

Beginning in 1995 Dr. Cornel West taught at Harvard University in the African Studies and Divinity School. I had the pleasure of sitting in on two of his lectures and a public talk. Many consider him the eminent African America scholar today. His book, Race Matters, changed my life and established my continuing respect for his scholarship and his humanitarian challenge to all Americans. He has written over twenty books including, Race Matters, The Future of American Progressivism, and Hope on a Tightrope. In addition to Harvard, West has taught at Union Theological Seminary, Haverford College, and Princeton University.

To demonstrate the variety of his activities, he also had a role in two of the Matrix films and has recorded his own rap music.

West's views on racism are summarized by Wikipedia as follows: West has called the U.S. a "racist patriarchal" nation where "white supremacy" continues to define everyday life. "White America," he writes, "has been historically weak-willed in ensuring racial justice and has continued to resist fully accepting the humanity of blacks."

This has resulted, he claims, in the creation of many "degraded and oppressed people hungry for identity, meaning, and self-worth." Professor West attributes most of the black community's problems to "existential angst derive[d] from the lived experience of ontological wounds and emotional scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs and images permeating U.S. society and culture."

In West's view, the September 11, 2001 attacks gave white Americans a glimpse of what it means to be a black person in the United States—feeling "unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hatred" for who they are.

"The ugly terrorist attacks on innocent civilians on 9/11,"

West said, "plunged the whole country into the blues."

Two years ago at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta,

Georgia Cornel West gave the Martin Luther King Jr.

speech on what would have been King's 81<sup>st</sup> birthday. West

gave the talk in typical African American preaching style—

lots of alliteration, lots of questions, and dramatic gestures

and pauses and instant verbal feedback from the audience—

“Preach it brother!” “Tell it, brother, tell it!”.

After the traditional acknowledgement of the dignitaries present, West began, “One of the things we want to resist in this place, at this time, is the ‘Santafication of Martin Luther King. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to sanitize Martin Luther King. I don’t want to deodorize Martin Luther King Jr. I want some funky brother; I want to keep it real Martin. I want to talk about some of the wounds, and the scars, and the bruises and that he still kept loving his way to the river. We are not going to domesticate brother Martin this morning, no, no, we are not going to turn him into some Santa Claus with a smile on his face and toys in

his bag with everybody jumping up and down like they were always in solidarity with him—No! No!

We are going to remember the American FBI said he was the most dangerous man in America. We are going to remember the FBI said he was the most notorious lying truth teller in America.

What are we going to do with any love? We love Martin Luther King Jr. I am the son of the same Jesus. I have been washed by the same blood at the cross. (Pointing to a large portrait of MLK) Take a look at that picture there of our young brother. (It is easy to forget King was only 39 when

assassinated.) West continues: Look at his eyes. Look at the intensity. What do you see? You see a love at the center, dealing out holy anger and righteous indignation and a moral outrage because there is too much suffering and misery in the world. Let's not talk about that now, now we live in the age of Obama.

I don't disagree with Obama, but the world needs to know that there are still some angry black folk. Anger is connected to the love that you have because Martin Luther King was a man of love, a preacher of love, a prophet of love.

Justice is what love looks like in public.

And if you really love folk you can't stand that they are being treated unjustly, you know that they are being treated unfair. When you really love folk justice is not just some abstract notion that has to do with the arrangement of social institutions, it's a fire in your blood and if you don't do something what's left of your humanity? That's the kind of brother Martin Luther King was, arm of truth on the one hand but, the condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak.

You can't talk about truth, unless you talk about the way to truth and the way to truth is to have a hypersensitivity to the suffering of others. To aspire to be a saint is to be a redeemed sinner who looks at the world through the lens of the heart. If you can look at the world through the lens of the heart you have a hyper-sensitivity to what is going on on the block. You have a hyper-sensitivity to what is going on in the prison-industrial complex, you have a hyper-sensitivity to what's going on in public housing, you have a hypersensitivity to the public school system, you have a hyper-sensitivity to unemployment and underemployment,

you have a hyper-sensitivity to domestic violence, you have a hyper-sensitivity about people's civil rights, that's why we need to talk about Martin and that's why he is dangerous.

Boy, he's dangerous.

We don't want to come together to talk about King and then leave well-adjusted to injustice.

NO! We want to be maladjusted to injustice."

This speech continues at some length and if you are

interested it is on YOUTUBE – just put in Cornel West +

Martin Luther King.

In his later life Dr King changed more to the radical and more to the universal. He also spoke publicly against "systemic rather than superficial flaws" in our economic system, questioning the basic tenets of capitalism and calling for full employment, national health care and a guaranteed annual wage. As a means to these ends, he envisioned a massive escalation of nonviolent civil disobedience.

Whereas much of his early work in the South simply sought recognition of the general principles mirrored in the Constitution, King planned for subsequent campaigns to be waged in confrontation with the federal government.

Nonviolence, King argued, "must be adapted to urban conditions and urban moods.... There must be more than a statement to the larger society, a force that interrupts its functioning at some key point."

Cornel West through the mouth of Martin Luther King asks us tough questions. Do we have any answers? Is our Unitarian Universalist call for diversity, just a shield behind which we can stand polishing our liberal credentials while Trayvon Martins and Martin Luther Kings get killed in the street?

