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**His legacy for the future
of social renewal**



Luigi Morelli

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.: HIS LEGACY
FOR THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL RENEWAL

Why does Martin Luther King Jr. remain one of the most significant leaders of modern American history, almost fifty years after his death? Why do we look back with yearning and a sense of loss to his legacy? Part of the reason for this may be found in what Stanley Levison—one of the leader’s close advisors and friends—commented about him. King is one of the rare figures in American history who attained public and international recognition at a very high level without ever tying himself to a party or other special interests. He attained great moral stature although, or rather because, he was completely devoid of political ambition. In many ways his life’s work was prophetic of what the future may call of us. The present essay looks at what King’s legacy has left to all those devoted to social change, particularly how his figure can inspire a Civil Society sector seeking for own identity. Far from idolizing King’s role, it will also look at those limitations that relying on his example pose for the future.

The charismatic leader’s life story moves beyond the confines of biography. It attains a grander-than-life stature when we peek just a little behind the scenes of the events at symbols and signposts of his figure and career. He is clearly a product of his class and society, but reaches beyond to the spirit of a nation, to the needs of the times. Daddy King foresaw this after his son’s involvement on the question of Vietnam: “He did not belong to us, he belonged to the world.”

The man and his mission are already encapsulated in the name, starting from the first name that gathers much of his essence. *Martin* means “warrior,” or “warlike.” Although undoubtedly working for peace, King was a strategist of the use of nonviolence, a fighter for the cause of peace. And that required a continuous recourse to courage in face of danger and death. Like Luther, he was a reformer, willing to look behind the letter of the law to what animated the spirit. In fact, schooling of the mind formed the background and basis to everything that King achieved subsequently. Understanding spiritual reality in the crucible of the experience was for him as essential as fighting for the good. *King* renders a little bit of the idea of the reach of his charisma, even of its limitations.

Finally, we could comment that he was not only Martin Luther King but also *Jr.* In terms of heredity, King was the end of a line that had prepared him uniquely well for the task at hand. In terms of mission he stood at the beginning of a new one. He entered life not only at the ideal place for his task but he stood, so to speak, on the shoulders of giants, those that had built his bloodline. The father, Martin Luther (or more commonly, Mike), had grown up on a sharecropping farm, and spent much of his time working in the fields. His father had been an alcoholic and used to beat his wife and son after getting drunk on Saturdays. Mike had seen his father being regularly cheated at the plantation, and, having witnessed a lynching, developed a growing hate for the whites. After leaving home he worked as a mechanic and as a railroad fireman, but was most attracted by the ministry. He made up for his education by receiving a high school diploma and entered Morehouse College in Atlanta in 1926. At that

time he courted his future wife, Alberta, daughter of Daniel Williams, the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, one of the most prestigious churches of the city. After the marriage Mike became the assistant to his father-in-law. When the pastor died in early 1931, Mike inherited his role at Ebenezer, and soon expanded the church and its membership in dramatic fashion—from six hundred to several thousand. He also became the director of a black bank, and took an active role in the NAACP, serving on its executive board and Social Action Committee, at a time when the organization was considered radical. King's father had become a man of importance in the black community, accumulating business and political influence. He played an important role in an interracial coalition and in the Negro Voters League at a time when he had reconciled his views about race.

The priesthood lay on both paternal and maternal lines of influence, and King was consequently ideally placed in a nexus of great influence in an important city of the South—moreover, one in which segregation had relaxed its iron grip, if ever so slightly. King had been placed at the crossroads of religion and social engagement. He would find ways to create something that was more than the sum of these parts. But let us go back to childhood's formative years where his character and life mission were forged.

Childhood and Youth

The young boy grew up constantly within the shadow of the church, where he stayed all day every Sunday and part of afternoons and evenings on weekdays. His home was in a safe neighborhood, only three blocks away from the sanctuary. An interesting anecdote is that

in which King, age five, responded to his father calling people to join the church. In competition with his sister, King ran up to the pulpit to be ahead of her after she had gotten up first. “She was not going to get ahead of me,” was his comment later. At this early age his favorite hymn was “I Want to Be More and More Like Jesus.”

For all his budding piousness, King was a child like many others, very active, and good at sports. He was very talkative and social, making friends and leaving his mark easily. And yet, together with this very social streak, he also entertained a more introspective tendency. He could immerse himself intensively in his inner life, especially when reading a book. He especially liked to read those who could expound on ideas, and all historical orators. Summing up both tendencies, King liked to call himself an “ambivert,” or a cross between introvert and extrovert. Added to all of this was a certain precociousness of mind.

