

# Martin Luther King Remembered

## *A Call for Consciously Maladjusted Leaders*

By Dan Holden

On the third Monday of each new year we celebrate with a federal holiday Martin Luther King's birthday. In light of the racial tension and demonstrations in the US and around the world, it seems fitting to give a nod to his work and its relevance to us today. This letter is written for leaders who aspire to conscious leadership development and for the coaches and consultants who work with them. MLK attempted to augment the narrative in our country, to have the story of our nation include, but not be limited to, the experience of Black and Brown people in the US. In a 1963 speech<sup>1</sup> he encouraged Americans of all colors to become *maladjusted*, arguing that there are things that we should never allow ourselves to adjust to. What follows are helpful hints for my (mostly) White colleagues in the leadership and coaching worlds, suggestions that will accelerate our conscious maladjustment and help us show up in ways that may help the nation heal.

Our *inner narrative* is the essential story we tell ourselves about our lives, our value and worth. What do we believe we have to do in order to be safe, worthwhile and "ok" as people? It is this narrative that we actually react to, not the external circumstances that command so much of our attention. We are familiar with the reactive narrative, with its 'less than' fear that unless we perform well, know more than others and/or are liked and respected by the multitudes, we are worth nothing. Creative narratives are more expansive. Less ego attachment to outcomes leaves us more free to create outcomes we want. *I am not my work; neither my results nor my relationships define me, I am worthy as I am.* There are later stages of conscious leadership where maladjustment is not an option — it's a requirement.

The Integral level of conscious leadership<sup>14</sup> requires that we integrate the never owned, least desirable aspects of ourselves — our shadow. *Race is always an element in our disowned identity.* We learn about race, our own and others' — from family, friends, school, religious systems, movies/television, books, magazines, advertisements, etc. In America the racial divide has been present since before we were a nation.<sup>2</sup> Racial learning is part of the water we swim in and the air we breathe. Other nations have their own, often similar, histories with indigenous people and how the dominant, White group treated them. Let's get started. Parts of this will be hard to read; after all, I write to the disowned racial shadow in us. Integral work involves simply considering these observations as a possibility, something to be curious about. Your curiosity will be maladjustment enough.

### Group/Collective Identity — I Am Many

Virtually all adults are familiar with our individual identity. It's the part we reference when asked, *Who are you?* White people are frequently less cognizant of the many group or collective identities we simultaneously hold: I am a military veteran, an author, a father, husband, brother, a coach. Not all group identities are seen as equal; some are felt to be better or worse than others. I seldom see myself as a White person unless I'm with many dark skinned people. Then my racial

identity stands out to me. When we meet a new African American person, we tend to see his/her group membership first, long before we see the individual as a distinct person. Whatever qualities we associate with the group, we assign to the individual. This process is largely unconscious for many. If we are interested in becoming consciously ( and racially ) maladjusted, it is essential that we gain awareness and competency in navigating group level identity.

We do not need to feel responsible for *all the horrible things White people* have done to Black, Brown and other dark skinned people<sup>3</sup>. It stops real learning from taking place; the way forward is easier. I was not there when the slave ships arrived. I did not massacre Native people and take their lands. The groups I belong to did; I share some but certainly not all of their qualities. The requirement here is to acknowledge the good and bad experiences and qualities of our groups without taking each and every quality as an indictment about you, personally. *No substantive dialogue on race can happen at the individual level.*<sup>4</sup> The impersonal nature of group level awareness makes it easier to stay in the conversation, rather than fleeing, avoiding or fighting. Group identity can be subtle and insidious. Attempting systemic change without an appreciation of this dynamic is virtually impossible.

