of Dr. King marks time. We capture an era with one of the most referenced and iconic snapshots of global history. We compress a movement into a single moment.

Even though the date is frequently cited as the *end* of the latest U.S. Civil Rights Movement, we know time didn't stop on April 4, 1968. Day by day, decade by decade, the world kept on. Moreover, we know that Dr. King did not disappear from our daily lives. He comes to us on any given day, in living color and in high definition.

Dr. King can be seen in commercials (Apple, Chevy), billboard ads (Alltel, Time Warner), and popular cartoons (Boondocks). From coast to coast, communities clash over the re-naming of streets and schools in his honor. There have been political debates around the establishment of a national King holiday; academic arguments about archiving the King papers; and artistic disagreements regarding the King Memorial currently under construction on the National Mall. In short, we keep MLK newsworthy. He is on our TVs and he is in our schools. We see his image. We hear his voice. We sell. We buy. We teach *the dream*.

The 2008 election of President Barack Obama almost mandates an amplified visibility and presence of Dr. King. Certainly, President Obama's philosophical and rhetorical borrowings encourage the multitude of references and comparisons. However, and maybe most importantly, many

\*A few books remained within constant reach while writing this brief response to *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*. The most cited is my copy of *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (1968, Beacon). Referenced throughout is also Vincent Harding's *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (1996, Orbis). Harding's book inspired me to locate a reprint of *A Drum Major for a Dream* (2002, Writers Workshop). David Garrow's (1981, Penguin) *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* and *Bearing the Cross* (1986, HarperCollins) were useful. Taylor Branch's *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-68* (2006, Simon & Schuster) was particularly helpful. Last, a copy of *A Testament of Hope: The essential writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1986, Harper Collins) was frequently referenced. Similarities are intentional.

agree when the President proclaims his own political ascent to be “a direct consequence of Dr. King’s life work.”<sup>1</sup> Framed in this way, the election of President Obama has been hailed as *the dream* come true.

It is regrettable, if not disappointing, that we find no purpose in revisiting the full dream – the total experience and complete life of the man. While King’s presence and legacy travels across generations, it is a frozen image. It is a selective and cautious representation; a cautionary tale. In the poem, *Now That He Is Safely Dead*, author Carl Wendell Himes, Jr. suggests, “dead men make such convenient heroes.”<sup>2</sup> We dispense with the conflicts. We disregard the contradictions. As Himes pens, “it is easier to build monuments than to make a better world.”<sup>3</sup>

To delve into the full *dream* requires us to better understand why Dr. King spent so much of his *reality* fighting the “giant triplets” of racism, materialism and militarism. To be sure, Dr. King’s work is also about gender, religion and sexuality. Our lives, and the lives of icons, are always more complex, much more nuanced and contradictory than we like to explore.

And so the whole *dream* compels us to understand why Dr. King, during the last years of his life, continued to link racism to poverty to warfare. The complete dream requires us to understand why Dr. King increasingly linked Chicago’s Southside neighborhood to neighborhoods in Accra and Berlin and Beirut and Hanoi. This was tireless and usually thankless work. As history instructs, this was dangerous work. The complete dream requires more.

We, however, choose to celebrate and consume carefully crafted caricatures of our heroes. With Martin Luther King, Jr., we have premapped his trajectory – a prophetic martyr blazing a path across the skies. We enthusiastically sell and retell stories of meteoric rise. And this is a story made easy for us. You see, Martin Luther King, Jr., was a child prodigy.

Rev. King delivered his first Sunday sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church at the age of 18. As a third-generation practitioner, MLK took the profession and the calling seriously. Preparation for Sunday sermons (lyrical essays) meant hours between the pages of the Bible, philosophy books, political pamphlets, newspapers and religious tracts. That he borrowed widely, a practice that is canonized within the black Baptist tradition, continues to be a point of contention. It is also the

reason why we frequently attribute quotes to Dr. King, even when he may not have been the first to utter them. King had an amazing ability to give life to words, even when the words were not his own.

