

Address at the U.S. Marine Corps. Logistics Base
Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Program and Celebration

Dr. Everette J. Freeman

President

Albany State University

Albany Georgia

January 10, 2012

Read by

Albany State University First Lady

Mrs. Jo Neal Freeman

January 10, 2012

Dear President Freeman,

I am keeping a birthday promise to Coretta to answer your many letters, emails, Facebook entries and tweets. My wife tells me as an Antioch College graduate, as is she, you are hard-headed and not likely to stop badgering me until I write.

You can imagine that I receive quite a lot of requests for advice and guidance and Coretta enjoys reading them all. She reminded me that you once served on the youth task force for the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, DC, and that you had decided to leave the long reception line greeting me after my Sunday sermon at the Washington Cathedral on March 31, 1968. Coretta reminded me that you left thinking you would be able meet me during the planned Poor People's Campaign briefing and workshop in Washington the following Tuesday evening. She tells me I would have liked you then even though you are a bit too pushy now.

Coretta wants me to send her best wishes to your wife, Jo, and thank Jo again for the fine time the two of them had talking at her 50th Antioch College reunion. She regrets that Bernice wasn't able to join the other siblings when everybody came to campus for that wonderful weekend of remembrances. Coretta also mentioned her fondness for your work in crafting the charter for the Coretta Scott King Center for Cultural and Intellectual Freedom that remains a cornerstone of Antioch as an institution. She and I both think your work on this project was among your best. When Coretta agreed to allow Antioch to name the Center in her honor, she did so largely because you also wore her down too!

Leaving those things aside, I frankly am writing you back because I no longer want you to feel neglected over my earlier letter to the unflappable Mary Jo Haywood that I sent her two years ago when she was Camilla's mayor. She read my letter at the King Celebration program at the Marine Base. You began writing me the very day after Mary Jo spoke and have not stopped. You really are pushy for such a bald-headed, skinny fella, but God loves you anyway and so do I!

You must know how much Mary Jo means to so many people down there and here. She truly symbolizes what it means to be a Drum Major for Justice!

Please share this letter with my many supporters at the Base and extend to all my best wishes for a better year. Tell the Base personnel and especially the members of Blacks in Government that I appreciate their commitment to continue this fine King Day Celebration year after year. Do let the Marine Base Gospel Choir know that every time they sing Sister Mahalia Jackson and I always pause to listen approvingly.

Give special greetings to Dr. Wilson for the marvelous job he is doing. Tell Brother Billie J. Robinson that I continue to read and enjoy his emails and web links. Extend my hearty congratulations to newly-elected Mayor Dorothy Hubbard. I always looked forward to the day when a woman would become Albany's mayor and could not be more delighted that its first female mayor is the incredibly gifted Dottie Hubbard. Well done, Mayor Hubbard. Well done, Albany, Georgia!

Let General Hudson know that the brigades of Marines up here proudly and consistently applaud his sure and steady leadership of the Logistics Command. The Generals tell me that his examples of unselfish devotion and caring guardianship have not gone unnoticed.

In your most recent email, President Freeman, you asked my thoughts about the shape of the civil rights movement today and tomorrow. You asked me if I thought there was cause for optimism or pessimism?

My optimism for the boundless vitality of the human spirit has not diminished. All over the United States and elsewhere I see unmistakable signs that the struggle for justice and equality has taken on renewed energy and vigor. The Occupy Wall Street Movement and the Arab Spring are important and logical extensions of the age-old struggle for a better world. In its own way, the Hip Hop movement and the battle to end open the internet, Facebook and other social media to peoples living under dictatorships are part of the same struggle against unchecked free enterprise, moribund totalitarianism, materialism, the degradation of youth and women, nuclear annihilation, exploitation and greed.

On the home front, I am encouraged by the thoughtfulness of so many civic leaders as well as some business leaders who have come to see that there is no contradiction between a growing America with jobs and economic opportunity for all and a taxation and legislative structure that helps the least able make ends meet. Capitalism forgets that life is social. As I have so often said, communism forgets that life is individual. And the kingdom of brotherhood can be found neither in the thesis of capitalism nor the antithesis of communism but in a higher synthesis – a higher synthesis that combines the truths of both.

I see much evidence in America today that thoughtful people are putting aside the old antagonism for a new-found respect for ideas and ideals of yesteryear. We know well up here, Dr. Freeman, that there truly is nothing new under the sun. It delights me to see that my earthly brothers and sisters increasingly are coming to see that poverty is not God ordained. We know only too well up here that race is a new idea in human history – less than a thousand years old really. As a force that divided humanity, the concept of race cannot and will not endure. We see evidence here also that humankind is rapidly coming to see that violence cannot end violence; only love can do that.

