

TRANSADVOCATE

Where is the Transgender Martin Luther King Jr.?

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Abstract

By Autumn Sandeen All quotes in italics are the words of Martin Luther King Jr. “Cowardice asks the question - is it safe? Expediency asks the question - is it politic? Vanity asks the question - is it popular? But conscience asks the question - is it right? And there comes a time when one [...]

Article

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All quotes in italics are the words of Martin Luther King Jr.

“Cowardice asks the question - is it safe?

Expediency asks the question - is it politic?

Vanity asks the question - is it popular?

But conscience asks the question - is it right?

And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular; but one must take it because it is right.”

I yearn for an equivalent figure to Martin Luther King Jr. in the Transgender Civil Rights movement. I see transgender people failing in their push for social justice: we have no significant voice -- an idealistic, moral voice -- speaking about how wrong it is to discriminate against transgender people.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to issues. He spoke lyrically about the “chains of discrimination,” about refusing “to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation,” about coming to cash a check, “a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”

He stated in his I Have A Dream speech “This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism...Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God’s children.”

I don’t hear transgender leaders turn such apt word-pictures.

“The good neighbor looks beyond the external accidents and discerns those inner qualities that make all men human and, therefore, brothers.”

The Human Rights Campaign (HRC), in a June press release, stated support for congressional bill HR 3128. HR 3128 affirms that Federal employees are protected from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and to repudiate any assertion to the contrary. Protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, but not gender identity or expression. That the self-described largest civil rights organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people supports a bill that does not protect its transgender constituency is abominable.

I would have hoped that transgender activists would have been united in their disdain for the failure of HR 3128 to include protections for transgender people. Such was not the case. The National Center for Transgender Equality also released a press release in support of HR 3128. NCTE's press release, if conscience and principle were guiding their comments, should have taken a position that it's wrong that transgender protections weren't included in the framework of HR 3128.

Why aren't gay, lesbian, and transgender civil rights organization leadership voices consistently speaking about the humanity of transgender people, and treating us like family within the LGBT community?

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

It matters that transgender people often live in poverty, often engage in survival sex, are harassed by police, and die from hate violence. It matters that transgender people have no consistent, moral voice speaking about the community's need for social justice. Who has the national attention of the press to voice transgender concerns?

"Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

We don't have a leader in the transgender community that speaks with moral authority about why the community's social justice issues need to be addressed -- a national leader, recognized as a uncompromising idealist of reasonable equality goals. Why is it that those with national voices who speak for transgender people don't consistently demand equality at every turn?

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

How I yearn for an equivalent figure to Martin Luther King Jr. in the Transgender Civil Rights movement. How I yearn for a consistent, idealistic, moral voice -- speaking about how wrong it is to discriminate against transgender people. Where is that voice?

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