

A close-up portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. looking slightly to the left. He has a mustache and is wearing a dark suit jacket over a patterned tie. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green field.

I.B. TAURIS

# The Courage to Dream

ON RIGHTS, VALUES AND FREEDOM

VINCENT HARDING AND DAISAKU IKEDA

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Daisaku Ikeda and Vincent Harding, Tokyo, 1996

O, yes, / I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—  
America will be!  
An ever-living seed, / Its dream  
Lies deep in the heart of me.

*Langston Hughes,*  
*'Let America Be America Again', 1938*

# Preface

*Daisaku Ikeda*

'I Have a Dream' – a great dream for the future becomes a light of hope illuminating our lives. A dream for the triumph of justice becomes the driving force for progress, rallying the people. And a dream for the harmonious coexistence of all humankind becomes a bond of peace creating a new global society.

Professor Vincent Harding is a renowned historian and champion of human rights who stood alongside Dr Martin Luther King Jr, a key leader of the civil rights movement, in upholding a noble dream and devoting his life to its realization. I first met Professor Harding in Tokyo nearly twenty years ago, on 17 January 1994, Martin Luther King Jr Day. Throughout the years since Dr King was felled by an assassin's bullet, Professor Harding, as Dr King's spiritual comrade, has kept his legacy alive and continued his fight for equality and justice.

Professor Harding and I felt an immediate bond of empathy and understanding upon our initial meeting. I sensed in him the passion of a proud, steadfast champion of human rights and an unbending resolve to battle all forms of prejudice and inhumanity that threaten the dignity and worth of human life.

At that first meeting, Rosemarie Freeney Harding, Professor Harding's wife, stood by his side with a wise, lovely smile. Until her death in 2004, she was for many long decades his true, faithful comrade in the fight for justice, as well as a renowned peace and human rights activist in her own right.

Dr King gave his life to the struggle to eradicate racial discrimination, to establish equality in civil rights, to eliminate poverty and to resolutely oppose all forms of war and violence. At the same time, Dr King's thoughtful, impassioned gaze was focused on a more distant horizon for the future of human society: the establishment, as Professor Harding repeatedly refers to it in this dialogue, of the 'beloved community'. Dr King's ultimate goal, I believe, was to build beautiful, loving ties joining all the people of the world into a global family, transcending all differences, including race, religion, language and gender, while respecting our rich diversity.

In this dialogue, I speak of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, a figure who appears in the important Mahayana Buddhist scripture the Lotus Sutra. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging embodies in his practice the spirit of unqualified faith in the dignity and worth of all beings – an absolute commitment to respect and revere them, no matter what the cost, even at the risk of his life. I believe that the 'beloved community' of which Professor Harding speaks is also a 'respectful community' as represented by Bodhisattva Never Disparaging: a community shining with respect for the dignity and worth of life.

Though Dr King is frequently referred to as a leader of the civil rights movement, Professor Harding believes that the term 'civil rights movement' is an inadequate description of the cause to which he and Dr King dedicated themselves; he suggests instead that it should be seen as a broader 'expansion of democracy'. Many individuals have devoted their blood, sweat and tears to this movement to expand democracy. We must never forget these unidentified champions, nor the fact that this movement itself is

never-ending. It is an ongoing effort, to be passed from one generation to the next, from adults to youth, for all eternity.

This expansion of democracy is not just a matter of changing government policies or something that can be achieved by a select group of political leaders. It can only be accomplished when every individual in society, awakening to their own dignity and worth as well as that of others, stands up to join hands with their fellow citizens to build a better world based on true humanism.

1 January 2013 marked the 150th anniversary of President Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. 28 August of the same year is the fiftieth anniversary of Dr King's historic speech 'I Have a Dream' in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. The dream of which Dr King spoke with such passion and commitment is still alive today, and it continues to inspire those striving courageously, in the face of many obstacles and difficulties in this world of suffering, for peace and humanity.

As long as we still have this dream, hope remains eternal. No matter what tribulations arise, no matter what storms of adversity beset us, as long as there is hope, the great march forward of the people, the great river of justice, cannot be held back. We will flow magnificently onward with the stirring cry, 'We shall overcome!'