In actuality, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., lived a life ahead of the curve. By the age of 25, he is pastor of his own church. He comes to the pastorate of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church after a short stint in Boston. As much as he was a man of the people, Dr. King was also a man of letters. MLK graduated from Booker T. Washington High School at the age of 15. At the age of 19, he graduated from Morehouse College (B.A., *Sociology*) and by 22, he earned a second bachelor's degree from Crozer Theological Seminary (B.D., *Divinity*). At 26, only shortly after arriving in Birmingham, he earned a doctorate from Boston University (Ph.D., *Systematic Theology*). The year was 1955, and by its end, a nation would be introduced to *Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

As our story continues, King would go on to work with a gifted group of leaders and activists to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Together, they organized marches, coordinated campaigns, boycotted businesses, and lobbied for legislation. At the relatively young age of 34, King was named *Time* magazine's "Man of the Year." At 35, he becomes the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and only the second black American after Dr. Ralph Bunche's selection in 1950. Lest we forget, Dr. King was a mere 36 years old when he stood along side President Lyndon Baines Johnson as the 1965 Voting Rights Act was signed into law. No longer a skinny, fresh face in a new city, he was a wise and wily political veteran well before his mid-thirties.

In the midst of all this work, in the midst of a growing family, in the midst of travel and guest sermons, Dr. King also wrote. He authored four books, numerous essays and at least one letter. Yes, Dr. King was a prodigy.

This is the story we tell. This is the story we teach. A man rising fast and furious and cut down at the height of his trajectory. These are the images we freeze. We prefer the apexes - climactic black-and-white photos frozen in time. It could be the National Mall in 1963 or maybe Oslo in 1964 or maybe the Oval Office in 1965. Of course, in 1968, Dr. King also gave us the *mountaintop*. This is a story made easy for us.

To wrestle with all that he is; all that he was; and all that we package him to be; this is the harder story. The hard truth is that *work* always comes with costs. Giftedness is responsible for only a small portion of uncommon productivity. The rest takes sacrifice and time – time spent away from dinner tables *and* away from a son's kiss good night *and* a daughter's next school recital.

In reality, the last years of Dr. King's life are incongruent with our popular imagining of him. His life and his work do not always match our textbooks. He did not have blind faith. He was conflicted. He developed and questioned his beliefs. He was questioned for them. At times, he acted questionably. Was he fallible? Absolutely. Does this lessen the lessons? Absolutely not. We can discuss and debate the contradictions.

This also helps to explain why Dr. Vincent Harding christens King as "the inconvenient hero." Dr. Harding writes that "one of our crucial difficulties in apprehending the meaning of the man and the movement he represented" is "rooted in our apparent determination to forget – or ignore – the last years of his life."<sup>4</sup> We have our reasons and we dare not look into these last years. Even today, with his omnipresence, we do not speak of the Dr. King circa 1967 or 1968.

Before April 4, 1968, Dr. King was certainly becoming more inconvenient and clearly more undesirable in some quarters. King's continual "calling for another service, a more constructive, creative way of standing up for this land that he loved,"<sup>4</sup> made him widely unpopular. At home and around the globe, he remained committed and determined to speak openly. This, in return, opened him to an onslaught of censure and criticism.

Dr. King's public contemplation of a third (peace) party for the 1968 presidential election was met with condemnation and dismissal. His continual linking of war to racism to poverty was met with scorn and disapproval. International affairs, it was claimed, were not the matters of a Southern preacher steeped in the politics of respectability and regional courtesies. Despite his Nobel Laureate status, U.S. civil rights and global peace were claimed to be separate movements. From the White House to the NAACP to the *New York Times*, it was believed that "linking these hard, complex problems will lead not to solutions but to deeper confusion."<sup>5</sup> Today, we

should know better. Forms of oppression share basic tenets. Then, foes, and more than a few friends, painted Dr. King as misguided and un-American.<sup>6</sup>

This is the Dr. King who arrived in Memphis, slightly battered and exhausted. Our stories and our teachings rarely include this King. After a year of struggles, some political and some personal, he was tired. He was concerned. Some say he was paranoid. And he was increasingly committed to the idea most responsible for the criticisms: a revolution of values away from a 'thing'-oriented society toward a 'people'-oriented society.