In the United States, I also see hopeful signs that the civil rights movement that I loved – and still love – is maturing. When my good friend, C.T. Vivian, spoke at your Civil Right Museum last year, he rightly declared that the most important civil rights issue of the 21st Century is educational opportunity for all. As an educator, Dr. Freeman, you know well the significance of education to societal progress. Poverty is linked to poor education just as toes are linked to feet.

Recently, Princeton Professor Eldar Shafir wrote powerfully and convincingly about the tragic psychological picture poverty paints. He points out that poverty takes a cruel toll literally on the lives, heart and mind of the poor. According to Professor Shafir, poverty reduces an individual's judgment, decision-making and even a person's IQ when stressed.

I am especially proud of Earl Graves, Sr., the chairman and founder of Black Enterprise magazine, for admitting in the December 2011 issue that the course of the civil rights movement after my death went profoundly astray because of personal pride and greed. If you haven't read Earl's excellent editorial, entitled, An Apology to Dr. King, you should. In part Earl wrote:

"It's fair to say that we have done justice to King's memory. But the truth is America has not done justice to his dream. In fact, I and the rest of King's generation, now between the ages of 70 and 85, owe Dr. King an apology. Due to our lack of leadership and accountability, and despite the conspicuous success of a minority of African Americans, we have failed to do what it takes to lead our people to the promised land of freedom, equality, and the full measure of the American dream."

Brother Graves acknowledges that the fight has not been won and that there is more to do. I couldn't agree more. There is!

I see sign of hope as well for your generation, Dr. Freeman, those between the ages of 55 and 70. For so many years, your generation – regardless of race or creed – abandoned the fight to create what Howard Thurman, the theologian, Coretta and I call the "Beloved Community".

Time after time, your generation sought expediency over the hard work of creating a more "perfect union" for all mankind. It was as though you saw the ending of the War in Vietnam and the coming of affirmative action at the workplace and "party time" at the bars as your only concerns.

While your generation fled to pot smoking, LSD, casual sex, psychedelic cloths, big afro-hair do's, exotic cars, trophy spouses and palatial homes, the great urban ghettos lay ruined and neglected in the years following my death. Feeling flush with victory over forcing an end to the Vietnam War, your generation stood virtually silent as Bayard Rustin, the legendary civil rights activist, and Liv Ullmann, the screen actress, sought to save Cambodians fleeing their country in rickety boats as the Khmer Rouge made Cambodia one massive killing field. Likewise, while Mao Tse Tung reduced Communist China to little more than a national forced labor camp, your generation merrily sang along to the tune "What's Going On".

In your hot pursuit of the next sex partner, the next job, the next thrill, your generation abandoned each other in a mindless miasma of divorce and remarry and divorce, the surrender of parenting to the latest cabbage-patch craze, and seeking to buy the love and affection of your children with money. By and large, it was the television and not you who raised your children, if you consider them to be raised at all. No wonder your children developed what so often appears to you as an attitude of defiance and indifference. Their indifference is really a cry for your love, your attention.

And yet, I see signs now that your generation – a generation that believes 1 in 6 of you believes will live to be 90 years old – is truly coming of age. Your quest for an end to global warming and your insistence that grandchildren have more of your love and guidance and cookies and ice cream are hopeful signs of a new awakening even as you often fret about America's economic place in the world as the 21st century unfolds.

Already the so-called BRIC Nations – Brazil, Russia, India and China – have carved for themselves huge portions of the economic pie formerly reserved only for the rich, western nations. The BRIC Nations now enjoy increases in their economies that spawn new billionaires every year. Within a few short years, the United States no longer will occupy the status as the world's #1 economic leader. China will take its place as the world's most powerful economic nation on earth. No amount of pleas for the so-called good 'ol days will stay the hand of economic progress. Prayers for a return to conservative values will do little to stop India from its relentless drive to become the customer service call center for the world. Even as these economic developments take shape, the masses of people in the slums of Mumbai, Rio, Moscow and Beijing have benefitted little if at all. For example, while Brazil boasts economic growth that the United States can only envy, there are in Rio alone 24,000 unidentified murder victims over the past decade and more than 60,000 murders overall. In Brazil, Russia, India and China, organized crime has become a pervasive and disturbing way of life. And yet, the masses fight on for a better existence. In BRIC Nations and throughout the world, poor people and their allies are demanding access to economic opportunity. I am thrilled by this rich wellspring of non-violent militancy and determination and so should you!