Dr King was shot and met the end of his precious life on 4 April 1968. I learned of this tragedy when I was in the midst of preparations for the first entrance ceremony of the Soka Junior and Senior High Schools,<sup>1</sup> which would take place in a few days; I was also laying the groundwork for the establishment of Soka University, which would occur three years later. I offered prayers of the deepest condolence.

In Dr King's book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, the Japanese edition of which was published immediately following his assassination, he asserted his unyielding conviction: 'One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant



goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.’<sup>2</sup>

The indispensable requirement for this kind of transformation is education – education that fosters a courageous spirit of non-violence within people’s hearts. The people’s movement for peace and humanity that the Soka Gakkai International is promoting is also an ongoing, never-ending struggle and its success or failure rests entirely on fostering youth to carry on the movement and its ideals. This is why I chose education as the crowning effort of my life and have devoted all my energies to it.

Today, forty-five years since Dr King’s death, how much of his dream has become a reality? If he were alive today, what would he say about our world and the United States, and what actions would he take? These questions have been present in my thoughts as I engaged in this dialogue with Professor Harding.

We who live in the twenty-first century have a mission and a duty to study the great spiritual struggles of our predecessors and open a new path forward. As a participant in this dialogue, I will be deeply gratified if this book ignites a bright torch of courage and hope in the hearts of all those people of our world today – especially our youth, in whose dreams our future rests – who dedicate themselves to pressing courageously onward, shoulder to shoulder, for the sake of justice and peace.

# Preface

*Vincent Harding*

Near the end of his thoughtful preface to this dialogue, President Ikeda makes a statement that is characteristic of the man and his vision, a statement that caught my attention and reminded me why I constantly found such pleasure in our long-distance conversation: 'We who live in the twenty-first century have a mission and a duty to study the great spiritual struggles of our predecessors and open a new path forward.' This urgent encouragement has been on my mind a number of times since our dialogue ended. (Will it really end, or will it continue in many manifestations for the rest of our lives?)

One important opportunity to respond to my brother Ikeda's challenge opened up even before we closed off this stage of our conversation. Not long ago, a group of men and women deeply involved in the twentieth-century human rights struggles of our country decided to bring ourselves together as a National Council of Elders.<sup>1</sup> One of our major reasons for coming together was to make available to a younger generation whatever we could share of our long experience in working for a 'more perfect Union'.<sup>2</sup>

Just as we were organizing the Elders, we learned that a new generation of young people was coming together, calling itself the

‘Occupy movement’ and focusing especially on the great and growing income inequities in America and the unjust political domination accompanying this. What we Elders discovered was that the young Occupy organizers were eager to talk with us, to share experiences, to learn and to teach.

In a sense, we have engaged in serious dialogue with our children, and we Elders are glad to see that members of the Occupy generation have now volunteered their time and resources to assist fellow citizens who suffered great personal and property losses in our recent storm on the East Coast.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the most prominent of our children was not in the Occupy movement but in the White House. Remembering some of the dialogue President Ikeda and I shared about the possibilities that Mr Barack Obama represented for America and for the world – and feeling a real sense of connection to this young man in my role as an Elder and as a carrier of the African-American portion of his story – I have paid close attention to him.

In the course of his first term, I reminded myself and others that it is essential for us to believe that ‘We the People’ have great responsibilities in a democracy. And occasionally, I wrote to my nephew/brother/son in the White House. Recently, I wrote to encourage him in a difficult time, the time after his re-election, a period of great financial and political difficulty. As I often do, I reminded my adopted son of the powerful words he had spoken some time before: ‘We did not come to fear the future. We came here to shape it.’<sup>4</sup> When he is at his best, I believe that my nephew/son really believes these words and wants to live them out with us. So, I wrote to him:

Do not be afraid, my son. Do not be afraid to speak the names of the poor, to shape a new future with them, and with all this diverse, beautiful, and motley crew that is coming to make up our nation again. I think that’s what our most progressive eighteenth-century ‘founder’ Tom

Paine meant when he said, 'We have the power to begin the world over again.' I'm sure that's what our beautiful brother Martin Luther King Jr meant when he kept calling at the end, 'America, you must be born again.'