The Dr. King who arrived in Memphis was not celebrated. His opposition to the Vietnam War was not popular, nor was his standing alongside men and women fighting for economic emancipation. Our chosen story of MLK leapfrogs these years. We magically transport Dr. King from Oval Office to the Lorraine Hotel balcony. We bend the laws of physics and, easily, almost casually, we normalize his assassination. We accept a hasty demise. We anticipate it. 39 years young and we tell the easy story.

The difficult story would resist the unnecessary abruptness of Dr. King's life. Exploring the full dream would require a challenge to bloodshed – whether it comes by way of war or poverty or racism or homophobia or religion or gender or . . . no matter its origin. "Violence," King writes in this book, "is the antithesis of creativity and wholeness." (p. 63)

Throughout his life, Dr. King possessed a determined willingness to engage in these public, but not necessarily polite, conversations. Talking of war, racism and poverty remains socially prickly. And yet, there are times to break the silence. King chose to push the community discourse in a nation reluctant to revisit the *American dream*. What does one risk if she or he dare speak of *nightmares*?

Dr. King knew this question to be rhetorical. He knew the triplets, like other isms and phobias, to be "based on a contempt for life."<sup>7</sup> We may prefer the dream, but King's public addresses and writings remain as rude reminders – inconvenient as they may be.

This brings us to Dr. King's last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*. Like other great works, this book is simultaneously timebound and timeless. Our most recent history only reinforces the book's relevance. Since the U.S. inauguration ceremonies of January 20, 2009, the

*world house* has learned that post-racial does not mean post-racism; we have learned that stimulus packages will not end poverty; and we have learned that the *Obama Doctrine* (i.e. “the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace”)<sup>8</sup> appears to be incongruent with Dr. King’s life work. *Where do we go from here?* There are options.

In 1967, King wrote it was either “nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation.”<sup>9</sup> Today, this remains the contradiction of our condition. We are, in fact, tied together in a single garment of destiny. At a global and local level, this book presents the options: *chaos or community*. Sometimes, binaries help us see the road ahead.

In the end, this book is more than it has pages to be. As Taylor Branch writes, Dr. King labored “feverishly every day for words to reinvigorate civil rights.”<sup>10</sup> The result is a book that explores the connections between theory and practice. It reads as if we are privy to Dr. King thinking out loud. He pulls back the curtain and allows us to follow along as he grinds in the midst of hardship. In a public life, such private thoughts are not always shared.

We can learn from our elders’ mistakes and their masterpieces. This book is one of the masterpieces. It is, as Dr. Locksley Edmondson once lectured, “Dr. King’s most *mature* writing.”<sup>11</sup> We may not always agree with the author or the book, but there is no other conversation more worthy of our time and energy.

Because Dr. King “lived pressed against the hard and jagged edges of the struggle,” he knew that nonviolence had to move beyond theory. In fact, Dr. King *might* have agreed when President Obama accepted his own Nobel Peace Prize by saying, “the belief that peace is desirable is rarely enough to achieve it.” Wanting it – or merely thinking it – is not enough to make any dream a reality. Dr. King was well aware that *dreams* have to be operational. Ironically, dreams have to be practiced and practical. There has to be something concrete in reaching for the ‘oughtness.’

I come from people whose lives and livelihoods prove this basic fact . . . we work to bring things into existence. My parents and my family have taught me that you make the world you want to see. I come from machinists and mechanics; homebuilders and housekeepers; ironworkers and caretakers. I come from people who work with their hands and their

bodies. We build homes and we build bridges. We make beds and we make a way. It is the hardest of work. It can be the longest of days. But we must work together if we are to make our lives and our communities better.

The MLK Community Build began with a small group of folks who could not accept that *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* was a book out-of-print. Select chapters of the text were found in anthologies, but the whole book – the one that fulfills the dream and the story – was not readily accessible. The goal of the MLK Community Build was simple: find a way that this particular book, was *in print* and *in use*.

