

Helping Families Respond to Dr. King's Call to Challenge Racism, Materialism, and Militarism

by Jim McGinnis

As we move further into the 21st Century, in the midst of the United Nations Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Sake of the Children of the World, the responsibility and challenge for parents, teachers, counselors, pastors and others who nurture children and youth to promote this "culture of peace and nonviolence" is increasingly difficult. This is especially true for us in the United States since 9/11. In the face of increasing fear and the desire for security, as well as an increasingly narrow sense of patriotism, the words and witness of our national prophets become even more urgent.

No one in recent US history can claim this prophetic mantle as much as Martin Luther King, Jr. And no words of Dr. King ring out as clearly and boldly as his "When Silence Is Betrayal" speech (sometimes referred to as his "Beyond Vietnam" speech) of April 4, 1967. In this speech Dr. King challenges all of us, first, to look critically at our national values and how they have been contradicted by "the giant triplets of racism, extremely materialism, and militarism." Secondly, he encourages us to speak out against these evils that have invaded our individual souls as well as the soul of our nation and threaten the well-being of the whole human family. For there is no peace - personal, national, or global - without "liberty and justice for all."

"A time comes when silence is betrayal. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, people do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world. Moreover, when the issues at hand seem as perplexing as they often do in the case of dreadful conflict, we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty. But we must move on.

"Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. For we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.

"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. 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, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered..."

These are challenging words for all; threatening words to many. But for all of us who nurture children, especially in a family setting, the challenge is as important as it is

difficult - to develop healthy racial attitudes and struggle against racism, to curb consumerism and struggle against poverty, and to promote nonviolent ways of dealing with others, both interpersonally and internationally. In this essay, Kathy and I offer parents and others many practical ways of promoting this "culture of peace and nonviolence" at home, in the community, and around the world. As parents who have worked on this within our family since 1970 and now with our grandchildren, we hope our experiences and those of many other families with whom we have worked will be helpful in these critically important areas.

Promoting Healthy Racial Attitudes and Challenging Racism

From infancy on, children learn lots about others who are racially and culturally different and who their parent(s) think are worth being with. They notice who is invited into their home, who eats with them at the family dinner table, who is pictured on the walls of their home, who plays with them on their playgrounds and shares their pre-school classroom. They notice the visuals in the children's books we read to them, the words they hear around them, the faces of the characters on the TV shows they watch.

When our own three children were small (1, 3 and 5), 5-year-old Tom asked me one day as he stood beside me while I was changing 1-year-old Theresa's diaper - "Dad, when Theresa grows up, will she kill us?" The question was occasioned by an earlier conversation when we told Tom that we would be visiting a Winnebago family that summer while we were teaching in La Crosse, WI. Theresa is half African American and half Native American (Winnebago). Kathy and I were stunned. We had placed positive visuals of Native Americans in our home, critiqued cartoon shows where Native Americans were caricatured, chosen his pre-school teachers for their racial sensitivity. Yet, racism and racial stereotyping are so pervasive in our society that Tom was not immune to it.

After 33 years of working with our children on racial awareness and racial justice and with thousands of other families through our work, we have come up with twelve suggestions that have proven effective for families who want to promote healthy racial attitudes and challenge racism. Perhaps the most important of the twelve is #4 - "fostering interracial relationships." Most people make decisions and life changes based on love rather than guilt or duty. Any family that works consistently at breaking down racial barriers, whether they are families of color or caucasian, faces obstacles and opposition, sometimes even from those within their own family. Risks are involved. But we are generally more willing to take risks when we do so because of our relationships with people "on the other side." The friendships we have cultivated in the interracial communities where we live, work, worship, and have educated our children have deeply motivated us to continue to challenge racism.

What Families Can Do About Racism

1. Inform yourself about racism

See the resources on the back of this flyer. For more regular updating, subscribe to "Witness for Justice," a news service of the United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice, 700 Prospect, Cleveland, OH 44115, shoresk@ucc.org (weekly three-page bulletin, no charge). Subscribe to an African American, Hispanic, Asian, or other ethnic newspaper in your community.

2. Talk about current events

Talk within your family specifically about the events that have racial implications. Encourage children to ask questions and draw conclusions.

3. Celebrate heroes, holidays and cultural events

Lift up for yourselves and your children the lives of people of color, past and present, who have fought, and continue to fight for racial justice. Enjoy the learning by surrounding it with a party or other enjoyable event. Many communities have cultural events (dance, theatre, art) that provide information as well as real insights into the culture, history, and life of different racial groups. Holidays (e.g., Kwanzaa, Cinco de Mayo, Chanukah) can also be times to learn more about the values of other people.

