

Tackling Old Problems in New Ways
Reviving the King Legacy in Contemporary Society

This is not a drama with only one actor. More precisely it is the chronicle of 50,000 Negroes who took to heart the principles of non-violence, who learned to fight for their rights with the weapon of love, and who, in the process, acquired a new estimation of their own human worth.

Martin Luther King, Jr.
Strides toward Freedom

Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement know that their individual acts were in service of a broader and deeper vision. In fighting segregation, they sought to strengthen society through inclusion of the excluded. When Dr. King spoke against the Vietnam War, he did so out of a vision of a peaceful society. Local communities struggled against the devastating impact of poverty, but their goal was empowerment, not welfare. Our goal is to recapture Dr. King's vision of a world made better through people coming together in love.

In considering King's legacy and continuing relevance, there is no better place to start than his Nobel Laureate Lecture, given in 1964 and entitled "The Quest for Peace and Justice." In that lecture, King identified three moral challenges confronting us: (1) racial injustice, (2) poverty, and (3) war. These challenges—forcefully articulated over fifty years ago—remain as pressing today as they were then. While the consequences of failing to address these moral concerns were severe in King's day, they may be even more devastating today. King issued a clarion call for moral action that was daunting in its scope but promising in its prophecy. Like those brave civil rights marchers who answered King's call, we too might discover "a new estimation of our own human worth."

King believed that racial injustice, poverty, and war were interrelated manifestations of the fact that "we have not learned the simple art of living together." He seems to have felt that the means

IPF Framework

Generative Themes for Strengthening Communities

1. Fostering dignity
2. Safeguarding livelihoods
3. Encouraging respect
4. Erecting home/resurrecting family

Generative Themes for Creating *Soul Force*

1. Unleashing empowerment
2. Instilling responsibility
3. Promoting engagement
4. Creating resilience

Generative Themes for Building Peaceful Relationships

1. Envisioning a "shared future"
2. Demonstrating trustworthiness
3. Accepting loss
4. Rectifying injustice

for ending these moral woes were at hand and that only the political and moral will to solve these problems was lacking. While far from naïve about the difficulty of the challenge, King was optimistic that more could and would be done if we had the determination to tackle these problems. Yet, the passage of time has made it clear that each of these problems is more unyielding than he had hoped.

Before turning to these issues, it is important to note that, although undeniably prophetic, King's vision was bounded by the times and circumstances of his day. Many have noted that King was entrenched in the sexism of his society and that he was unaware of the impending threat of climate change (and the compounding and disastrous effects it will have on the problems of racial injustice, poverty, and war). No doubt more limitations could be cited, but our goal is not to document and analyze King's shortcomings or his blind-spots. Instead, we seek to broaden and empower his vision beyond the moment in history in which he lived. To extend and expand King's vision to the present, we draw upon many decades of experience addressing the moral and spiritual issues to which King gave voice.

Over the course of our involvement in breaking down the barriers of societal division, in combating poverty and economic stratification, and in struggling to build peace in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, we have frequently found ourselves in situations where we have had to ask ourselves **what should we do when it seems that there is nothing that can be done**. We have discovered a way forward by identifying the underlying generative themes that give rise to the numerous issues that threaten to overwhelm us.¹ In doing so, some would say that we were focusing on root causes, but we were also working in practical ways to address the immediacy of the problems that people faced. Over the course of our analysis, we will identify twelve generative themes that will provide a conceptual framework for developing the strategies we need today.

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One final note before delving into the moral and political challenges of King's legacy: we use the term *we* expansively. Most of the time, we are referring to us, the two authors. However, at times, our use of *we* is meant to include colleagues and collaborators with whom one or both of us have worked. This inclusive use of *we* occurs especially when we are discussing *our* work on

¹ See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

peacebuilding. Much of this work involved the Stanford Center on International Conflict and Negotiation and its network of researchers, scholars, and practitioners. (We want to give a special nod to Lee Ross, a close friend and colleague, a Stanford professor and co-founder of SCICN). We also draw heavily on the work of Youth Potential Today when exploring issues regarding poverty as well as the Ecumenical Hunger Program in East Palo Alto. (We want to give shout-out to Karen Hotaling for YPT and Nevada Butler for EHP). At times, our use of *we* includes friends and colleagues in these wider associations in which we work. Finally, we want to issue an invitation to you, the reader, to join *our* project and become part of *us* as *we* begin this journey to revive the King Legacy.