From early on the child had entered a love affair with the spoken word. He relished language and had already warned his parents, “When I grow up I’m going to get me some big words.” Such was his precociousness of mind that he entered school a year early and continued to skip grades (ninth and twelfth), so that at age thirteen he entered Booker T. Washington High School, where he particularly enjoyed English and History. For all these natural gifts, King did not leave things to chance. He was so methodical that, later when preparing the weekly sermon, he would start on Tuesday by drawing an outline, then work on it within an established sequence until Sunday morning.

We have seen that his father was instrumental in placing King on the tracks that would sow the conditions for the son’s success. Yet, the

relationship with his father carried a mix of respect and admiration with resentment and embarrassment. At home King Sr. was a stern patriarch, at times even a tyrant. He would give physical punishment and at times “he even made [the children] thrash one another,” reminds us Stephen B. Oates, his biographer. King Jr. was very sensitive and took badly to the beatings, feeling both guilty and angry. On some rare occasions he would react by hitting his brother A. D. (Alfred Daniel). Most of the time, however, he took the bitter medicine with a stout silence. In his teenage years he took out much of his frustration in games and sports, so that friends couldn’t tell whether he was playing or fighting. He did not smoke, drink, or swear, but took part in fights, and acquired a certain reputation, even though he shied from using stones or knives. On the whole, though, he preferred negotiation, leaving fist-fighting as a second choice.

There were some active areas of disagreement with the father. At around age fifteen King started questioning the Christian doctrine he breathed in all around him. He doubted the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and became critical of the Sunday School Christianity he was exposed to, being embarrassed by the emotional side of Southern Baptism. His father was urging him to become a minister, but King resisted it.

Partly stemming from the distance from his father, King was very close to his Grandmother Williams, who was very dear to all the King children, to whom she used to tell Bible stories. She provided the warmth and support that the son could not find in the father. In fact he admitted that his love for her was extreme. When she died he was still crying days after and could not sleep at night. At that time he wanted

to know more about immortality of the soul, not content with empty reassurance. He could not understand or accept how others could find certainty for their assertions.

The portrayal of this uniquely gifted child would not be complete if we did not shine a light on King's deep attachment to very earthly aspects of life. From an early age he had a special love for nice clothes. Later he was always dressed immaculately in gray and black suits, white shirts, and ties. He had a fascination for those living in wealth and enjoyed the company of his wealthy benefactors. In the same fashion he exerted a magnetic attraction on others around him. What stood out in King's character was the richness of his voice. Girls were attracted or spellbound by it at turn, and young King was quite a flirter. His brother A. D. commented that "women and food were always his main weaknesses. . . . He kept flirting from chick to chick." He loved good food to such an extent that he had difficulty keeping his weight down or dieting.

We have an overall picture of someone who is both quite idealistic and quite at home in the world, one who has a mastery at getting what he needs. And yet, there was yet another trait in King's social life. Such was his desire to be with others that he would delegate to others tasks that would render him unpopular, and was depressed at severe criticism. When depressed he would have hiccups that could last for hours. Amazingly the hiccups stopped, on one occasion at least, when he got up to give a speech.

A last, striking feature of King's early upbringing was a pronounced disposition to accidents, together with the ability to survive them unscathed. On the first such occasion he fell headfirst

twenty feet down over a banister, and bounced through an open door down to the cellar, coming out unhurt. He was hit twice by cars and once A. D. hit him on the head with a baseball bat. On that occasion, without concern for his head, he kept on arguing about the game. Once, when A. D. accidentally hit the grandmother, King, fearing he had killed her, threw himself out of a window, falling twelve feet down. He lay immobile until he heard that the grandmother was fine. He had apparently tried to kill himself. The grandmother died on March 1941 while King was watching a parade, for which he had left the house without telling anyone. She had suffered a heart attack and King suffered from guilt. Once again he hurled himself out the window, and once more was protected from hurt. There seemed to have been a certain deep dimension of guilt—as more than one author has detected—hidden in King's very being that would show up on occasion, just as it did in the case of the grandmother. Added to this, in the years to come, would be the guilt for his privileged upbringing and position in society, and for wanting to live more poorly and not being able to achieve it.

