

A Poem for MLK Day: "I Care and I Am Willing to Serve"

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When I first started teaching, I came across a book called Teaching with Fire, which contained poems submitted by teachers that helped them sustain the fire to teach. While I gave both copies that I had away, one poem from the book remains in my memory even though I haven't read the book in years. Marian Wright Edelman's "I Care and I Am Willing to Serve" not only encapsulates the mindset of many teachers (and many people who dedicate their lives to serving others), but it also fits the mood for today, which president-elect Obama has used to call people to serve others.

Edelman's poem, which she used in [a fantastic commencement speech at Tulane University](#) in 2001, helps all of us confront our shortcomings. However, it does not let us off the hook. Even though we may not have Martin Luther King, Jr.'s eloquence and have a myriad of insecurities and limitations, Edelman, the founder of the [Children's Defense Fund](#), encourages us to go out and make a difference in any way we can.

"I Care and I Am Willing to Serve"
by Marian Wright Edelman

Lord I cannot preach like Martin Luther King, Jr.
or turn a poetic phrase like Maya Angelou

but I care and am willing to serve.

I do not have Fred Shuttlesworth's and Harriet
Tubman's courage or Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's political skills
but I care and am willing to serve.

I cannot sing like Fannie Lou Hamer
or organize like Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin
but I care and am willing to serve.

I am not holy like Archbishop Tutu,
forgiving like Mandela, or disciplined like Gandhi
but I care and am willing to serve.

I am not brilliant like Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois or
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or as eloquent as
Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington
but I care and am willing to serve.

I have not Mother Teresa's saintliness,
Dorothy Day's love or Cesar Chavez's
gentle tough spirit
but I care and am willing to serve.

God it is not as easy as it used to be
to frame an issue and forge a solution
but I care and am willing to serve.

My mind and body are not so swift as in youth
and my energy comes in spurts
but I care and am willing to serve.

I'm so young
nobody will listen
I'm not sure what to say or do
but I care and am willing to serve.

I can't see or hear well
speak good English, stutter sometimes, am afraid of criticism
and get real scared standing up before others
but I care and am willing to serve.