Racial Injustice → Strengthening Communities

Events across the world had led King to believe that we were living in the midst of a “freedom explosion.” Not only in the United States were oppressed people rising up to make “freedom and equality a reality ‘here’ and ‘now’.” King felt that some deep inner awaking was reminding downtrodden people of their birthright freedom. The new critical element was the strong conviction that this freedom was within reach. What made freedom achievable was the power of **non-violence**. Oppressed people could withdraw their consent to abide by unjust laws and customs. They would no longer cooperate with a “regime of discrimination and enslavement.” With determination, they could and would claim their freedom.

The goal of non-violence was not to conquer or humiliate oppressors but to liberate society to become a *beloved community*. Differences and disagreements would not immediately vanish but would be addressed in dialogue. Because violence silences dialogues, King believed that non-violence was “the only way to re-establish a broken community.” The goal of the dialogue he sought was not to find accommodation with an unjust and violent *status quo*, but instead to create the mutual understanding that was needed to create a more just and peaceful world. In the inspiring cadence of a preacher, his voice rang out: “We adopt the means of non-violence because our end is a community at peace with itself.”

There can be no doubt that racial, ethnic, and economic divisions in America have not been eliminated, and to these divisions, globalization and rising economic disparity have added more layers of complexity. In addition, increasing awareness of gender and sexual-orientation

discrimination have confounded further the difficulties we face. The challenges are plain to see, but the creative means of addressing them are much less apparent.

King deeply believed that only strong communities could be peaceful communities, and by extension, we maintain that the only way to overcome the economic and social isolation that we experience today is to take up King's challenge to strengthen the communities in which we live. To end racial injustice, we identify four generative themes that strengthen community: **(1) fostering dignity, (2) safeguarding livelihoods, (3) encouraging respect, and (4) erecting home/resurrecting family**. Although each of these themes deserves extensive analysis, we will offer only a brief description here.

1. Fostering dignity comes from the realization that creating a just peace is not always achievable in the short term. However, creating a non-humiliating peace is possible. We are not giving up on justice, but we are acknowledging that a non-humiliating peace gives us better opportunities to create a less unjust peace.
2. Safeguarding livelihoods first arose for us in relationship to police violence, but we have come to see that it has wider relevance. Conceptually, policing can be thought of as either a force that defeats what threatens a community or a service that safeguards what is important to a community. Shifting notions of policing toward a service that safeguards is a subtle, but important, move. In a wider frame of reference, this notion of safeguarding offers opportunities to reassess how we might better protect our capacity to live meaningful lives in the wake of globalization's negative impact on our communities.
3. Encouraging respect comes from our engagement in various dialogues attempting to bridge deep and often violent social differences. The point of departure for any meaningful accommodation of each other has to be respect for the lived experiences of those with whom we seriously disagree. No one is required to approve of the policies and prescriptions that political opponents offer, but we must respect the experiences that give rise to those opinions.
4. Erecting home/resurrecting family highlights our fundamental need to belong. The image of home and family are intertwined. It takes a family to make a home, and homes are where families live. However, we use home and family expansively—home is more

than a location, and family is more than genetically-related people. Both serve as metaphors for the many ways people create a sense of belonging. Today, the “nuclear” family no longer provides the emotional and economic support and protection that it once did, and a return to the “extended” family of previous generations is not a viable option. This implosion of family hastened the desolation of home, leaving us everywhere feeling more isolated, insecure, and threatened. Our sense of well-being seems afloat because we doubt that we can control our destinies. To erect home/resurrect family, we must discover new ways to grapple with each other’s struggles, celebrate each other’s victories, and suffer each other’s losses.

Poverty → Creating Soul Force

Although many today see King primarily as a leader for civil rights, King rightly saw poverty as inseparable from the racial burdens that African Americans bore. More broadly, along with segregation, poverty was a massive evil that stained America’s soul. While King believed that poverty was as old as the hills, the new element for him was that we now had “the resources to get rid of it.” What we lacked was the political will. In his speech, King called for “an all-out world war against poverty.”

Although plenty was known back then, and while there is still much more to learn, the causes and effects of poverty are now better understood than they were in King’s day. We now realize that the situational and cognitive dynamics that trap people in cycles of poverty are incredibly complex and that the struggle to break out of poverty has no easy fixes.² Even if poverty cannot be eradicated, the means for alleviating poverty are even more available today than they were in King’s day. The sad fact is that the political will to do something about it has waned even further.

