

Remembering Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr: Rev. Dr. Unzu Lee

"Why We Can't Wait," in Korean were the words inscribed on the spine of one of the books found on the top shelf of a book case in my house. We had just immigrated to this country, and the book probably was my father's. Although I knew that these words belonged to the Rev. Dr. King, Jr., I was too busy surviving day to day, and I never took the book out to read. And yet, in my mind's eye, I still see those letters as vividly as I did then. I suspect it is because my years of encounter with the reality of racism in this country have made these words become real to me.

I know the realism of these words because forty some years since Dr. King said "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," we are still judged by the color of our skin. Fifty years after Ralph Ellison started his famous novel with a line "I am an invisible man," the individuality of people of color remains invisible to a dominant society that judges us only by our color.

For Asian Americans who are often praised by the dominant society as the "model minority," this is a hard lesson to swallow. For those of us who immigrated after the civil rights era and have not been collectively subjected to overt forms of racism such as slavery or internment, it is even harder to realize the truthfulness of King's words. We want to believe in the security of our success. We want to keep on believing in the creed that "all [men] are created equal." After all, we have come here seeking a better life. Vulnerability is the last thing we want.

Vulnerability, however, is our reality as Asian Americans. Take the case of Dr. Wen Ho Lee, a Taiwanese American scientist who was released in September 2000 with an apology from presiding US District Judge James A. Parker after spending 278 days in solitary confinement accused of passing classified information to China. His guilt? His Asianness. Take the case of James Yee, a U.S. born Chinese American who graduated from West Point and was sent to Guantanamo Bay as a Muslim chaplain. Although the charges against him were later dropped completely, he spent 76 days in solitary confinement for the suspicion of passing secrets to al-Qaeda. His guilt? His Chinese ancestry and Muslim faith that he adopted as an adult. These cases among many others challenge especially "those who think they have it made" and should "generate uncertainty and vulnerability in the Asian-American community."¹

Dr. King's words ring with a more heightened sense of urgency in today's U.S. context that struggles with the fear of terrorism. As an Asian American of faith, I refuse to let fear separate us. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and I too cannot wait any longer.

The Rev. Dr. Unzu Lee is a Presbyterian Women Program Associate, working primarily with leadership development. She can be reached at ulee@ctr.pcusa.org.

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¹ <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2001/lee-0502.html>