4. Form interracial friendships

Concern for racism and risk-taking and persevering action against racism are nurtured by the relationships we have across racial lines. Such relationships are more easily achieved if we live and work in integrated situations and our children go to integrated schools.

5. Seek out racially diverse role models/professionals

Children's attitudes are affected by the people they relate to a variety of capacities (doctors, dentists, teachers, ministers, counselors). Make racial diversity one of the criteria for choosing such professionals for yourself and your children.

6. Never use or allow racially derogatory terms

Children need to know that comments and/or jokes that belittle or insult the racial or cultural ancestry of any person or group are absolutely unacceptable in our homes. It is also important for them to see us confront other adults about their language.

7. Check TV programming

Children can be brought into our discussion about TV shows. We can look at the simple question of numbers: how many TV series have African Americans? Hispanics? Asians? Native Americans? We can also discuss the kinds of roles: are people of color shown in positive or in stereotypic ways? (For example, are African Americans shown in warm, loving family situations or as perpetrators of crimes?)

8. Look at your voting patterns

Political candidates at all levels need to be evaluated in terms of their stance and activity against racism in all forms. Children can be part of discussions about these candidates, about our voting decisions. In some communities, working on voter registration drives is a concrete way of putting into practice concern about the ability of all people to participate in the political system.

9. Write letters to the editor

In every community there are racial incidents that occur as well as ever-present economic and political realities that reflect the institutional dimensions of racism (for example, high unemployment, infant mortality, difficulties in voter registration). Families can let their opinions be known in the community through letters that can be signed by the whole family.

10. Involve yourself in community projects

It is important for both adults and children to be involved in projects in which the leaders are people of color.

11. Stand with the victims

Even though the circumstances vary from one community to another, there are always opportunities to add our voices to those fighting against the impact of racism, whether at school board meetings, city council hearings, court proceedings or vigils. At times these situations may be appropriate for the participation of children.

12. Visuals

The pictures and other visual representations in our homes should truly be multiracial.. Children learn a lot from what they see in their home environment. It is also important to check for racial stereotyping in any of the visuals in our homes.

Recognizing and Challenging Extreme Materialism

One of the most challenging comments I have heard about the level of conspicuous consumption that has been elevated to the status of "the American dream" came from a Nicaraguan mother visiting us in St. Louis. Grethel Montoya was the founder of the Maria

Luis Ortiz Women's Cooperative in the rural village of Mulukuku in central Nicaragua. In one of her presentations to US supporters of her cooperative, she confessed that she wouldn't want to raise her children here. "Your children have so much that they have lost their souls. They have lost their connection with the earth and its seasons."

Well, Grethel wasn't alone in her observation. Dr. King lamented this shift in American values - from a person-oriented society to a thing-oriented society. It is probably truer now than in 1967 that "machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people." And the tragedy of it goes far beyond the impact extreme materialism has on the souls of our children. It affects the whole world. First, with the explosion of communications technology and the pervasiveness of advertising, American consumerism has threatened traditional cultural and religious values in every corner of the world. But even more seriously, it has become the rationale for the unprecedented expansion of US military power. It is in defense of this "American way of life" that US foreign policy-makers have justified a national security strategy that now includes pre-emptive attacks on nations that might threaten our privileged life-style. We're being sold an "us against them" worldview that denies a sense of the global human family in which we are all equally important children of our common Creator.

It is hard for most of us to name and confront this privilege and worldview ourselves and even more difficult to share it with our children. But share it we must, if the world is to survive and our nation's soul, as well as our individual souls, be restored. How do we help young people realize how privileged and unjust the life-style of our nation is, especially when that's what they see all around them. How do we help them become more person-oriented and less thing-oriented, less tied to consumerism and more committed to service of others?

We have learned several effective strategies from our own experimentation and from other families over the years in this effort to challenge extreme materialism, as the highlighted list indicates. As with challenging racism, the best approach is through personal relationships, especially for people of privilege. The best way we know to open our eyes and move our hearts to a sense of global solidarity is #5 in the list below. To "open our homes and hearts to others" can help us experience people and places where the standard of living is very different and where we can meet people and form relationships. This can begin within our own homes as we open them in hospitality to those needing a sense of belonging and perhaps a meal or short-term stay. For very young children, this is especially helpful because the exposure takes place in a place of security for them - their own home. As they get more comfortable with "strangers," we can reach out into our local communities where we can encounter people who are struggling economically, whether it's at a shelter, food pantry, or public hospital. Sometimes taking public transportation provides an opportunity to see and perhaps meet others who can help us see and feel and then act.