If there is a silver lining to today’s apathy, it is a rising concern about the growing inequality that has engulfed our society in particular, but also other developed nations across the globe. In this regard, King’s message is still both inspiring and compelling. King believed that the moral heart of the matter was simple: “In the final analysis, the rich must not ignore the poor because

² See Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*

both the rich and the poor are tied in a single garment of destiny.” In King’s day, poverty was quarantined in urban ghettos and rural hinterlands so that it could be ignored. While it is not that much different today, ghetto walls and rural distance do not contain and constrain the effects of inequality as effectively. The consequences of inequality are everywhere around us. If we have learned nothing else in this age of global dislocation, it is that inequality breeds resentment and humiliation that refuses to be silenced or ignored. As the consequences of inequality seep throughout our society, they poison the sense of community that we so desperately need to live meaningful lives.

Redistribution of resources and income is an essential component of any effort to alleviate inequality, but poverty, which is but the bitter tail of the inequality spectrum, cannot be alleviated by simply transferring income from the rich to the poor. The real question is how to empower the poor to break out of the poverty that kills them from within. King learned from Mohandas Gandhi the importance of “*soul force*” as a way of life that empowered oppressed people to break the chains of their enslavement.

Gandhi coined the term *satyagraha* to capture the essence of non-violent resistance. In Sanskrit, *satya* means truth, and *agta* means insisting or holding firmly to. While for Gandhi truth implied love, King believed that love was truth. Gandhian non-violence became King’s way of putting love into action. As he wrote in “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method.”

In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the Poor People’s March, King proclaimed:

“In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. ... Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.”

It is not clear when King began using the term, but there can be no doubt *soul force* tapped into the strong currents of African American spirituality.

While King spoke of *soul force* primarily in relationship to non-violent protest, he also understood it more broadly as the power of love to address social problems. Under King’s leadership, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference created Operation Breadbasket, whose

primary aim was to harness the economic power of African Americans for improving conditions in poor communities. King understood that inequality was only part of the problem that the poor faced. The poor had been robbed of their dignity, and the first essential step out of poverty was to declare that “I am somebody.” *Soul force* gave those who embrace it “new self-respect” and called forth “the strength and courage that they did not know they had.”

Again, from many decades of engagement, we are deeply aware of the difficulties involved in breaking out of poverty and have often felt overwhelmed by the need to do something when it felt like we could do nothing. The way forward entails taking to heart what King undoubtedly knew and what poor people live with daily; namely, that while poverty was, at one level, a simple lack of resources, it was also, at a deeper level, a crushing sense that, because people are poor, they do not warrant the dignity and respect that humans deserve. King’s answer to this was *soul force*—that new estimation of our own human worth that King underscored.

The generative themes that we seek are also the building blocks for *soul force*. In this sense, our generative themes will be less focused upon the conceptual tools for analyzing the causes and conditions of poverty and more focused upon the attributes that endow a person with dignity. Our goal is not so much to solve an economic problem as to construct senses of self that will enable the poor to rise above poverty. In this regard, four themes emerged that seem especially relevant: (1) unleashing empowerment, (2) instilling responsibility, (3) promoting engagement, and (4) creating resilience. We offer a few words about the lessons these themes teach:

1. Unleashing empowerment: Although you may feel otherwise, your actions can produce the outcomes you intend. Despite appearances, there is always a connection between what you do and what you get. Never settle for anything less than what you want. Recognize the progress that has been made, and continue to struggle for more.
2. Instilling responsibility: How you act is important because your actions are the only thing you can control. No action that you undertake is insignificant. How you lead your life determines what you will ultimately become. Take yourself seriously because if you don’t, no one else will.
3. Promoting engagement: You are connected to those around you in more ways than you can imagine. No one breaks the chains of poverty alone, and neither will you. You must stand

with others if you want them to stand with you. Giving back is the rent you pay for living in a community.

4. Creating resilience: There is no question that life will knock you down because life is hard on everyone. The only question is whether and how you get up. Don't let hardships break your dignity. No challenge can defeat you unless you let it.

War → Building Peaceful Relationships

King was especially concerned about the increasing destruction that modern weapons of war could unleash. He believed that war had become obsolete because even its “negative good” of preventing the spread of evil had been rendered ineffective by the devastation that modern arsenals would cause. King believed that there was no way to exit war’s march toward self-annihilation except to create an alternative to war for resolving differences. Non-violence offered such an alternative, but King was under no illusion that non-violence alone could solve everything.

Unlike the racial injustice and poverty with which he was very familiar, King was just beginning to turn his attention to the problem of war. Some of his remarks sound quite similar to lofty platitudes about turning away from war and giving peace a chance. There are, nevertheless, strong indications that he sensed that the deeper problem had to do with laying the foundations of a peaceful world, and in this regard, he deeply believed that waging war would never lead to peace.