White people, for example, do not fear being killed by police when we are pulled over for a traffic violation. People of Color often do. Talking and listening from a group or collective level makes it easier to see, hear and respect the *present day* experiences of others. As we share our own experiences, we begin to see where we are similar ( we value peace and financial well being for our families, freedom and a chance to make a difference with our lives and work) and where our experiences are often different. When White people wear our Covid masks, we likely don't consider that we may look like thugs to the bank security guard. African American men consider this as a possibility. I have never had to sit with my family before a long road trip and discuss what we will do *when* we are pulled over by the police. *Virtually every African American parent I personally have known considers 'The Talk' essential to their life and safety.*

√ A task for the *maladjusted*:

Get more curious about and comfortable with your group memberships. Notice that some are easy to speak about (I'm a biker; leather jacket, boots, etc.) while others are painful and more difficult to acknowledge (I am the father of a recovering addict). Some seem neutral to positive (I'm certified in Equine Facilitated Coaching) while others often bring a negative experience (I am assumed to be stupid when shopping for women's clothes for my spouse; I'm usually shown the chair where men are supposed to sit). How would my life be different if 100 times a day every day I was assumed to be stupid by important others? <sup>6</sup>

Some groups are assigned rank, power and privilege (Senior leaders in organizations) while others have little of these (first line employees). Notice also that you may not get to choose which groups you belong to; they are ascribed. Socially aware police officers, outraged by the behavior of some of their peers, are nevertheless seen first as 'one of them', no matter how wrong or unjust this assignation is. Racism is systemic bias (laws, policies, formal and informal rules of conduct, collective assumptions and beliefs, strategies of exclusion, etc.) in which dark skinned people are negatively impacted.<sup>4</sup>

## It Is Not Race but Racial Hierarchy

Our white slave trader ancestors assumed they were transporting sub humans for economic gain. Blacks knew that it was doctors, lawyers, teachers, architects, farmers, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters who were stolen. From the beginning Whites did not see Blacks as equal. Article 1 of our 1776 Declaration of Independence states very clearly that citizenship was to be afforded to white, Christian, male property owners only.<sup>7</sup> In 1857, the Dred Scott ruling reaffirmed that Negroes could not become American citizens.<sup>5</sup> Even Lincoln struggled to see Blacks as social equals. Subsequent amendments and articles would change this and yet there is still deeply embedded in White consciousness the internalized assumption that we are better, smarter than, more deserving than Black and Brown people. Or should be.

For many years I worked with mixed race faculty teams facilitating workshops on race and gender dynamics in corporate America. At some point I realized there was something deep, ugly and detestable that had been triggered in me. I felt *less than* my colleagues of color, and this was clearly not acceptable to my White hierarchal identity. The cumulative toll of parental glances and thinly veiled comments, movies and television shows depicting dark skinned people in *less than* roles, and all of the mostly white corporate leadership teams I worked with, had impacted me. The racial hierarchy had seeped into my consciousness; I had internalized it. My inner narrative had to expand to hold this 'news'.

I suspect it is this same ugly secret inside of my White colleagues that is the real drive behind White resistance.

A task for the *maladjusted*:

Begin to notice the racial makeup of groups you work with in person or on Zoom/ Teams calls. Just notice, that's all. Notice any difference in how racially homogeneous groups feel to you as opposed to more mixed-race groups. Just notice. Observe yourself when speaking with new service representatives, colleagues, business clients and online customer service people. Is there any difference in the assumptions you make when these people are assumed to be White as opposed to People of Color? Are you as patient and understanding with one group as you are with the other? I am not, sad to say.

When you meet a Person of Color in an unusual role — airline pilot, physics professor, bank president — what is your reaction? In meetings, who (by race) tends to be heard? Who gets talked over or interrupted? Training yourself to simply notice is a powerful way to bring race onto your radar screen. People of Color have to do this every day. Find ways to share what you notice.

