Martin Luther King Jr.: Prophet of Nonviolence

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This article is the ninth in a year-long series about economics and holidays.

On the third Monday in January we honor the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with a federal and state holiday. We have many ways of honoring his memory. We can look at progress in racial equality and how far we have yet to go. Many communities organize volunteer service days in his memory, because he worked to build strong multi-racial communities. Perhaps Dr. King is most famous, however, as an advocate and practitioner of nonviolence as a philosophy and a way of life. It is his commitment to nonviolence that I choose to honor in today's essay.

American society has a tendency to violence. We have a higher rate of gun ownership and murder than most developed nations. We like violent sports and violent movies. But there are also many Americans who practice nonviolence as a way of life.

Nonviolence is more than the absence of violence. It's not passive. It's a way of life, a conscious refusal to rise to the bait, an attitude toward the other person, the other party, the other country. It's hard work. It's going the second mile, not seeking revenge, not an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. Nonviolence begins in attitude. Gandhi, the most successful proponent of change through nonviolent resistance, says that "It takes a fairly strenuous course of training to attain a mental state of nonviolence…Nonviolence is a weapon of the strong." Nonviolence calls for an attitude of collaboration, of partnership, of acknowledgement of our shared humanity, shared interests, shared desires, rather than competition, right/wrong, win/lose, conquest/defeat. Those dichotomies have a place in the world, to spur us to be and do our best, but they can also be a source of great harm when they take over segments of our life that should be grounded in mutuality and right relationship.

American society places a high value on competition. Competition spurs us to do our best, to succeed, to win, and in the process, to produce benefits from others. We compete in school for grades and prizes. We compete for entrance into good colleges and for the best-paying jobs when we graduate. We compete on reality shows and game shows to win big money, to be the next Iron Chef or the biggest loser. We compete vicariously through our favorite sports teams or political candidates. We compete as a nation to be the richest, the most successful, the envy of all other nations.

The market economy relies on competition as a way to harness our aggressive and individualistic inclinations to the service of the greater good. Our individual pursuit of success and profit under the discipline of competition benefits the economy as a whole. Unlike warfare or other kinds of aggressive behavior, market competition is generally not violent, at least not physically violent.

For economists, the opposite of competition is not collaboration or cooperation but monopoly. Being a monopolist means no longer having to compete, because you have wiped out the competition. So you don't have to pay any attention to what consumers want, because if they want cable service or electricity or water (three typical monopolies) they have to come to you and pay your price. There are lots of local monopolies as well—the only grocery store in a small town, for example, which charges higher prices because it's so far to the next supplier.

Most economists think that monopolies are short-lived. People will search out substitutes. Eager entrepreneurs will find a way in, a way to break off some segment of the monopolist's market with a different but related produce. Competition will find a way. Federal Express and United Parcel Service succeeded by challenging parts of the U.S. Postal Service monopoly. The American auto industry, long dominated by the big three, found that foreign producers could invade that cozy club with cheaper, better, smaller cars. We are still seeing the consequences of competition in that area of the economy for the former monopolists.

But economists have paid surprisingly little attention to the other alternative to competition. Mainstream economic theory suggests that cooperative production of goods and services will break down because of the tendency to free-ride. Free riders are those who enjoy the benefits of shared goods and services for all regardless of ability to pay without providing their fair share of the effort and funds it takes to produce those goods. Whether it's a food co-op, or a sailing club, or a church, or some other voluntary cooperative organization, there will always be shirkers who want to enjoy the benefits without paying their fair share.

Some of those shared goods and services benefit payers and nonpayers alike, like fireworks displays, or public beaches, or national defense. That's one reason why so many of those goods are provided by governments. Others are just too expensive for low income households to provide for themselves, so they depend on our contributions of time and effort. These goods include affordable housing, transportation, and basic health care. But there's a surprising amount of private effort in making such services available too. Despite the predictions of economists, people do care not only about their own well being but also about the well-being of others, even strangers. And they will cooperate in making sure that those needs are met. They also organize themselves into smaller groups like neighborhood associations and clubs of various kinds that monitor the contribution of members to ensure that everyone makes a fair contribution of time and/or money to the common purpose.

Another aspect of collaboration that takes some economists by surprise is that people do not always act only in their narrow self-interest. The same profit maximizing greedy capitalist at work may give blood or pound nails for Habitat for Humanity. Human beings are more complex than simple individualistic self-interested competitors. They values community in many forms—neighborhoods, voluntary associations, cities, extended families, churches. And they are willing to do their fair share to make those things happen.

Several studies of economic behavior have borne out the complexities of our interaction with others that involve both competition and collaboration. Economics shares with mathematics and psychology an interest in game theory as a way to understand how people interact with each other. One of the findings from game theory experiments is that that people who have regular and repeated interactions with the same others—in real life, neighbors, merchants, service providers—pursue a strategy called Tit for Tat. If you cooperate with me the first time, or treat me fairly, I will do the same to you the next time. If you take advantage of me the first time, I will take advantage of you the next time. The most successful players of these games, which mimic real life, do unto others as they have been done unto in the previous encounter. Eventually a pattern sets in of refusing to play again with those who act purely selfishly, while surviving players collaborate for the best shared outcome. In real life, collaboration means doing your fair share of the work or contribution your fair share of the money even if no one is checking up on you. Selfish behavior may succeed in the short run, but not necessarily in the long run.

How do we as a society balance the benefits and costs of competition by encouraging more cooperative ways of relating to each other? We return to Dr. King, who was not an economist, but a theologian. Theologians help us to shape our understanding of the world and our place in it, call us to our better selves, and in the process, shave off some of the rough edges of a competitive world. Within the framework of those values, habits, and self-understandings, economics can be used to harness competition and encourage cooperation to give us the best of both worlds—the productive economy and the supportive community.