While they don't need to be overseas, service or solidarity trips provide a more expensive, but highly effective, experience. Going to Nicaragua where we lived and worked with families in a poor barrio near Managua and then in Mulukuku were life-changing experiences for everyone in our families and the other two families who went with us in 1989 and 1992. All 14 of us learned or re-learned that we had so many more things than they did, but that *things* are not the things that provide genuine happiness. We experienced people of great courage and faith who invited us to join in their struggle for a more just way of life. We learned that community cooperation is more satisfying than everyone trying to get as much as they could for themselves.

But there was one moment that stood out more vividly than the rest. At the end of our stay with a family near Managua, the 13-year-old granddaughter Elizabeth gave our daughter Theresa one of the only two shirts she owned, as a friendship gift. Theresa at 15 realized what that gift meant. She felt a little strange going through her suitcase to choose one of her nine shirts to give Elizabeth in return. She understood the difference in life-styles and the level of generosity in an unforgettable way. Perhaps we all need to regularly recharge our sense of solidarity with person-to-person experiences, or begin to provide them for the first time.

How Can Families Challenge Materialism

1. Use public facilities.

Instead of always buying new books, use the public library where children learn to care for resources not because they own them, but because others need them too. Public parks and playgrounds provide many enriching opportunities that backyard play equipment can't.

2. Critique advertising.

Watching TV with our children, looking through magazines together, commenting on advertising appeals on highway billboards or shopping mall displays provide opportunities to help young people become more critical thinkers and less susceptible to advertising.

3. Enjoy the outdoors.

Young people who grow up learning the delights of natural beauty are less interested in having lots of stuff in order to be happy. From walks in the park to hiking in mountains, from sleep-outs in the backyard to camping or canoeing, from local botanical gardens and arboretums to state and national parks, the beauty of creation satisfies and delights far more than computer games and video arcades.

4. Personalize celebrations.

Personal "presence" can be more satisfying than lots of purchased presents when we celebrate birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions. Surprise parties, albums with special photos and personal statements, "homemade" gifts, going special places with the person being celebrated, etc., are all wonderful alternatives to consumeristic rituals.

5. Open our homes and hearts to others.

Hospitality at home can include new neighbors, inviting school friends to dinner who are having a rough time at home, relatives or neighbors living alone, teens needing temporary shelter or respite, and international students who can't go home for holidays. Regular visits to local shelters, soup kitchens, food pantries, and nursing homes offer opportunities to meet people who are hurting outside the home and to develop relationships that may provide the motivation to make sacrifices in one's life-style in order to help others who have less.

6. Spare and share

Families economically able to do so might set up a regular process for making sacrifices like cutting back on desserts, soda and liquor, costly entertainment, new clothes; calculate the savings and set it aside in some kind of container that might be decorated with appropriate pictures and symbols; and then decide as a family how to distribute the savings. Appeals for money that come through the mail, on the phone, or at the front door might be collected for consideration by the whole family.

7. The "Exchange System"

Families might also consider an "exchange system" whereby for each new item brought into the home, a similar item needs to be given away to someone in need. This works especially well with articles of clothes but can also apply to books, games and toys; dishware, appliances and furniture.

8. Shop with a conscience

Buying from local producers (e.g., open air or farmers markets), eating at neighborhood restaurants, shopping at local stores, buying the handicrafts of "Third World" artisans for gifts, participating in boycotts of companies that exploit their workers and/or the environment all demonstrate and teach a sense of social responsibility.

9. Clothing allowances and thrift stores.

Using thrift stores for some clothes when the children are young opens up a whole new world for them beyond the shopping mall. Inviting their friends to go along on a thrift store outing provides peer support for this way of being "different" than many of their friends. Putting older children on a clothing allowance helps them learn how to budget and shop for bargains, while eliminating many a "please buy me..." argument.

Challenging Militarism - The Family Pledge of Nonviolence

The third of Dr. King's "giant triplets" is also extremely challenging. Even the word "militarism," when it is associated with our nation's policies, can make us defensive. But it must be made abundantly clear that to say that a nation's policies may be militaristic at times is not to say that people who serve in the military are wrong. Most military personnel serve their country in self-sacrificing ways and are among its noblest of citizens. But that doesn't guarantee that the policies they are implementing are in the best interests of humanity or even their own nation.