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For all of the racism that was undoubtedly present and strong, King grew up in a relatively sheltered environment. In fact, in childhood his favorite friend before entering school was a white boy. When the child's parents prevented their son from seeing him, King was introduced to the matter of race by his parents. He later had other experiences with racism. He saw Klansmen parading and assaulting

blacks, and police beating black children. His parents wanted him to be able to differentiate between white men and he could not understand why. Things changed in his college days, when he wanted to immerse himself in the reality of his less-fortunate brethren by taking summer jobs as a laborer, in spite of his father's opposition. Those experiences offered a blessing in disguise, showing King how much the system was to blame over and above personal racial prejudice and tempering his views on race.

This last example shows how King's thinking evolved and led him to change his positions over time with notable flexibility. This is because he was in equal parts a theoretician and a man of action, which we can detect even in the trajectory of his studies. He was in fact at times torn between a career of the mind and one devoted to action, so the two lines continued parallel for all of his life.

Studies

What made King particularly fit for the intellectual life was an unusual blend of attitudes, many of which are seldom found together. He had both a great capacity for conceptualizing, and a great memory. He could remember entire biblical passages, and, with the same ease, facts and details about all his friends. These capacities, together with his thorough immersion in biblical imagery, explain also his developed ability for thinking in pictures, not often found in conjunction with intellectualism.

At Morehouse College, King chose sociology as a major and English as a minor. He quickly earned a string of As in English, history, philosophy, and sociology. He went on to study for a BA in

Divinity at Crozer Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, and later for a PhD at Boston University's School of Theology.

In his studies King inquired far beyond the basic topics, particularly in “the quest for a philosophical method to eliminate all social evils,” in which he explored all major thinkers, beginning with the Greeks. To Plato and Aristotle he added others such as Kant, Rousseau, Locke, Ricardo, and Adam Smith.

King went on a systematic dialectic inquiry in order to always find the middle ground. This quest for the point of balance resulted from his immersion in Hegelian philosophy. He had read the German author's *Phenomenology of Mind*, as well as *The Philosophy of History*, and *The Philosophy of Right*. King wholeheartedly embraced this thinking, which allowed him to steer clear of either/or choices. This reconciliation of opposites is present in the way he engaged in nonviolent action and most clearly in many of his famous speeches.

In his studies King dedicated considerable energy in defining his Christian position. He first came across Walter Rauschenbusch, an engaged Christian social activist. Through him he came to the Rousseau-like idea of evil as the product of a capitalist society and its laws. This satisfied his need to see religion active not only in personal salvation but in social change. At this juncture King still seemed an advocate of Protestant liberalism. However, life circumstances led him to growing doubts about the goodness of human nature—which he had not questioned that far—and he turned his attention to the thinking of Reinhold Niebuhr to elucidate the matter. Niebuhr attacked liberal thinking, particularly its naïve optimism about human nature. For the same reasons he attacked pacifism. King decided he had held on to a

naïve belief in the power of reason, and now agreed that this needed to be accompanied by faith in order to change human nature. It was also for the above reasons that he did not join pacifist organizations.

His next goal was to reconcile the rift between idealism and relativism. He found such a synthesis in “personalism,” a personal idealism that saw the work of God at the level of the individual, justifying the belief in the inherent value of all human beings. At the end of this trajectory of the mind he arrived at the conclusion that evil lived at the individual level, but that it could be transformed.

In his Ph. D., in order to deepen his understanding of personalism, King studied the divergent views of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman, pitting transcendence in the first against immanence in the second. As a true Hegelian he saw the point and the limits of each view. He felt that Tillich’s stance made individuality an empty proposition. Wieman’s views could not offer concepts for the unity of the whole. He concluded that “a more adequate view is to hold a quantitative pluralism and a qualitative monism. In this way oneness and manyness are preserved.” The results of this thinking are clearly present in King’s later spiritual growth.

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All the above could satisfy King the thinker. Something else was necessary for King the man in action—a thinking strategy that would show him the way in making social change operational. He first came across the thoughts of H. D. Thoreau, and was enthused by the idea of the “creative minority,” already in the days of Morehouse College.

Years later he had the opportunity of hearing a lecture about Gandhi by Mordecai W. Johnson, who argued that nonviolence could be effective in the US too. Gandhi had moved Thoreau's ideas further. Through him King understood how anger could be rechanneled towards love. So inspired, King would gradually embrace nonviolence as a tool that could work at the level of groups and nations.