I don't know whether my brother/son/nephew Obama has seen any of my letters. But I do believe that this is the direction my brother Ikeda was pointing to when he urged me and all of us to 'open a new path forward'.

Let's go.

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## CONVERSATION ONE

### A More Perfect Union

IKEDA: I am honoured to participate in this dialogue<sup>1</sup> with such a great champion of human rights, compassionate educator and pre-eminent American scholar of social history. I look forward to exploring with you the focal issues of the twenty-first century – the issues of human rights, peace and education.

You were a trusted friend, colleague and ally of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, both of you taking part in the civil rights movement. In our dialogue, I hope that you will share your anecdotes and memories of Dr King as you discuss at length, for the sake of young people, the philosophy of faith and action that was forged and tempered in your struggles for human rights. I also want to contemplate and explore together what we must do – what path humanity must take – to create a peaceful global society.

HARDING: This dialogue gives me the chance to reminisce about Dr King's life as well as engage in some autobiographical reflection. Words cannot express my appreciation for this opportunity. My daughter and friends all strongly encouraged me to participate in this dialogue.

IKEDA: Let's have a free, wide-ranging discussion. Dr King once said, 'An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concern to the broader concerns of all humanity.'<sup>2</sup> What makes a human being extraordinary? It is not merely social standing or fame. Those who fight for human rights and strive for the happiness of the downtrodden, even to the point of sacrificing themselves – these are the exceptional people.

This is why I respect the courageous citizens and many champions of humanity, including you and Dr King, who have fought long and hard for human rights and freedoms, risking their lives.

The struggle against the social evils of inequality, discrimination, poverty and violence is never-ending. Dr King sacrificed his life in this cause. His powerful example continues to inspire much courage and hope in those dedicated to justice and the cause of humanity.

I hope the youth – the next generation's leaders – will be inspired by the faith, wisdom and action of these immortal heroes and learn the lessons of this history. And I hope that these lessons will be engraved upon their young hearts. In this context, I believe our dialogue will be profoundly significant.

HARDING: Thank you, my brother. I have been looking forward to this because I feel that this discussion with you will be a wonderful opportunity to stimulate my own thinking and re-examine issues on a much deeper level.

Human existence includes the experiences of life and death. When I consider the life and death of individual human beings, I also am compelled to think of the life and death of societies. Today, more than forty years since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, I have a powerful premonition that we are at the beginning of a major transformation in American society.



IKEDA: Yes, and a symbol of this major transformation in American society is the appearance of President Barack Obama. In February 2008, when Mr Obama was considered the most likely presidential nominee of the Democratic Party, you stated in an interview with a Japanese newspaper, *The Mainichi Shimbun*:

To his supporters, Mr Obama is the creator of a new America . . . I am sure that [Dr King] would have been very happy about Obama's surge in popularity. I think that he would have seen Obama's breakthrough as the magnificent next step on the journey toward the society about which he could only dream.<sup>3</sup>

Then, in January 2009, President Obama was sworn into office and thus took on the considerable hopes and aspirations of the American people. How do you view this tidal wave of change that is spreading across America?

HARDING: When I ponder the origins of what is currently happening in America – the Obama phenomenon – I am compelled to trace its beginnings to Martin Luther King and to the hundreds of thousands of magnificently ordinary women and men who were his co-workers. They led the post-World War II movement to expand democracy in America, known as the civil rights movement.

Mr Obama appeared on the scene long after the height of the civil rights movement, representing a new opportunity for young people to participate more in the ongoing struggle for the expansion of democracy, following in the steps of King and his comrades. This is the scenario in America today.

I'm happy that Mr Obama has focused on the goal of 'continu[ing] on the path of a more perfect Union'.<sup>4</sup> With these words, Obama has breathed the spirit embodied in the Preamble