Where do we go from here? We decide. And as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., writes in this book, “we cannot afford to make these choices poorly.”<sup>12</sup> Read. Listen. Work. Debate. Collaborate. Whenever we have a choice, build toward community.

*Dr. Sean Eversley Bradwell*

Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholars Program

*Faculty-in-residence, Ithaca College*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Obama, B. (2009, December 10). Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize. In the White House Briefing Room. Retrieved December 15, 2009, from [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize).

<sup>2</sup>Found in Palmer, D., & Zepp, I. G. (2002). *Drum major for a dream: Poetic tributes to Martin Luther King, Jr.* Calcutta, India: Writers Workshop, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup>Found in Harding, V. (1996). *Martin Luther King, the inconvenient hero.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup>Dr. King’s Error. (1967, April 7). *New York Times*, p. 36. Retrieved November 22, 2009, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>6</sup>Shannon, W. (1967, August 20). The Ordeal of Martin Luther King: The Urban Problem Civil Disobedience. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), E12. Retrieved December 22, 2009, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>7</sup>King, M. L. (1968). *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?* Boston: Beacon Press, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup>Obama, B. (2009, December 10). Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize. In the White House Briefing Room. Retrieved December 15, 2009 from [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize).

<sup>9</sup>King, M. L. (1968). *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?* Boston: Beacon Press, p. 202.

<sup>10</sup>Branch, T. (2006). *At Canaan’s edge: America in the King years, 1965-68.* New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 577.

<sup>11</sup>Edmondson, L. (2008, July 24). “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Chaos or Community.” MLK Community Build General Meeting. Ithaca, NY.

<sup>12</sup>King, M. L. (1968). *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?* Boston: Beacon Press, p. 214.

## Discussion Guide

### Suggestions for Group Discussions

It can be helpful to establish ground rules when facilitating a group discussion. Ground rules can help lead to a constructive and positive group conversation by framing the topic and providing some guidelines. It is recommended that all members of the group agree to a set of ground rules before a session begins. Below is a sample of common ground rules.

#### **Suggested Ground Rules:**

1. Respect confidentiality.
2. Allow people to speak: do not interrupt.
3. Listen actively: respect what others have to say.
4. Use “I” statements. Speak from your own personal experience.
5. Avoid personal attacks.
6. Don’t be afraid to respectfully challenge each other.
7. The goal is not to agree, but to gain a deeper understanding.
8. Be aware of body language and nonverbal responses.
9. Participate to your fullest ability.

## Chapter 1: Where Are We?

**Big Idea:** *“The paths of [Black-White] unity that had been converging crossed at Selma, and like a giant X began to diverge. Up to Selma, there had been unity to eliminate barbaric conduct. Beyond it the unity had to be based on fulfillment of equality, and in the absence of agreement the paths began inexorably to move apart.” (p. 4)*

### Chapter 1 Discussion Questions

**1.** Dr. King quotes Hyman Bookbinder, assistant director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, “The poor can stop being poor if the rich are willing to become even richer at a slower rate.” (p. 6) Otherwise, King continues, “the nation can expect further deterioration of the cities, increased antagonisms between races and continued disorders in the streets.” (p. 6)

*Reactions? Responses? Is King advocating “Big Government?” Why is “Big Government” such a contested topic?*

**2.** King criticizes white Americans – including those who supported the struggle leading up to the Voting Rights Act for not being willing to accept full equality for African-Americans. He writes, “White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap – essentially it seeks only to make it less painful and less obvious but in most respects to retain it.” (p. 8)

*What do you think of Dr. King’s criticisms?*

**3.** Dr. King writes, “The great majority of Americans are suspended between these opposing attitudes. They are uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it.” (p. 12)

*Of the indicators of racial inequality that King points to in Chapter 1, what progress have we made in our community and/or nationally and what work do we have left to do?*