We could sum up all of the above by saying that King was deeply interested in a way out of dualistic thinking. This is apparent in his adoption of Hegelian philosophy, but is also present in the way he approached the matter of resistance to evil. Here too he steered away from passionate rebellion or quiet submission and found a middle ground in nonviolent resistance.

King's views reached the depth of his being, not remaining only in his head. Everything that challenged his mind—even that which he could not accept—formed the basis for pushing his understanding to new places. When reading Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* and *The Will to Power*, he wondered whether Nietzsche was not right in criticizing Christian love. He asked himself whether love could be an effective tool for social change after all. Finding Gandhi probably offered a way out of the philosopher's challenge.

The same was true—only more so—in meeting the ideas of Karl Marx. Although he appreciated the philosopher's passion for social justice, King came away from it in shock and disgust at its materialism. He called it a “grand illusion,” and a “cold atheism wrapped in the garments of materialism.” He could not accept its “the end justifies the means” tenets and its recourse to violence. However, he could see the other side of the coin in the fact that communism

played an important role due to the absence of a deeper Christianity effective in the social field. It is typical of King the thinker that he offered a sermon on “The Challenge of Communism to Christianity.” He also studied psychology, which he first rejected and later partly accepted as a valid source of insights.

In short we could say that King had an uncanny ability to learn from everybody. He did not dismiss even his worse enemies, if only to learn about the human psyche. About Reverend Frazier—a segregationist of the Methodist Church—he wondered how he could be so sold on segregation, and how he could be more eloquent than many speaking about the other side of the issue. He was somehow fascinated by how the mind lures individuals into accepting what does not stand to reason. This was showing him how much more power was used by those fighting for evil, and how those fighting for reason were often shy and lukewarm.

Another concept found fertile ground in King’s imagination. He was deeply drawn to Hegel’s ideas about “world historical individuals as agents of the will of the world spirit.” In retrospective everything proves that he was such one.

Answering the Call of the Time

Not only was King’s intellect precocious—so was the speed with which he entered his life’s mission. In his teenage years King had rebelled against the tradition of Southern Baptism and against what did not offer him a satisfying understanding of the world. In his studies he had actively fought to acquire this independent and personal understanding. This allowed him to regain the personal conviction of

the soul's immortality at around age seventeen. It was at that time that he also asked his father for the opportunity to offer a sermon at his church. This first attempt was already a great success. In 1947, at age eighteen, he became an ordained minister, and made assistant pastor at Ebenezer.

After completing his PhD, King was considered a great scholar and would have had a future assured in academia. He had completed twenty-one straight years of study. His advisor, DeWolf, thought him one among the five or six best students he had taught in thirty-one years of career. He could have had a successful life mapped out in teaching, but the young "doctor" wanted to be able to profess as a minister before entering academia. At this point King the thinker became King the man of action—or rather the thinker put to the acid test of action everything that he wrestled with in his mind.

Various churches were interested in him but the most solid offer came from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The church was situated just across the street from the Alabama State Capitol. The low, dark building with the pointed steeple stood dwarfed by the white domed capitol in which Jefferson Davis had been inaugurated president of the Confederate States of America.

In this place King had been preceded by men of weight. His predecessors were Vernon Johns and E. D. Nixon. The latter had gone through the 1940s with Asa Philip Randolph's nonviolent crusade. He had also tried to awaken the local consciousness but with little apparent success. Here King was chosen as pastor on March 1954. Neither he nor Coretta were enthusiastic about going back to the South, but this was for King a chance to put into action everything he

had learned. He gave his first sermon in May, the same month of the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, in effect outlawing segregation in public schools, a victory obtained by the NAACP. The South had reacted in anger, vowing to make the decision ineffective.

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The Rosa Parks episode awoke Montgomery on December 1, 1955. It was the first time a black person was accused of violating a city ordinance, and the case was brought up to the Supreme Court. Most of the local leaders rallied to the idea of a boycott, and decided to launch it on December 5. Once more the young minister found himself on a ground that had been carefully cultivated. To him fell the task of bringing the seed to fruition.