## Black prosperity and wealth virtually always evokes white resistance and violence.

It follows from the above, that if I need to see you, dark skinned person, as less than me in order for me to be ok and worthwhile, then any action that leaves you equal to me will feel threatening to me. Following the civil war, Blacks enjoyed one of the greatest eras in their history (1865-1872). Frederick Douglas, a Black activist, help found the Freedman's Bureau to assist newly freed slaves re-build their social and economic lives after the war.<sup>8</sup> Many towns were created by and for the benefit of Black people. The Amnesty Act of 1872, however, allowed

southern whites back into the country as voting citizens. The Freedman's Bureau and bank almost immediately lost their funding and collapsed. Many Black and White historians view the period that followed, 1872-1968, as the White Supremists period. I wasn't taught this in school.

Wilmington, NC was one of the most integrated cities in America in the late 1800s. Black wealth and involvement in government alongside whites made it a model for the rest of the young nation. In 1898 white terrorists overthrew the democratically elected government there, killing many black leaders as well as their white supporters. It took the town 100 years to publicly acknowledge this part of its history.<sup>10</sup> The 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v Topeka Board of Education* ruling (I learned when I was in High School) ended discrimination in education. I never heard about the 1958 Supreme Court *Pupil Placement* ruling that allowed local leaders to place students where they wanted them. This ruling effectively negated the *Brown* decision and made education discrimination the de facto law in America<sup>11</sup>. Integral level leadership development exposes us to aspects of ourselves from which we would rather turn away.

There is a clear pattern of white resistance to any attempt to see People of Color as equal to Whites and worthy of just and equitable treatment. Consider that the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s was triggered by demands for an end to discrimination in Housing, Education and Banking. Laws to end racial bias in these wealth-generating areas were already in place but consistently ignored by state and national leaders. The same is often true today.

The racial tensions across America and the world this past year have a strong element of White resistance in them. Even peaceful demonstrations of the Black Lives Matter movement often resulted in disproportionate White and governmental reaction. This is quite different from the lack of security during the largely White January 6 uprising in Washington. In the affluent suburbs west of Milwaukee this Summer, another young Black man was killed by police. Peaceful protests were met with National Guard soldiers, while anonymous lawn signs were planted after dark in thousands of yards saying, *Keep our town White*. Public school educators who attempted to teach their students about the conditions giving rise to these protests received death threats and petitions to the school boards to discontinue this teaching. The identical dynamic is occurring in an affluent Southlake, Texas community<sup>15</sup>. Apparently, even talking about fair and equal treatment threatens something deep and fearful in Whites. Our collective resistance keeps us, as White people, from seeing and owning this aspect of our group level consciousness<sup>12</sup>. Conscious leaders must allow for this disturbing awareness if we are to grow.

√ Task for the *maladjusted*:

What does it feel like to have read this passage? To what extent have you been able to wear your *Group Level* hat and consider the information in a more impersonal way?

In one local newscast a parent was interviewed who had petitioned the school to stop teachers from teaching about the conditions leading to racial protests. His argument: 'Teaching will result in kids hating the police.' If you heard this concern, how would you respond? What would you ask or say?

What experiences of your own might serve as a small bridge to help you begin to feel the weight of abuse and injustice cited above? Mine was an abusive boss who

struck fear into all of us and was seen as a direct threat to our career and livelihood. There was nowhere to turn for relief. I left after three years. What if there were no place to leave to? What are your bridging experiences?

### The myth of the level playing field & meritocracy

There is no question that individual People of Color have risen to the highest levels of excellence in academic, corporate, health care, artistic and the performing arts fields. In just a few areas — the NBA and NFL — Blacks are the majority and have collectively reached significant levels of representation and achievement (except in management and ownership positions). Many of my white colleagues are quick to point these things out in their argument that we all have the same opportunities. The proverbial cream rises to the top. That's how a meritocracy works — perform well and get rewarded well. Affirmative Action, the argument goes, should not be needed. Yet, if you ask Black and Brown people if the playing field is level, they are likely to roll their eyes and walk away<sup>13</sup>.