4. King sees the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the desegregation of public facilities as the end of one struggle but the beginning of another, more difficult phase of insuring equal opportunity for black Americans and all poor people. Dr. King writes, "The line of progress is never straight. For a period a movement may follow a straight line and then it encounters obstacles and the path bends." (p. 12)

*In what direction are we headed?*

***Ithaca/Tompkins County Connection:*** Dr. King begins his book with a chapter entitled *Where are We? Where is Ithaca today? What is the state of our community?*

## ***Chapter 2: Black Power***

**Big Idea:** "So Black Power is now part of the nomenclature of the national community. To some it is abhorrent, to others dynamic; to some it is repugnant, to others exhilarating; to some it is destructive, to others it is useful. Since Black Power means different things to different people and indeed, being essentially an emotional concept, can mean different things to the same person on different occasions, it is impossible to attribute its ultimate meaning to any single individual or organization. One must look beyond the personal styles, verbal flourishes, and the hysteria of the mass media to assess its values, its assets and liabilities honestly." (p. 33)

## **Chapter 2 Discussion Questions**

1. King titles this chapter "Black Power" and spends a lot of time talking about that phrase. He writes, "It was my contention that a leader has to be concerned about the problem of semantics." (p. 30)

*What was King's view on the slogan/term 'Black Power'? Why does he spend so much time on this point?*

2. King writes, "Before this century, virtually all revolutions had been based on hope and hate." (p. 45)

*Can genuine revolution ever be hateful? What does hopeful revolution look like?*

**3.** King quotes Cicero in saying that “freedom is participation in power” and goes on to say that, “non-violence is power.” (p. 55)

*What do these statements mean? Do you agree? Why or why not?*

**4.** Dr. King writes, “Violence is the antithesis of creativity and wholeness. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible.” (p. 63)

*Why does Martin Luther King, Jr. believe this?*

***Ithaca/Tompkins County Connection:*** Dr. King writes, “Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose.” (p. 37) Why did certain sectors of the Ithaca community feel a need to have a street named in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. and why did other sectors oppose it? What can be learned from our community conversation about street renaming?

### ***Chapter 3: Racism and the White Backlash***

**Big Idea:** *“The racism of today is real, but the democratic spirit that has always faced it is equally real. The value in pulling racism out of its obscurity and stripping it of its rationalizations lies in the confidence that it can be changed. To live with a pretense that racism is a doctrine of a very few is to disarm us in fighting it frontally as scientifically unsound, morally repugnant and socially destructive.” (pp. 87-88)*

### **Chapter 3 Discussion Questions**

**1.** Are there examples of the backlash today? Or, has the backlash disappeared?

**2.** King writes, “Any discussion of the problems of inequality is meaningless unless a time dimension is given to programs for their solution.” (pp. 92-93)

*Have you ever been too patient about justice?*

**3.** King says that “the virtue of patience will become a vice if it accepts so leisurely an approach to social change.” (p. 93)

*What is he saying here? Have you ever been too patient about social change? Give an example. Why were you patient? What could you have done differently?*

**4.** Dr. King ends the chapter by writing, “True altruism is more than the capacity to pity; it is the capacity to empathize. Pity is feeling sorry for someone. Empathy is feeling sorry with someone. Empathy is fellow feeling for the persons in need – his pain, agony and burdens.” (p. 107)

*What does this look like? What are some examples of empathy?*

***Ithaca/Tompkins County Connection:*** Could there be a backlash from encouraging the Ithaca community to take part in reading Martin Luther King’s book, *Where Do We Go From Here?* Why or why not?

## ***Chapter 4: The Dilemma of Negro Americans***

**Big Idea:** “We must get rid of the false notion that there is some miraculous quality in the flow of time that inevitably heals all evils. There is only one thing certain about time, and that is that it waits for no one. If it is not used constructively, it passes you by.” (p. 136)

### **Chapter 4 Discussion Questions**

**1.** Dr. King writes, “To produce change, people must be organized to work together in units of power. These units may be political, as in the case of voters’ leagues and political parties; they may be economic, as in the case of groups of tenants who join forces to form a union, or groups of the unemployed and underemployed who organize to get jobs and better wages.” (p. 139)

*Do you see any examples of groups of people working together in Tompkins County today?*

**2.** What does racism look like in the experiences of young people today? Do you think young people's experiences regarding racism differ from those who came before them?