Rosa Parks was uniting herself with a movement that had its forerunners on American ground. The myth may persist that King singlehandedly introduced nonviolence to the forefront of the civil rights. However, here too he simply arrived at a culmination. Prominent blacks had already gone to India in reverence to Gandhi. The nonviolent idea had been first introduced at the thought stage by black leaders and intellectuals in a symposium in *The Crisis*, the NAACP journal, which had also launched the seed-idea of an American Gandhi. Later Asa Philip Randolph was identified as this living symbol. He had appealed for mass marches and school and bus boycotts in the ghettos in 1942. Unfortunately the events led to the violent riot season of 1943 and this marked the end of the experiment.

The torch was taken up by the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), particularly by James Farmer. This even resulted in a “freedom ride” in 1947, with the achievement of integration of public facilities in various Northern and border states. Once again the path had been laid for the right person to come at the right moment, and King was the man of the hour.

The Montgomery Improvement Association elected King to be its president in spite of his young age. Having only twenty minutes to prepare an important speech, he focused here too on a Hegelian reconciliation of militancy and moderation. To a very packed assembly, he stressed that they wanted their share of American citizenship rights. After arousing the crowd, however, he called them to caution and moderation. It was as though he had prepared for this speech all his life.

King knew how to use restraint in the heat of battle as in success. In Montgomery his leadership faced a turning point at the time in which his house was bombed. Something dramatic was on the verge of happening; the crowd was ready to explode. King called on them not to get panicky, and he advocated the message of love. Through this living example the crowd had come closer to understanding what nonviolence and the Christian message entailed.

At the end of this boycott King was twenty-seven. He had become a living symbol of the black struggle. But he sensed the danger that such a burden put on him, and experienced a crisis of identity. He was receiving tempting offers to move out of the theater of active resistance, and could comfortably retire in the world of academia. He said then, “I am worried to death. A man who hits the peak at twenty-

seven has a tough job ahead. People will be expecting me to pull rabbits out of a hat for the rest of my life.”

In August 1963 King was in Washington, DC, for the famous March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He had not been the initiator of this idea. However, he is remembered as the one who impressed his stamp onto it. Coming last among a host of speakers, A. P. Randolph introduced him as “the moral leader of the country.” In the speech, King, receiving support and inspiration from the crowd, went off the script, speaking completely from his heart. He pronounced the famous “I have a dream” series, went on to “Let freedom ring,” and concluded with “Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!” The “I Have a Dream” speech remained the marking moment of the Washington march, due to King’s ability to call on the deepest aspirations not only of those present but of all Americans in whom the dream still lived.

It was King again who was present at the culmination of the civil rights movement’s success in Selma. Protesting the death of a certain Jimmie Lee Jackson at the hands of a state trooper, King and his followers escorted the hearse to Marion, his hometown. After the funeral it was announced that King would lead a march to Montgomery, the state capital. Governor Wallace banned the march and the police ruthlessly repressed the marchers. In total seventy blacks were hospitalized and another seventy injured. At this point King was inspired to call on the help and sympathy of fellow clergymen across the nation. The story, photographs, and footage of the Selma episode had a strong repercussion in the media. The response to King’s appeal was prodigious; in a few days he enlisted

four hundred ministers, rabbis, priests, nuns, students, and lay leaders. The events that followed the march culminated in the death of a white minister, James Reeb, and the crime rallied the whole nation behind the civil rights movement, pressuring President Johnson into signing a stronger bill guaranteeing voting rights.

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The above review of the signposts of King's civil rights career would not be complete without mention of the fights that King lost, particularly in Albany, Georgia; Chicago; and St. Augustine, Florida. In these events King was most often betrayed by an impulsive nature and the enthusiasm for the cause giving way to a lack of analysis and definition of strategic objectives. However, for the most part, King achieved landmark successes not simply stemming from being at the right place at the right time. It was far more due to an inherent "Hegelian coherence" between thought and action, the first of these being the way in which he related to matters political.

Working Between the Cultural and the Political

Before many of the civil rights leaders, and more completely than anybody else, King had understood he had a role distinct and complementary to that of politicians. His relationships with presidents Kennedy and Johnson illustrate how unique his position was at the time, and how different from that of many other civil rights leaders. At bottom King knew that both parties were hypocritical and/or opportunistic in matters of civil rights and that only external pressure

would influence outcomes. This is particularly why King refused to listen to warnings of ill-timing of many of his campaigns. He knew it would never quite be the right time if he had to listen to and subordinate himself to the political agenda. But this is not to say that King despised the political process—he only wanted to be an independent and equal player with it.