So, in answer to your question about the fate of the civil rights movement and the fight for social justice worldwide, Dr. Freeman, I think there is cause for cautious optimism. But you – all of you there at the Base, in the country, and throughout the world – must seize the initiative to make things better.

Over a century ago, the father of American psychology, William James, wrote a groundbreaking book entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. It is a book as vital today as it was when James, a physician by training, wrote it in 1902. Among the many insights about religion and its place in human life, James made the pointed observation that religion for many people religion is either a dull habit or an acute fever. Religion has never been a dull habit for me nor – as you might imagine – anybody else up here.

Unfortunately, I see too many instances that religion has become merely a label that distinguishes one tribe member from another in a world that is increasingly complex and multi-faceted. It has for many people become an intellectual place-holder and substitute for having hard won beliefs about good and evil, right and wrong, or God and the devil. To say that one is a Catholic, a Jew, a Baptist or a Quaker, the tradition in which your lovely wife was raised, says nothing about that person's understanding of the abiding principles that have sustained Catholics, Jews, Baptist or Quakers in times of joy and sorrow. Attending church simply to say that somehow one more thing on the weekly "to do" list can be checked off reduces faith to a dull habit. A religion preoccupied with status, community gossip, petty in-fighting or the latest political craze is not a religion at all. It is a juvenile social club.

Your religion faith, if it is collectively to be of any use to you, must become and remain an acute fever.

William James published his book just before the rise, of the Social Gospel Movement in the United States. The Social Gospel Movement, led by Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist minister working among the poor and the industrial workers of New York in 1908, questioned the moral right of capitalists to be amassing untold wealth through exploiting and denying decent wages to workers and toilers.

Rauschenbusch believed it was the responsibility to the church and the religious community to agitate and advocate for workers, the poor and the dispossessed. Drawing largely from Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount, the Social Gospel Movement demanded improved wages and working conditions, a shorter workweek and workers' rights to form and join labor unions. For the Social Gospel Movement, the poor are indeed blessed and will inherit the earth if the church and religious community fight on their behalf.

I am indebted to the Social Gospel Movement philosophy. It shaped my view of the prophetic role of the church in addressing civil rights as well as social injustice. What the Social Gospel Movement possessed abundantly was an ardent fever and fervor to eradicate inequality. It is precisely this kind of religious fever that is needed today. As I have said so often, if the church is to be alive it must take a stand and a forthright and powerful stand against the evils of racism, economic exploitation and violence still existing in this country and throughout the world.

I see in your future a reignited Social Gospel Movement. A movement, perhaps, not as dominated by religious leaders as in the past, but a Social Gospel Movement that connects church groups and community organizations with labor groups and Occupy

Wall Streeters in a concerted effort to win back the moral conscience of America and the world. The arc of history ultimately and always bends towards justice!

The words of Rauschenbusch are as relevant today as they were in 1908 when he wrote:

“There is certainly a great and increasing body of chronic wretchedness in our wonderful country. It is greatest where our industrial system has worked out its conclusions most completely. Our national optimism and conceit ought not to blind us longer to the fact. Single cases of unhappiness are inevitable in our frail human life; but when there are millions of them, all running along well-defined grooves, reducible to certain laws, then this misery is not an individual misery, but a social matter, due to causes in the structure of our society and curable only by social reconstruction.”

So, Dr. Freeman, in a nutshell tell others who ask that the call for freedom remains alive. Tell them that from my perspective I continue to hear the bell of freedom ringing strong and true. On my behalf, tell them to:

Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi.

From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

Let freedom ring from the State House of Wisconsin as public sector workers say no to anti-union legislation.

Let freedom ring from the steaming and congested streets of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia as its citizens demand election reforms.

Let freedom ring from the deep and massive diamond mines of South Africa.

Let freedom ring from Juba, South Sudan as tens of thousands create a modern new nation independent of Khartoum, the capital of Sudan.

From every in every park in every major city as courageous Americans ask: What about the other 99% of America who are not wealthy.

Let freedom ring in Iran and Somalia.

Let the clear voice of non-violent protest be heard in Athens, Greece and Athens, Georgia.

Let freedom ring! Today. Tomorrow. Always!

Coretta is telling me to come go for a walk with her. She believes that I do not walk nearly as much now as I did during those powerful days in Montgomery and Memphis, in Cicero, Illinois and in Birmingham, in Washington, DC and, your beloved Albany, Georgia. So I end with these parting thoughts from one of my favorite protest songs on the 1960s. They are words that animated me even in my times of fatigue and strain. There are not long but powerful:

You've started in this struggle for freedom, go on and make it your own!

God bless you and the Albany community.....

Your servant,

Martin Luther King, Jr.