Perhaps the best way to begin to consider militarism is with a definition that applies to personal as well as national behavior. Most generically, militarism means the practice of using physical force, or the threat of physical force, to impose one's will on others. More specifically, it means relying heavily or exclusively on military might/force as the means of achieving political goals. Militarism reflects a "win-lose" approach through physical force rather than a "win-win" approach through negotiation. Sometimes it includes the attitude that "might makes right."

To the extent that the "militarism" label can be applied to US foreign policy, such policies may need to be directly challenged. Families can participate in many forms of political action or nonviolent direct action. Family letter-writing is one possibility. The whole family can decide what to say about an issue in a letter to the editor of their local paper and sign it "The _____ Family." So too with letters or emails to our political leaders. Families can also participate in public demonstrations or vigils together. They can decide together whether to put a yard sign in their front yard, a bumper sticker on their car, and/or wear buttons on their jackets.

But militarism infects families as well as nations. Adults and older siblings are not immune to using physical force, or the threat of physical force, to impose their will on other family members. Adults and youth alike often seek out entertainment that glorifies militaristic attitudes and behaviors, whether it's video and computer games, movies and TV shows, or even some music. One very helpful tool for families who want to challenge militarism in their society and militarism in their own home is the "Family Pledge of Nonviolence," highlighted below.

The Family Pledge of Nonviolence

"Making peace must start within ourselves and in our family.

Each of us, members of the _____ family,
commit ourselves as best we can to become nonviolent and peaceable people:

Respect self and others

To respect myself, to affirm others and to avoid uncaring criticism,
hateful words, physical attacks and self-destructive behavior.

Communicate better

To share my feelings honestly, to look for safe ways to express my anger,
and to work at solving problems peacefully.

Listen carefully

To listen carefully to one another, especially those who disagree with me,
and to consider others' feelings and needs rather than insist on having my own way.

Forgive

To apologize and make amends when I have hurt another,
to forgive others, and to keep from holding grudges.

Respect nature

To treat the environment and all living things, including our pets, with respect and care.

Play creatively

To select entertainment and toys that support our family's values and to avoid entertainment that makes violence look exciting, funny or acceptable.

Be courageous

To challenge violence in all its forms whenever I encounter it,
whether at home, at school, at work, or in the community,
and to stand with others who are treated unfairly.

Several aspects of this pledge are especially appropriate for the manifestations of militarism identified above. "Play Creatively" addresses the problem of violent entertainment. Some of the strategies for challenging materialism are helpful here, especially using the outdoors for recreation. These forms of recreation also apply to "Respect Nature" component of the Pledge. Acts of public opposition to militarism are clearly ways to "Be Courageous" and challenge violence in some of its forms.

But it is the first four components of the Pledge that offer families important ways of reducing militarism at home. One of the most helpful tools for family peacemaking is the family meeting - as a way of respecting each family member, listening carefully to one another, and solving problems peacefully. This means negotiating with children whenever possible, rather than imposing our solutions on them. This doesn't mean that there are no bottom-lines, that everything is negotiable. In our 35 years of parenting, we have learned the difference between basic values being non-negotiable and how we implement or live out those values as a family being very negotiable.

A good example of this kind of negotiation with children took place for us around the issue of toy guns. We recall vividly a situation with our oldest son Tom when he was only six. He came into the house crying because some neighborhood kids were intimidating him with their toy guns. "I have to have a gun, Dad!" he pleaded. "I have to defend myself." We suggested a solution of self-defense by another means -- "how about a bullet-proof shield out of a trash can lid?" Tom's immediate response was "It won't work; I have to have a gun!" After a pause, he offered his own compromise: "How about a squirt gun? It shoots water, not pretend bullets, and doesn't even sound like a gun?" We were

struck by his ability to honor our values -- we had explained a number of times about not pretending to kill people when so many really do get killed by guns and how scared and sad that makes us -- and yet get his own needs met. So we agreed. The next day he confronted his playmates' real looking toy guns with his squirt gun. From then on, the intimidation stopped.

While issues of gun play usually don't end with one incident nor are they always resolved easily, the key for us looking back was our willingness to listen to our children and their needs and negotiate with them ways of getting these needs met without compromising our values. This process of mutuality is essential to nonviolent family living. And listening is a real tool of nonviolence. For the listener, it requires letting go of our own agenda and focusing on others. For the one listened to, there is no need to assert oneself negatively, often violently, to be recognized and experience some power over their own lives.