Are we adjusted to injustice? Or even worse, much worse  
are we indifferent to injustice? Are we adjusted to the war—  
ten years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, are we adjusted or  
are we indifferent?

Are we adjusted to the war and adjusted to sending on  
repeated tours of duties our sons and daughters—or sending  
the sons and daughters of the poor, the uneducated, or  
unemployed—the rich ain't going to fight no war.

We send the poor and when they return all cracked and  
broken—then we don't have any money to give them  
medical attention and psychological care—are we adjusted?  
We rant about socializing the government, how capitalism is  
the only way to go, to build the country, but when General  
Motors runs out of gas, where do they pump the rescue  
money from?  
From you and me, from our pockets in the form of tax  
dollars—and if , in some moment of capitalistic notion we  
would beg for a return on our tax dollars—they would call  
us communists.

Wall Street was going to drive over a cliff and drag us with them—we had to rescue them—too big to fail—and now they have returned to their multimillion dollar salaries—everything is okay—Wall Street has recovered, yet out here in middle America—people are still losing their homes through foreclosure—that American dream—to own a home might be gone in a generation or two. Are we adjusted or indifferent?

In America we have a big problem—like racism, oppression—a big problem, that we are reluctant to talk about and that is wealth.

When we subtract everything we owe from all the money and assets we have what is left over is wealth. In the United States Senate of the one hundred Senators, 68 have a net worth of over a million dollars. The highest is 215 million and the average is almost 14 million.

In the House of Representatives there are 435 members. 240 members have a net worth of a million dollars or more. The highest is 251 million and the average is 4.7 million.

Anyone surprised that the vote to do away with the Bush tax cut for the richest 1% of Americans failed repeatedly until just recently?



Our government “of the people, by the people, for the people” as Abraham Lincoln so aptly spoke in the Gettysburg Address, has probably by now perished from the earth. We are or are on the verge of a plutocracy or an oligarchy.

In America the top twenty percent of wealth holders control 85% of the wealth. The lowest 40% of Americans control only .03%--that is 3 one hundreds of one percent.

This is a problem—a huge problem.

No less an American than Franklin Delano Roosevelt said:

“The first truth is that the liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of private power to a point where it becomes stronger than their democratic state itself. That, in its essence, is fascism — ownership of government by an individual, by a group, or by any other controlling private power.” EOQ I don’t believe Roosevelt used the word “fascism” lightly or incorrectly.

Are we getting maladjusted yet? Are we beginning to look around for someone with Martin Luther King’s moral stature to rise up and speak out?

King said, "There is nothing more dangerous than to build a society with a large segment of people in that society who feel that they have no stake in it; who feel that that have nothing to lose. People who have stake in their society, protect that society, but when they don't have it, they unconsciously want to destroy it." EOQ

The top twenty percent of Americans who control 84% of the wealth they want to protect society. And the bottom 40% of Americans who control less than one percent of the wealth...well, let them get adjusted to a future that might

include increasing monies to the war machine, a turned over health care bill and a bankrupt social security system.

Dr. Cornel West is prophetic when he says, "Let's not sanitize Martin Luther King."

In making monuments to King we might destroy what, of King, we need most—a willing moral leader, a symbol and a reality of speaking truth to power. Let's not make a Walt Disney movie out of King's life.

King was a flawed human being with the courage and love to stand first, against the institution of the Atlanta, Georgia bus system, they bombed his home, he became the leader of

the civil rights movement, they stabbed him at a book signing, the FBI tried to ruin his life and sent him letters encouraging him to commit suicide, He won the Noble Peace prize, Black Panthers called him white America's Uncle Tom, He felt he had to talk to issues more universal than human rights; he spoke out against the War in Vietnam and he was shunned by others in the civil rights movement, lost popularity, and fell from the ten most respected men in America. King went to Memphis to march for the sanitation workers—for better wages, for better working conditions—and he was assassinated.

Now Martin Luther King has been gone longer than he was alive. His memory fades. King gets sanitized. Some of the most popular songs of the Civil Rights era, like "We Shall Overcome" are now considered banal and overdone. When we want to be derogatory about some event we say, "It was a Kum-ba-ya moment."

May we renew our maladjustment to injustice. May we revive our hypersensitivity to the suffering all around us. On Martin Luther King day maybe some of, like me, are going to go to the Martin Luther King breakfast—we're going to have a breakfast, hear some speaker from No Place for Hate,

and a dramatic reading the “I Have a Dream” speech—all of that is good, but it isn’t enough good enough—it may be too adjusted to injustice.

Let’s do something do something to be maladjusted!

I would like to end with a quote by Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, ““We could choose to be a nation that extends care, compassion, and concern to those who are locked up and locked out or headed for prison before they are old enough to vote. We could seek for them the same opportunities we seek for our own children; we could treat them like one of “us.” We could do that. Or we can choose to be a nation that shames and blames its most

vulnerable, affixes badges of dishonor upon them at young ages, and then relegates them to a permanent second-class status for life. That is the path we have chosen, and it leads to a familiar place.”

I hope you will consider becoming maladjusted to injustice.