**3.** Dr. King writes, "For the evils of racism, poverty and militarism to die, a new set of values must be born. Our economy must become more person-centered rather than property- and profit-centered. Our government must depend more on its moral power than on its military power." (p. 142)

*This was written in 1967. How do you respond today?*

**Ithaca/Tompkins County Connection:** King writes, "Nothing today more clearly indicates the residue of racism still lodging in our society than the responses of white America to integrated housing." (p. 125) If King were alive today, would he be more inclusive regarding issues of gender, and sexual orientation? It has been said that Ithaca/Tompkins County is progressive when it comes to social issues, do you agree or disagree?

## *Chapter 5: Where Are We Going?*

**Big Idea:** "Education without social action is a one-sided value because it has no true power potential. Social action without education is a weak expression of pure energy." (p. 164)

### **Chapter 5 Discussion Questions**

**1.** Dr. King writes, "Laws only declare rights; they do not deliver them." (p. 167)

*How does this quote apply to institutions today?*

**2.** Dr. King writes, "The total elimination of poverty, now a practical possibility, the reality of equality in race relations and other profound structural changes in society may well begin here." (p. 150)

*What systematic efforts to eliminate poverty might make sense in our time and in our community?*

**3.** Dr. King advocates the need for effective programs. He writes, “The programs of the past all have another failing—they are indirect. Each seeks to solve poverty by first solving something else.” (p. 171)

*What would “direct” programs look like?*

***Ithaca/Tompkins County Connection:*** Make a list of local/county groups and organizations – particularly “the levers of power.” (p. 146) In what ways do local groups and organizations actively promote equality and justice in Ithaca and Tompkins County? What might happen if these groups and organizations more consistently worked together across race, class and political divisions?

## *Chapter 6: The World House*

**Big Idea:** *“We must rapidly begin the shift from a ‘thing’-oriented society to a ‘person’-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy.” (pp. 196-197)*

### **Chapter 6 Discussion Questions**

**1.** King argues that we need to go beyond both capitalism and communism and instead build a “socially conscious democracy,” a “person-oriented society.”

*What is King writing about, and what are some of the features of such a society?*

**2.** King ends his book by writing, “We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation. This may well be mankind’s last chance to choose between chaos

and community.” (p. 202) The final word in King’s book is “community.”

*What kind of community do you envision? What steps can be taken to establish an ideal community? Who are people or groups you can work with to get there?*

***Ithaca/Tompkins County Connection:*** King writes, “In a real sense, all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother’s keeper because we are our brother’s brother. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” (p. 191) How would you apply this quotation to the Ithaca community? How would you apply this to any community?

## **Afterword**

In writing an afterword to a companion guide to *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I feel a deep responsibility to be uncomfortably truthful. What I know about Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement; what I learned from my time in the Birmingham Public Library’s Department of Archives & Manuscripts Collection; what I have come to believe urgently from studying non-violent direct action; is that we must find ways to reveal hidden tensions, no matter how difficult this may be, in order to effectively eliminate them.

While my community may seem perfectly healthy to the summer tourists hiking in our gorges or to the visiting professor here on a one-year appointment, those of us who live here know that things are not quite as they appear. For instance, we Ithacans are not taken aback when headlines in the local paper tell us that “country kids and downtown kids” have been fighting at the high school. Many of us are not shocked when our cable access channel runs a story about people living in cardboard boxes behind the fancy grocery store where many of us shop. And we are not the least bit surprised to see groups of people standing on the *Commons* every Thursday, week in and week out, carrying

signs calling for a peaceful resolution to the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan.

In fact, we have become so used to seeing these things that they tend to register somewhere in our subconscious while we continue to drink our cups of coffee and go about our daily lives. This book has the potential to awaken us from our collective complacency and to motivate us to *work together* for justice.

