

## **This month in social justice history: “A Freedom Budget for All”**

### ***A lesson from Martin Luther King Jr.***

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Fifty-one years ago in January 1967—after the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Martin Luther King Jr., A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin drafted their prospectus toward the practical liquidation of poverty in the United States by 1975. They named their proposal “The Freedom Budget,” attacking all major causes of poverty including unemployment, wages, housing, health, education and legal/fiscal policy. The Freedom Budget was 84 pages including statistics, charts, graphs and methodology, and was considered a Marshall Plan for the disadvantaged. With this manifesto, Randolph declared that “we have both the resources and the know-how to end unemployment and poverty...The millions of unemployed and the more than 30 million living in poverty take on the aspects of a national crime.” The team met with economists and social scientists to work out a \$10 billion/year, 10-year budget that called for:

1. Providing full employment for all who are willing and able to work, including those who need education or training to do so.
2. Assuring decent and adequate wages to all who work.
3. Assuring a decent living standard to those who cannot or should not work.
4. Wiping out slum ghettos and providing a decent home for every American.
5. Providing decent medical care and educational opportunities for all within their means.
6. Purifying air and water, developing transportation and natural resources to scale.
7. Correlating full employment with sustained full production and high economic growth.

President Lyndon Johnson paralleled the Freedom Budget with the passage of the sixth Civil Rights Act in 1964 (the first was created in 1866), the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and affirmative action to “encourage and promote negro businesses,” and he declared the War on Poverty, to rebuild cities and guarantee jobs. A. Philip Randolph attempted to show Johnson how to be at war with the Viet Cong in Asia while also fighting against poverty in the U.S.

In the following year, Johnson never responded to the Freedom Budget. King was assassinated. The Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 collapsed, along with the Freedom Budget. Fifty years later, poverty and inequity remain fundamental challenges for America, particularly with respect to racial inequity. While these problems are complex and multi-dimensional, perhaps greater attention needs to be paid to the role of empathy.

### ***To ‘alleviate poverty’ is a worldwide complex undertaking: The road to empathy***

Various authors suggest that alleviating poverty requires “trust, knowledge and empathy” and identifying resources and skills that may be lacking in communities.

To understand barriers to the types of growth and approaches championed by Randolph, King and Rustin, we have to better understand issues around trust, knowledge and empathy. In her work on “Intellectual Empathy, Critical Thinking for Social Justice,” Maureen Linker states there are five skills toward making us more effective in understanding social inequalities that other people face as well as the systems and structures that maintain these differences. These five skills include understanding the invisibility of privilege, knowing that social identity is intersectional, using the model of cooperative reasoning, applying the principle of conditional trust and recognizing our mutual vulnerability. Without these skills society overlooks the imperative and mutual benefit of closing the inequity gap, a gap that is widening by most measures.

“Empathy is the capacity to feel what you do not literally feel.” If pain defines the boundaries of the body, you participate in the social body with those you empathize with, whose pain pains you and whose joy should also be contagious. This quality of sharing defines what it means to be a human being. If empathy is the goal, and absence of empathy is the barrier, as defined by Edward Titchner in 1909 (as “*einführung*”) with the Greek root of “path” for pathology, it’s akin to defining a diseased state. The suffering of others may reach you through art, images, recordings and narratives; the information travels toward you and you meet it halfway, if you meet it.

If you don’t see the suffering of others, how could you turn away? If our attention is redirected, to a distant war for example, we don’t see a closer suffering. In the findings of Kraus et al, “Americans misperceive racial economic equality,” where “despite some indications of racial progress in American society, racial economic inequality continues to be strikingly high.” If we live increasingly in homogenous communities, for example, there will continue to be a “profound misperception of and misplaced optimism regarding contemporary societal economic equality—a misperception that has important consequences for public policy.”

The lessons from the work of Dr. King, A. Philip Randolph and others inform how we risk overlooking the more complex barriers to closing the inequity gap. That is, we risk overlooking our ignorance and bias around the suffering or agency of others in daily life. As a result, we risk perpetually hitting a brick wall, where proposals are made, un-sustained, stalled or ignored over decades.<sup>i</sup> Despite evidence of effective methods that can close the inequity gap, particularly when used universally, we too often even if unwittingly choose to look the other way. Instead, this spring: Engage. Inquire. Analyze. Debate. Champion. Enact.

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<sup>i</sup> See also the work of Sara Ahmed, “On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life.” Duke University Press, 2012.