

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Making the Connections

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In these last, lingering days of the year, I am inevitably drawn to reflection and anticipation. Taking stock of where we have been and where we seem to be headed as a nation and as part of a global community. In 2009, we faced the challenges of rising unemployment and economic recovery, the pressing need for health care reform, the urgency of developing a sustainable energy plan and addressing the crisis of climate change, the struggle for a just peace in Iraq, Afghanistan and regions around the world, to name but a few challenges. The public debate and dialogue around these issues in 2009 has at times reached inflammatory and rancorous levels. Differences in perspective on the issues of the day have deteriorated into personal attacks and oversimplified sound bites. Town hall meetings and public gatherings have become shouting matches, and there is a deeply troubling layer of fear and mean-spiritedness underlying many of the exchanges we hear on radio and TV talk shows or read in print publications.

In reflecting on the tenor of public debate in 2009, I recall an observation on public life offered by scholar and activist Cornel West in the early 1990s. Sadly, it seems to still ring true as we move into the year 2010: "You can't have a public debate when you have the public life itself gutted. You see, we've lived in a period in which the private has been cast as sacred, and public life in general has been evacuated. You think of public education, you think of public transportation, you think of public health care.... So we get a withdrawal and retreat from public life. We're losing the art of public conversation. Most public conversation nowadays takes the form of name-calling and finger pointing... There ought to be a public-mindedness that allows us to acknowledge our interdependence on each other."

If nothing else, the global economic, environmental, and political challenges before us should make clear that we are, as Martin Luther King, Jr. declared, "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality" - what happens in one part of the world ripples across the world. At the very time when fear and

despair might lead many to draw lines, "circle the wagons," put up walls and fences and boundaries of every kind, it is now when we most need to engage with each other in common struggle. I am reminded of a remark I heard during a panel discussion on women in government leadership: "We must strive for the highest level of cooperation, not the lowest common denominator." We no longer have the luxury of settling for the lowest common denominator, as safe and comfortable as it may be. The pain is everywhere, we are truly in this together, and only the highest level of cooperation will be sufficient to see us through the challenges of the New Year and the year to come.

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