Although annoyingly idealistic and vacuous to our contemporary ears, King called for “shifting the arms race into a ‘peace race’.” He firmly believed that a complete philosophical and spiritual reorientation was needed and sought this transformation in “an all-embracing and unconditional love” for all humankind. Unlike many today, King did not believe that love was a sentimental emotion that sought the comfort of false harmony. It was, instead, a powerful force that could dismiss what he called “the Nietzsches of the world” and expose weakness and cowardliness. Love—*agape* as the Greek New testament calls Christian love—was the driving force of his spiritual core, and we should not pretend otherwise. He was first and foremost a Christian minister and is even today studied by many as an important theologian.

King lived through most of the 60s, and they were heady times. Many of the transformations and revolutions that people had hoped for failed to materialize, even if some important reforms were achieved. Wherever one locates King in the cultural revolutions of that decade, there can be

no doubt that he possessed profound moral insight. The key to his insight about peace was revealed in a story he told to end his Nobel Laureate lecture. A well-known novelist died leaving among his belongings the outlines of a plot for novel he had hoped to write:

"A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together.' This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a big house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterners and Westerners, Gentiles and Jews, Catholics and Protestants, Moslem and Hindu, a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interests who, because we can never again live without each other, must learn, somehow, in this one big world, to live with each other."

King understood that the problem of war could be solved only if we found a way to live with our fundamental differences and violent divisions.

Work in conflict situations around the world has taught us the importance of building peaceful, trustful relationships between people who have very different beliefs and aspirations. Most conflict resolution aims at reaching so-called agreements as the way of establishing peaceful relationships. In our experience, this approach is backwards. Rather than agreements producing peaceful relationship, peaceful relationships make agreements possible. The obvious question is what makes relationships peaceful.

In consultation with colleagues from across the globe, we have come to believe that peaceful relationships take shape around four generative themes: (1) building a shared future, (2) demonstrating trustworthiness, (3) accepting losses, and (4) rectifying injustices. We turned these themes into four questions that parties to a conflict must address if they want to manage their differences. We don't believe that there are complete answers to any of these questions but rather that peaceful relationships emerge as the parties struggle to reach mutually acceptable answers.

We have used this approach to conflict resolution in a number of settings—in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and other world hotspots; in workplace and employment disputes; in family quarrels and community spats; as well as in business and legal disagreements. Our description of these questions has been honed over many years, and we offer a brief account:

1. Envisioning a "shared future": *Are the parties able and willing to articulate a future for the other side that it would find bearable?* The shared future question attempts to create a potential domain of mutually bearable futures. The core challenge that each side faces is to

articulate an acceptable place for the other side in the future it seeks. Such a future may be far from what either side deems desirable or just. The vision of a shared future is not necessarily a shared vision of the future, which implies agreement about future goals. But it is a vision that includes the circumstances and aspirations of the other party.

2. Demonstrating trustworthiness: *Can the two sides trust each other to honor commitments and to take (all of) the intermediate steps necessary toward that shared future?* In the context of longstanding conflict, each side feels that other has done more to foment the conflict than to broker a peace. Given these sentiments, both sides face a critical question: What has *changed* to make things different and why should we trust each other now?
3. Accepting loss: *How can the parties come to accept the losses that a settlement imposes on them and thus make the compromises needed to reach an agreement?* Each side tends to believe that the settlement calls for them to make all the important and painful concessions and offers them little or nothing in return. Both sides must find ways to recognize and acknowledge the painful losses that the other side is bearing for the sake of peace.
4. Rectifying injustices: *How can the parties work together to alleviate or rectify the most serious injustices that the settlement imposes on the parties?* Every peace agreement imposes losses and injustices on the parties from their perspective. The fundamental challenge is to work together to make these injustices bearable to the side that must suffer them. In the end, both parties must feel that they are better off in peace than they were in conflict.

Putting the JPF Framework into Action

Many times, we have sat with Northern Ireland community leaders deep inside loyalist and republican strongholds and listened to them describe the problems and challenges they were confronting. At some point in the conversation, we would ask them to explain what prevented them from achieving their objectives. In other words, **what stood in their way?** Our purpose was to engage them in a **barriers analysis**.

A barriers analysis first identifies the source of the resistance they were experiencing and then explores how that resistance might be lessened. In any situation, there are forces pushing for change and forces resisting change. When people want change, their first reaction is to push harder for the changes they want. Those resisting change push back harder in response. The result is

often a more impacted and potentially explosive situation. The barriers analysis interrupts this cycle of action and reaction by shifting our focus to why people are resisting change and how their resistance could be moderated.

As we listened to these leaders describe the barriers they encountered, we noted in our heads how much of what we were hearing concerned the generative themes we have identified. Our checklist allowed us to outline a conversation that might prove fruitful to people and the community with which we were engaged. In this sense, the JPF Framework took us to a deeper level of analysis and thus helped us develop more impactful strategies for moving forward. These conversations never brought forth the type of breakthrough that wipes away all of the difficulties people were facing. They did reliably produce small, but sometimes dramatic, insights that influenced events over the long term.

