

From the PES Anti-Racism Task Force:
BEYOND VIETNAM

Kate Esposito shares some excerpts from “Beyond Vietnam,” Martin Luther King’s first public antiwar speech, given at the Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination. This month marks the sermon’s 50th anniversary.

An audio recording and transcript of the complete sermon can be found at:

http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documententry/doc_beyond_vietnam/

“... 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.

“A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring...

“A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: “This is not just.”

“The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just.

“A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: “This way of settling differences is not just.” This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation’s homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into veins of people normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love.

“A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death...

“This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for all-embracing and unconditional love for all... This oft misunderstood and misinterpreted concept—so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak, cowardly force—has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man.

“When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.

“This Hindu-Moslem [sic] -Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: “Let us love one another; for love is God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

“Let us hope that this spirit will become the order of the day.

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.

“Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: “Too late.” There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect. We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation.

“We must move past indecision to action. If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

“Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world. The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.”