Because of how helpful the mechanism of the family meeting has proven to be for so many other families as well, it is important to identify some of the guidelines for conducting effective family meetings that have surfaced over the years. These include the following:

- Schedule them regularly, so there is some predictability. Otherwise the children will not trust the process.
- Schedule them at the most convenient time for all members of the family.
- Make the agenda available to everyone. It helps to have a piece of paper posted prominently on which to write agenda items. Otherwise children often forget what they want to discuss.
- Include agenda items that involve family plans, family fun events, family service opportunities. Do not limit the agenda to problems/conflicts only. Otherwise, it is likely to be too negative or heavy.
- Combine the family meeting with things that "taste good", e.g., a special dessert, a family game or fun night, a trip to the ice cream store, individual affirmations, candle-light and/or other touches of beauty where the meeting is held.
- Rotate leadership, so that children get a chance to develop their leadership skills.
- Be sure that decisions are clear, tasks are assigned, consequences are identified when necessary, and that a "check-in" time has been identified (i.e., a time to evaluate how well a particular solution is working).
- Decide by consensus, not by voting. Otherwise, there may be losers. One helpful definition of consensus is a proposal that everyone is at least willing to try for one week, even if one or more persons have some doubts about it..
- Give everyone a chance to speak. Help less verbal members of the family get their points across.
- When possible, consider the children's agenda items early in the meeting, so that they feel the process is working for them.
- When first starting family meetings, concentrate the agenda on "low stake" items, i.e., items less likely to trigger defensiveness. And don't ask reluctant family members for a

10-year commitment to the process. See if everyone is willing to try it for a few times and then evaluate the experience and continue with any necessary modifications if the overall process seems to be helpful.

A final component of the Pledge of Nonviolence that is crucial to countering militarism or violence in our families and society is forgiveness. This may be the most difficult aspect of the Pledge because of the prevalence of retaliation or "pay back." Forgiveness seems soft and weak. But Gandhi's courageous life revealed the truth of his Hindu tradition which said that "If you want to see the brave, look at those who can forgive." His own words are so unfortunately true - "An eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind." But how hard it is at times to let go of those grudges that keep eating away inside us. What a special grace it is when someone takes the first step in reaching out to heal a broken or strained relationship. This may involve a willingness to forgive that person for some hurt, or a willingness to apologize for my own hurtful actions and then do something concrete to make amends for the hurt I have caused. If children see their parents apologizing and forgiving, they will learn how to do so themselves. And our whole society will benefit.

Conclusion

The struggle to live in less racist, less materialistic, less violent ways is difficult in a society where racism, materialism and militarism/violence abound. The steps offered here provide daily opportunities to live the alternative as well as to challenge these "giant triplets." It's a matter of careful nutrition - what we feed ourselves and our children. A key of wisdom that emerged from 9/11 speaks loudly and clearly:

"A Native American grandfather was talking to his grandson about how he felt. He said, 'I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is the vengeful, angry, violent one. The other wolf is the loving, compassionate one.' The grandson asked him, 'Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?' The grandfather answered, 'The one I feed.'"

Resources (partial at this point)

On Racism

For young children's books, some of the best authors of color include Eloise Greenfield, Patricia McKissack, Wade Hudson, Angela Johnson and Virginia Hamilton. The Children's Book Press (2211 Mission St., San Francisco, CA 94110) is wonderful, it includes a number of bi-lingual books. For youth, try Mildred Taylor, Laurence Yep, and Walter Dean Myers

PEOPLE OF EVERY STRIPE! (P.O. Box 12505, Portland, OR 97212; 800-282-0612; www.teleport.com/~people) has many multicultural dolls and dolls with disabilities. The Highsmith Multicultural Bookstore (W5527 State Road 106, P.O. Box 800, Ft. Atkinson, WI 53538-0800; www.hpress.highsmith.com; 800-558-2110) has an excellent catalog of multicultural books.

Kathleen McGinnis' *CELEBRATING RACIAL DIVERSITY* (IPJ, 1994, 136 pp, \$12), is filled with activities, worksheets, readings and other resources for educators, K-12, with special activities based on racial justice heroes and multicultural children's books.

Trisha Whitney, *KIDS LIKE US: USING PERSONA DOLLS IN THE CLASSROOM* (Redleaf Press, St. Paul, 1999), helps children to explore the diversity that exists in the world through story-telling and problem-solving.

On Materialism

On Militarism

For copies of the Family Pledge of Nonviolence, its adaptations for schools (from pre-schools through college campuses), workplaces, faith communities, prisons, translations in 13 other languages, and a wealth of resources for helping families, schools and faith communities live the Pledge, see the website of the Institute for Peace and Justice - www.ipj-ppj.org; or contact them at 4144 Lindell Blvd, #408, St. Louis, MO 63108; 314-533-4445; email: ppjn@aol.com.

SADAKO AND THE THOUSAND PAPER CRANES