On January 22, 1960, King met with Senator John F. Kennedy, who was the front-runner candidate for the Democratic nomination. From that day and until Kennedy was elected King refused to endorse him, in spite of his sympathy for him. It was thanks to both John and Robert Kennedy that King was freed on October 28, 1960, when he had been jailed in Atlanta on the pretext of the missed renewal of his driver's license. King's praise for the courage of Senator Kennedy was the closest he came to endorsing him, and the episode gave Kennedy critical black votes to win the election. Soon after Kennedy's election, however, he was throwing his weight to influence Washington policy.

Regarding his non-endorsement of Kennedy, King commented, "I feel someone must remain in the position of nonalignment, so that he can look objectively at both parties and be the conscience of both—not the servant or master of either." In private King told the president that he did not want to be in the position to be unable to criticize him if he thought he was wrong. Kennedy replied that it often helped him to be pushed. This exchange aptly sums up an optimal relationship that can be attained between a moral/cultural and a committed political figure. This is in effect what each one of them could achieve given their respective spheres of influence. Kennedy had his hands tied to the

proceedings of Congress. King could provide a national climate that offered support to the president's legislative power.

In the fall and winter of 1962, in the time leading to the centenary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, King wrote a series of articles to put pressure on President Kennedy.

Birmingham marked a turning point in the quality of involvement of the local community, and King's popularity surged among blacks and their leaders. Robert and John Kennedy supported King's results by planning to make desegregation a matter of fact. To do this Robert Kennedy had to prevail over all other cabinet members. JFK gave a national address on civil rights on June 11, 1963, and King had strong words of praise for the president. The success of Birmingham further spawned a score of nonviolent, direct action campaigns in about nine hundred of the cities of the south, accompanied by demonstrations in their support in the rest of the country.

The Civil Rights Bill was written to begin desegregation of the schools, and deprive segregated facilities of federal funds. King harbored no illusion of the power of legislation alone in instilling brotherhood. However, he knew that it was an important piece in making a transition possible: "It may be true that you cannot legislate integration, but can legislate desegregation. It may be true that you cannot legislate morality, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me." In this lay the crux of the modality of his cooperation with political power, which he saw as capable of having the last word, but not able to initiate effective and durable change.

When JFK was assassinated, King expressed how deeply shaken he was and how much that made him turn to the thought of his own mortality. In early 1964 Kennedy's civil rights bill had passed the House but faced opposition and filibuster in the Senate. King realized that more civil rights campaigns were necessary. This found a culmination in the events of Selma, and the attack on James Reeb who fell into a coma and later died. This crime was a rallying cry for the nation, and calls were heard for federal troops to be sent to Selma. The event also gave President Johnson the support he needed to pass the bill. Johnson gave a special message on domestic legislation, the first time such a thing had been done in nineteen years. He was in effect conceding much that King had fought for. He literally sounded like King in his oratory, finishing with "We shall overcome."

Johnson also offered another great speech hailing "equality as a fact and result." At this point there was great friendship between the two national figures. The president signed the voting bill into law in the East Room where Lincoln had signed the First Confiscation Act, seizing all slaves. The new act outlawed literacy tests and all other obstacles to voting rights. It appointed examiners to register those kept off the rolls. Most political analysts attributed the success to King's Selma campaign. The pattern of southern politics was altered forever.

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King acted both as a new kind of leader and as a true moral/cultural figure, as can be shown from many little indices, first of all in his immediate circles. King knew how to empower others; he

needed no yes-men. He could tap talented people, give them space, responsibility, and appreciation. His staff was composed of people of great self-confidence and loyalty to him. He never took sides in staff meetings and let his people battle it out, continuing to ask questions, all the while reflecting back what he was hearing. When he was silent people knew he had reached a conclusion. It is true, however, that he could undermine the whole process while acting under the influence or the power of his charisma, bypassing all of this process, particularly in some of his hurried and unsuccessful campaigns.

King also was very mindful of the overall unity of the movement. In many instance he actively worked at overcoming fractional tendencies. He networked with other organizations, even fundraising for them, and splitting with them his Nobel Prize. In the Crusade for Citizenship King coordinated his activities with the NAACP to assure them that he was not in competition, having complementary objectives and strategies. In fact King showed over and over again that he was supremely fit to be a mediator between all the factions of the civil rights movement.