The harsh reality is that great individual performance and group level *Glass ceiling/Rock ceiling* co-exist. They are both true. Whites often believe that when People of Color (and White women, too) are promoted it is because of an affirmative action quota. It can't possibly be because they are smarter, more experienced and just better than their White colleague. This is a convenient perspective but a demeaning one! I do not know any Black or Brown person who wants a promotion they haven't earned. No one wants to be seen as a 'diversity hire.' They just want an opportunity to achieve and to reach their full potential. Perhaps now we can begin to see why this desire to be seen and treated equally and fairly is such a threat to many White people. Our own made up identity seems on the line.

√ Task for the *maladjusted*:

I used to believe I was super smart and exceptional in my work, and this alone explained why I advanced, got opportunities and did well. I slowly realized I had an advantage: I looked and sounded much like those (White) people who hired me. I had rank and privilege I had not earned because of my group identity<sup>6</sup>. The White version of affirmative action. My initial experience of this realization was one of loss. Consider the ways in which the myth of the level playing field shown up in you? How does this or might this betaken into account in your coaching and consulting work? Know that there have been many doors opened for you because of the color of your skin. Pay this forward to your darker skinned colleagues and clients. When you do this, you grow stronger, not weaker.

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Final suggestions for note my *maladjusted leaders* and colleagues

1. To be *maladjusted* means being willing to consider that race is always a dynamic when working with people of different skin colors. No matter where on the planet you go, darker skin is seen as 'less than' lighter skin. (There actually is no race gene; race is a social construct. We make up all of our assumptions about race.) Skin color may not be the only dynamic in play or the most important. It is, nevertheless, *always a dynamic in play*. Coaching a

white, introverted male leader to ‘speak up more, show up in a more empowered, candid way’ may make sense. Giving this same suggestion to a Black leader may result in resistance of some kind (including violence) from White peers and superiors. Know the larger context in which your client/colleague lives.

2. In your own personal and professional development, practice replacing judgement with curiosity. Marvel at how pervasive the early conditioning has been and begin to wonder what it would be like to simply keep these matters on your radar. This alone would distinguish you from many others. Remember: our ultimate privilege as White people is remaining ignorant or in denial of these issues happening around us today. When you open your mouth and speak, others will know you’ve chosen a different path.
3. Imagine the freedom you’d have by integrating these shadowy elements of your makeup into your conscious leadership and coaching practice. When speaking to People of Color about race (highly encouraged) practice going first by making observations about what you have noticed in yourself and others. *‘I noticed you attempted to raise that issue twice and were interrupted each time by the tall, White guy in the blue suit. Does that kind of thing happen a lot to you?’* Or, *‘I’m a White guy, I know I must carry racial biases; what did you see me do that leads you to say I’m prejudiced?’*
4. When speaking with White colleagues (highly encouraged) practice asking risky questions instead of joining on racial conversations. When someone complains about a ‘diversity hire’, ask: *‘Do you know with certainty that is true? What other possibilities could explain this?’* Or, *‘I see it differently. I know the one selected; she is smart, experienced and has a strong track record of success.’*
5. Most importantly, knowing the full context of an issue — the good, bad and ugly parts — does not negate or threaten the good and positive parts. Despite prevailing views to the contrary, learning to include conversations about race into our individual and collective lives does not mean the positive and extraordinary aspects of our histories are trash. *Consciously maladjusted leaders learn to seek an augmented view of our history, not an alternate one. We want to make even greater what is already an amazing history. This is true as we work with ourselves, our clients and the world we share.*

Let this be enough.

Dan Holden  
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  7. The Naturalization Act of 1790 limited US citizenship to whites only (Schultz, Jeffrey D., 2002. Encyclopedia of Minorities in American Politics: African Americans and Asian Americans. p. 284. )
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  15. NBC News, Jan. 22, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/viral-video-forced-wealthy-texas-suburb-confront-racism-silent-majority-n1255230>