Throughout the text, Dr. King surfaces underlying tensions that are as palpable today as they were when it was originally written in 1967. King asserts, "*There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we have the resources to get rid of it.*" Has this really changed? In fact, building on this assertion, I would suggest that we do not lack the means to deal with the full range of issues confronting our community. We do, however, lack a communal will. While passionate activism accurately characterizes Ithaca's citizenry, this activism is often compartmentalized and disjointed. As King suggests, some of this has to do with the politics of personality, and some has to do with the ways in which systemic forces work to keep us polarized, distrustful, confused, and exhausted.

Dr. King's book can help us create the community we say we want, right here and right now. For those who find themselves living in a town similar to my own, I hope this book provides you with some ideas on how to do the same. The answers we come up with and the actions we take will undoubtedly add some confusion to our lives. Will we have the moral commitment, individually and collectively, to work through this confusion?

The decision to read *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* within and between communities, across historically antagonistic lines, represents a public refusal to cooperate with the structures and practices responsible for perpetuating the lie that we are enemies. As we move forward in our Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Build, may we bear collective witness to the ways things really are, and may we find the courage to make things the way they ought to be.

*Barry Derfel,*  
Ithaca City School District,  
Instructional Specialist for Educational Equity  
December 2009

## Suggestions Towards Building a Beloved Community

- Get involved; volunteer at local organizations that build community. For a list of suggested organizations go to <http://mlkcommunitybuild.org>.
- Reach out; make an effort to get to know others, go beyond your surroundings, race, educational background, and nationality.
- Educate yourself; learn about the world around you. Visit the Tompkins County Public Library to find resources on many issues, or go to <http://tcpl.org>.
- Challenge yourself: join a Talking Circle on Race and Racism, sponsored by the Multicultural Resource Center, <http://multicultural-resource.org>
- Stay informed; be aware of the variety of issues around you, such as the economic struggles of those in Tompkins County.
- Talk. Question. Listen. Do!

Additional resources can be found at the MLK Community Build website: <http://mlkcommunitybuild.org>.

## Web Resources

### **MLK Community Build** <http://mlkcommunitybuild.org>

This site contains information about the MLK Community Build project. Included on this site are educational resources which can be used as a complement to King's book, and information about what other community groups in Tompkins County, NY are doing in conjunction with the reading of *Where Do We Go From Here?*

### **Lesson Plans** <http://www.mlklessons.notlong.com>

The Pre-K through adult lesson plans represent the collective work of educators from the Ithaca City School District (ICSD). As part of our effort to build a strong foundation to support our district's participation in this community project, the ICSD Equity Mentors and the MLK Curricular Support Committee created the following lesson plans. All lesson plan writers read *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* and engaged in discussion and reflection of the text and its implications for our schools and community.

### **Project Look Shar** <http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp/?action=mlk>

This kit was designed by educators in Ithaca, New York as part of the 2010 MLK Community Build. These lessons were intended to integrate media literacy and critical thinking skills into a study of the history and ideas of Dr. King for the English Language Arts curriculum. The content and document-decoding approach makes the lessons usable (or easily adaptable) for middle school through college level classes in English, social studies, history, politics, and media.

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The printing of this guide is made possible through the kind donations of the **Africana Studies & Research Center, Cornell University** and **The Cornell University Library**.

# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE: CHAOS OR COMMUNITY? COMPANION GUIDE

This Companion Guide to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last book, "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?" is the result of committed and collective action. It is the hope of the MLK Community Build that people and communities will read Dr. King's book – together.

Organize book groups. Host reading parties. Set up study teams.  
Talk. Question. Listen. Do.

In an era when many know of Dr. King, but few have read Dr. King, we continue to be faced with a persistent dilemma: we can either slip closer to chaos, or we can work to build community. Dr. King reminds us that poverty, racism, and warfare are "giant triplets" threatening the world.

Globally and locally, the question remains:  
where do we go from here?



Ithaca, NY (1961). Courtesy of Cornell University Library, The Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections.