

## AN INCONVENIENT HERO

Seventy-nine years ago, one of the moral giants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther King, Jr., entered the world on a cold and cloudy January 15th, so quietly that the doctor feared him stillborn and had to spank the baby several times before Martin cried. Born into a middle-class Georgia family, already active for two generations in the civil rights cause, King's father was pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church. Baptized Michael Luther King, his name was changed to Martin Luther at the age of five to honor the Reformation rebel who nailed his independent declarations to the Castle Church.

Martin Luther was an extremely sensitive boy, and it hurt him deeply when whipped upon occasion by his stern father whom he loved so much. Martin was the most peculiar child whenever you whipped him, Daddy King remarked: "He'd stand there, and the tears would run down, yet he'd never cry."

As a child, King had his share of fights, excelling in what an associate termed "middle-class combat," never using stones or knives. In all, young King was "a bit of a hellion" and "subject to violent mood-swings."

And, of course, there were stabbing cruelties of bigotry leaving deep scars despite King's protected family life. In the eleventh grade, King entered an oratorical contest sponsored by the Negro Elks in a distant Georgia town. Speaking on "The Negro and the Constitution," King captured a prize with the force of his presentation.

That night, heading back to Atlanta on a crowded bus, King and his teacher reviewed the exciting events of the day. The bus stopped, and some whites got on. There were no empty seats. The white driver came back and ordered King and the teacher to

surrender theirs, but King refused to budge. The driver threatened him, calling King “a black son of a bitch,” until at last Martin heeded his teacher’s whispers and reluctantly got up. They stood in the aisle all the way home, jostled and thrown about as the bus sped down the highway. “That night will never leave my mind,” King said later. “It was the angriest I’ve ever been in my life.”

My, how little Martin loved language. “You just wait and see,” he once told his parents. “When I grow up, I’m going to get me some big words!” This lad, of course, turned into one of the most powerful speechmakers in American history!

And Martin’s recall was phenomenal. By age five, King could recite whole biblical passages and sing entire hymns from memory. His parents and grandmother praised him for his precocious ways, making him flush with self-esteem.

Is it any wonder that he zipped through high school, entering Morehouse College at fifteen, pondering a career and searching for “some intellectual basis for a social philosophy”? King was persuaded by Thoreau’s argument that a creative minority, even of “one honest person,” could set in motion a moral revolution. He was also exposed to the writings of Gandhi, whose mystic faith in nonviolent protest became King’s lodestar.

We shouldn’t forget that, at seventeen, Martin finally made suitable peace with his family’s Baptist church by calculating that he would become a “rational” minister whose sermons would be “both spiritually and intellectually stimulating...a respectable force for social protest.”

Martin was elected class President of Crozier Theological Seminary and moved on to get a doctorate from Boston University as well as a bride: Coretta Scott, a bright and earnest music student, who graduated from Antioch College. Few figures in human

history have been more able than King to translate reflective study into compassionate action through the urgencies of his time.

Nonetheless, Martin was brought into history largely by accident, for his initial dream was to become a professor. In 1954 King took a pastorate in Montgomery, Alabama. There, in 1955, a seamstress' tired feet precipitated the first great civil rights test of power and launched King's meteoric career.

Rosa Parks' arrest for refusing to give up her seat on a town bus to a white man ended 382 days later with capitulation of the Montgomery bus line to a comprehensive Afro-American consortium and the U. S. Supreme Court. King, too new to Montgomery to have enemies in the usually fragmented black community, became its leader. His march to martyrdom had begun.

To be sure, this arrest was the precipitating factor in the protest, but not the cause. No, it was really the story of 50,000 who had grown increasingly fed-up with oppression and who "were willing to substitute tired feet for tired souls." As King went on to say: "Our campaign is not against individuals but against the forces of evil in the world. The basic tension here is not between Negroes and whites, but between justice and injustice. And if there's a victory, it will be a victory not merely for 50,000 Negroes, but a victory for justice and the forces of light."

In reviewing King's life, we must remember all the protests, marches, and jailings King and his compadres endured—so grueling yet so empowering, as the indomitable human spirit dared to shatter the chains of injustice. And in 1963, after the March on Washington, we can still hear the refrains of his extraordinary *I Have A Dream* speech:

*So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed that all persons are created equal. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little 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. I have a dream today. And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.*

King's relentless struggle for freedom and justice continued to elicit white resistance and retaliation, occasion jealousies among black leaders and produce a troubled soul in King. He was a harried man, holding in almost insupportable tension the exertion of high spirituality alternating with moments of sensual release.

King was an oft-tormented and flawed person. As the late African-American poet June Jordan phrased it: "King made mistakes. He wasn't a wonderful administrator. He didn't abstain from whiskey or tobacco. He wasn't a fabulous husband or father. He committed adultery. He wasn't a god." King was well aware of his short-comings and confided to friends that "I'm deeply conscious of two Martin Luther Kings...and the great burden of life is always to try to keep my higher self in command."

King was also guilt-ridden, because he didn't feel he deserved all the accolades he got. Raised in material comfort and given a superior education, Martin Luther King, Jr. had never really suffered like the black masses who loved him so.

There were other reasons for King's troubled soul. He felt a great deal of anger for the evils he'd witnessed in Dixie, especially the murder of the four Birmingham girls, and he relied more than ever on "creative nonviolence" to funnel his fury into constructive channels. King never told his people not to be angry, as many of his black critics charged. It was anger, after all, that fueled resistance, but theirs must not be a hateful anger, for that would only prove ruinous...anger for impact, never for injury.

It must be a disciplined, nonviolent rage, what King called “a creative dissatisfaction...It’s still my basic article of faith that social justice can be achieved and democracy advanced only to the degree that there is firm adherence to nonviolent action and resistance. However, as much as I deplore violence, there’s one evil worse than violence, and that’s cowardice.”

Then, of course, there was J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI relentlessly stalking King, trying to destroy him by wire-tapping and ruthlessly defaming his character. A lesser person than King might have quit in shame, leaving Hoover and his deputies to gloat in righteous triumph, but King’s determination to go on was a fierce countervailing force. He resolved never to be bullied into cringing inaction. He refused to be a coward!

So, whatever his imperfections as a person, King found comfort in the conviction that the struggle itself was right. In his effort “to do God’s will,” King could lose himself and prepare to lay down his life. He said: “the quality, not the longevity, of one’s life is what’s important. If you’re cut down in a movement that’s designed to save the soul of a nation, then no other death could be more redemptive.”

Most of all, I want to remind us today that King was an inconvenient hero. For those among us who would seek a non-abrasive idol, whose recorded speeches can be used as inspirational resources for rocking our memories to sleep, Martin Luther King, Jr. is surely the wrong man. We Americans can develop national amnesia quite rapidly, can’t we? Forty years after his murder, it’s, oh so, tempting to forget or ignore his demands for a fundamental restructuring of American society. His was not a sentimental vision but a radical one. We must engage the tougher, more difficult King, if we’re going to progress in this 21<sup>st</sup> millennium with moral courage.

As with Malcolm X, King, in his last years, was willing to take huge risks on behalf of hope: to shake himself free of more familiar settings and bravely respond to the cries of the poor, the vulnerable and marginalized women, men, and children of our nation and the entire world.

If we're going to honor King's memory, we can do no less. And, frankly, at this precarious juncture in human history, we desperately need unpurchasable and inconvenient heroes and heroines who intrepidly pioneer the moral path.

The last five years of King's life were concerned with the growing reality of economic injustice in America and the re-humanizing of our cities. King had always demanded that moral people are those who make genuine sacrifices and stand unwaveringly for justice, but his horizons were expanded and his commitment increased.

King kept warning fellow Americans about the triple evils of racism, militarism, and materialism. He took a radical stand on Vietnam when advised by both his black and white cohorts to be silent and stick to race relations. Instead he replied: "It's worthless to talk about integration if there's no world to integrate. The bombs in Vietnam explode at home. They destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America."

In a prophetic way, King pointed out that in the years ahead those concerned with issues of peace and justice must be concerned with Guatemala, Thailand, Mozambique, and South Africa. Those concerned with getting on the right side of the world revolution must undergo a radical revolution of values.

King kept upping the moral ante, yet he assumed a radical stance without ever writing our country off, screaming at whites, or waving a Vietcong flag. King was nonviolent to the end. Indeed at the close of his life he was killed in Memphis, Tennessee while peacefully protesting with garbage workers in support of their cause.

And so, if we're to properly celebrate King's birthday every year, we must make sure his message not be caged but instead be seen as morally uncomfortable, even somewhat subversive. We can't let an annual holiday make Martin Luther King, Jr. a mascot or allow his revolutionary image to be "whitewashed", American-style.

Without a doubt, it's tricky to immortalize a reformer. Hence, our challenge is to preserve King's heritage without losing his troubling dream, his inconvenient message. We need the Fourth of July to celebrate the strengths of America, but we also need times of self-criticism—times like King's birthday, to goad our society to change, toward ever-broader justice and liberty. We can't simply label our land "the home of the free" and hole-up in smug complacency.

There's a wonderful remark Kurt Vonnegut made in one of his novels, which reminds us that "The Star-Spangled Banner" is the only national anthem in the world that ends with a question: "Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?" Incredibly, our national anthem closes not with a fixed declaration but with an open-ended question! Just think of that!

And so, whenever we sing the Star-Spangled Banner, may we always remember that it bespeaks the dream of someone who knows that genuine freedom for everyone has not yet come, who knows that we must keep on keeping on to become the land of liberty and justice for all that we profess to be.

For a great country—a good and honest country—not only celebrates its triumphs but also remembers its sins, and keeps plodding and working to be freer and more compassionate to each and every one of its citizens.

Carl Himes predicted what was coming after the death of King when he penned the following poem:

*Now that King is safely dead, let us praise him, build monuments to his glory, sing hosannas to his name. Dead people make such convenient heroes: they cannot rise to challenge the images we would fashion from their lives and besides, it's easier to build monuments than to make a better world. So, now that he's safely dead we, with eased consciences, we'll teach our children that King was a great man...knowing that the cause for which he lived is still a cause and the dream for which he died is still a dream, a dead man's dream.*

The issue hovers: "Is King safely dead?" Or if King's radical message remains vigorously alive, you and I must seriously ask what his message truly demands of us right here, right now.

Vincent Hardin in his essay "Tell the Children" instructs parents, and all of us, just how to narrate the memory of King:

*So tell the children that the tougher, more difficult King lives. Let them know that we saw him facing the tanks in Tiananmen Square, dancing on the crumbling wall of Berlin, singing in Prague, alive in the glistening eyes of Nelson Mandela, present in the lives of freedom fighters and justice builders the world over.*

*We need to let our children experience the great, humanizing qualities of King's hope. Teach them to recognize the hero or the heroine in themselves. Teach them to nurture the compassionate, the forgiving in us all. Tell them that King lives within us, right here, wherever his message is expanded and carried out in our daily lives, wherever his unfinished battles are taken up by our hands.*

Indeed, wherever justice and righteousness prevail in our homes, in our houses of worship, in our own society, and in the larger world itself...King lives, King lives!

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