An example from King's life may prove instructive. King was well aware that white Southerners feared that African Americans would turn the tables on them if they gained the political power to do so. These fears may not have been well-founded, but even phantom fears are real to those who experience them. Early on, King gave a keynote address during the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom (May 17, 1957) that explicitly addressed this concern:

"We must not seek to use our emerging freedom and growing power to do the same thing to the white minority that was done to us for so many centuries. ... Our aim must never be to defeat or to humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding, and thereby create a society in which all men will be able to live together as brothers. ... We must act in such a way as to make possible a coming-together of white people and colored people on the basis of a real harmony of interests and understanding. We must seek an integration based on mutual respect."

King realized that, unless white fears were addressed, the road to civil rights for African Americans would be longer and more arduous than it otherwise might be.

Today, we read King's keynote with suspicious eyes. His call for a "real harmony of interests and understanding" and "integration based upon mutual respect" may seem too pie-in-sky as it feels far removed from what is actually happening around us. Nevertheless, engaging the barriers analysis with the JPF Framework can deepen our grasp of what can be done. Even the suggestion that ending racial injustice requires us to build stronger communities can take us down a different and more hopeful track. To know that fostering dignity, safeguarding livelihoods, encouraging

respect, and erecting home/resurrecting family are the targets at which we should aim is by itself empowering to those serious about change. Furthermore, knowing where to return as new barriers arise insures that we are never completely lost.

As we conclude this paper, we want to underscore the ways that JPF Framework can help deepen a barriers analysis.

1. The JPF Framework helps identify what you already know and transform it into workable knowledge that can be used effectively.
2. The JPF Framework helps identify what you don't know but need to know if you are going to move forward.
3. The JPF Framework helps identify new aspects of an issues that had been previously overlooked and new features of a situation that were previously hidden.
4. The JPF Framework identifies the themes that allow us to learn from those in other situations that are profoundly different from our own.

Two examples illustrate how using the JPF Framework along these lines can be helpful. In the first example, we have been working with the Kaiser Foundation to address the ineffectiveness of mental healthcare providers in minority and LGBTQ communities. The barriers analysis led us to identify the problem as lack of trust in the relationship between providers and recipients. Our framework pointed us toward focusing on trustworthiness, and we began exploring the difference between mistrust and distrust. Mistrust comes about when the parties don't have sufficient knowledge to trust one another. Distrust comes about when the parties actively anticipate that harm will occur from an encounter. If the problem had to do with mistrust, we could tackle it through increased contact because more contact would allow the community to learn that the mental healthcare providers were basically trustworthy. But, the problem was actually distrust. What was needed was a change in the expectation that contact with mental healthcare providers would produce harm. Increased contact would only make the problem worse if no attention was paid to demonstrating that benefits would come from engaging with them. The value of the JPF Framework was that it pushed us toward a deeper understanding of what we were trying to do.

In the second example, we have been in conversation with community workers in Belfast about developing youth programs. We were hoping to link our Belfast colleagues, who were working in a

working-class urban area, with Youth Potential today, which was a very successful youth program operating in rural Georgia. The barriers analysis suggested that, despite drastic differences in social setting, they face many similar barriers. Replicating what Youth Potential Today did in rural Georgia on the streets of urban Belfast—nor the reverse—would not be helpful. Nevertheless, a fruitful collaboration was possible because those in Belfast could benefit from what YPT knew about unleashing empowerment, instilling responsibility, promoting engagement, and creating resilience in rural Georgia and *vice versa*. Beneath their differences, both groups faced the similar challenges at the level of generative themes.

Let us close with two observations. First, the JPF Framework must expand to include the current-day issue of climate change. We cannot ignore the disastrous consequences that await us if we fail to take up this challenge. We are not certain whether King's three moral challenges—racial injustice, poverty, and war—provide a platform broad enough to address adequately the measures that must be taken to secure our future well-being, if not our survival. What is more than clear is that climate change will greatly exacerbate these problems and must be an integral part of any project to create a better world.

Finally, King was undoubtedly a sophisticated thinker. As we have worked on this manuscript, we have often wondered what he might have added to the conversations we are proposing. Both of us lived in Southern communities during the time of the Civil Right Movement and experienced first-hand the changes that it brought about. The power of King's moral vision was for us a living reality, not an historical event. We may not have the benefit of his moral clarity, but his moral compass continues to inspire us to seek greater ends.

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