

An Open Invitation to Join MLK Read

**By Richard W. Franke
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This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at www.sustainabletompkins.org.

As Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2011 approaches, a unique and timely movement is unfolding across Ithaca and Tompkins County. Ten thousand free copies are being distributed of Martin Luther King's last book, "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?" Thousands of students are reading the book in their classes. Hundreds of residents have been forming study circles in their churches and synagogues, at AFCU, the public library, the Tompkins County Workers' Center, the Multicultural Resource Center and elsewhere to read and discuss this timely, but until recently out-of-print, masterpiece.

Why should the sustainability movement in and around Ithaca be involved? Wasn't King essentially a civil rights activist in a very different time in American history?

Wasn't King assassinated in 1968, two years before the first Earth Day and well before the advent of the environmental movement?

Join a study circle, read the book and you will see how relevant it is to sustainability and to our world of 2011. In chapter one King surveys the great achievements of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He notes how the movement that achieved those

historic acts began to fray as it moved from the desegregation of public facilities to the greater challenge of equality in jobs, housing, education and health care.

Sound familiar? Chapter two summarizes the causes and consequences of the Black Power movement while chapter three analyzes the white backlash—a phenomenon we see again in our time. Chapter three includes a penetrating overview of the meaning and significance of racism as a philosophy. In chapter four King tackles the psychological and emotional impacts of centuries of slavery and racism and shows how Latinos, Native Americans, poor whites and others could all benefit from creating a multiracial, multiethnic expansion of the nonviolent civil rights movement. Chapter five goes into detail on how such a movement can access the "levers of power" to end poverty; one of the main causes and consequences of racism in King's view. Such a movement could overcome cynicism and passivity, and build lasting alliances that could take on new issues as they emerge. In chapter six King places the U.S. freedom movement in the context of the worldwide struggles for liberation and self-determination.

Within these six chapters we hear King's insistent voice of justice, equality, dignity and humanity. He shows how many social problems are amenable to "life-transforming change" and how these problems are interconnected.

It is a fundamental principle of the sustainability movement that social justice is an essential

component of any eventual sustainable world. Extreme poverty compels desperate people to destroy their environment in the long run in order to survive in the short run. Poor people cut down forests, plant on vulnerable hillsides and undertake other resource-depleting actions to feed their children.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, the very rich make luxuries out of endangered species and invest vast sums in the stock market in resource-destroying activities to garner quick returns. Greater social equality would lead to better resource allocation and use. In other words: greater sustainability.

Was King a hopeless utopian? A Harvard Business School professor recently showed a random sample of Americans—without the country labels—a chart of the highly unequal U.S. income distribution and a chart of the far more equal distribution in Sweden. Across all ages, genders, races, political parties and income groups, 92 percent of Americans chose the Swedish model. The chaos of extreme inequality was rejected for the more egalitarian potential for community. King's dream lives on in 2011 in peoples' minds.

Want to read this book? Want a free copy? Join a study circle? The information you need is available at mlkcommunitybuild.org. Let's read and talk together. Let's overcome chaos and build community.

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