Soon after the success of the Montgomery Improvement Association, back in Atlanta King found himself caught in between the students and Atlanta's elders who had negotiated a separate agreement. King played mediator between the elders—particularly his father—and the young, convincing them both to grab the agreement as the best possible step forward in the climate of the time. Black Atlanta rallied behind him and the agreements and sit-ins and boycotts ceased.

King never hesitated to place his conscience on the line. In the march for James Meredith through Mississippi he was going to

withdraw his support unless Carmichael and McKisssick agreed to a nonviolent, interracial march, which they did. Nevertheless violence was in the air, and so was the cry of Black Power. The media gloated on it, and spread the fear of racial wars. King then spoke publicly against extremist tendencies. Later in Chicago he also clearly spoke against black anti-Semitism. As much as he deplored this movement toward radicalism, King went at great lengths to understand it. He did not dismiss its slogans automatically, because he saw to what kind of despair this cry called.

In the Chicago ghetto the riots continued even though King had done all he could to preach nonviolence. After two people were killed and fifty-six injured, King contacted all the gangs that had caused the major part of the problems, asking them again to commit to nonviolence and to be march marshals.

In all of the above instances King acted as a “Hegelian mediator,” bringing together parties suspicious of each other, and mediating between himself and extremist tendencies. He did this by a keen awareness of his own feelings and a capacity to find detachment. In Chicago the leader had been booed as he tried to rally blacks for Freedom Sunday. He first experienced self-pity and resentment, thinking back to all he had done for the cause, losing patience and understanding. Then he realized to what extent he had let his feelings overrun his reason, and worked hard at understanding the pain of his opponents.

Most of all King exerted a remarkable independence of mind in his views on Vietnam. These formed the basis for a whole new expansion of his dream. This was possible first of all because King did not ride

the wave of dangerous political alliances. At this time, and with great courage, he distanced himself from Johnson's Vietnam policy. At the time of near-hysterical anticommunism, it took great courage to speak out against the administration's policies, and even King's staff was deeply divided on the matter. King, however, linked racial injustice and poverty to the Vietnam War, and national opposition rose immediately against him, as early as 1965. In contrast to him the NAACP unanimously opposed the effort to link the civil rights and peace issues. King was opposed not only by Roy Wilkins of the NAACP but by figures such as Whitney Young of the Urban League, Norman Thomas of the Socialist Party, and prominent civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, to name a few. Newspapers who had spoken glowingly about him now reversed their praises. Where others showed their vision limited by their political entanglements, King maintained a remarkable independence of mind, and developed an encompassing vision. Moreover he showed that he could learn from what the most extreme political fringes were saying, without adopting their means or strategies, remaining an unusual blend of radical visionary and moderate activist.

This trajectory was an escalation of the dream he had uttered in Washington, DC. The original dream concerned America's civil rights and racial justice, the dream of the "beloved community." After 1963 this vision grew larger and embraced blacks and poor whites together, adding the concerns for economic justice, peace and disarmament, and the economic liberation of the third world. This was an understanding of the more systemic ills of the capitalistic system, of the global dimension and interrelatedness of the ills of a world economy running

amok. In his early understanding of globalization King prophetically defined the separate role that can be attributed to a civil society that hardly knew itself as such. He clearly attributed to it a role independent and complementary to that of political action.

We could finally argue that King was not only a cultural figure but a spiritual leader and a moral authority. Saying that King was a spiritual leader does not mean attributing to him a mantle of perfection. In fact, we will return to his personal shortcomings and what he had to say about them. It is the conviction of this author that King could endure tension and stress and dread only because he was imbued with and animated by a deep spiritual life. This meant being aware of facing death threats on a constant basis, and yet finding the strength to uphold a belief in the capacity for progress of human nature and a belief and confidence in God's plan for the human being. This spiritual life was visible in the small as in the large things, and in the very way King faced the many challenges he encountered.

A Spiritual Leader

Many of King's victories are due to what amounts to small things that in hindsight betray the hand of the spirit. It was not without reason that he repeatedly asserted that he was first of all a preacher, then a social leader. In Montgomery, after twelve months of boycotts the city harassed the carpool and declared it illegal because it operated without a franchise. At the darkest hour of the boycott King expressed, "Tonight we must believe that a way will be found out of no way." This miraculous help came through the Supreme Court handing down the decision that Alabama's state and local laws requiring segregation

on buses were unconstitutional. Similar to this was the stroke of genius that inspired him to write the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” the inspiration to extemporize in the coda of his “I Have a Dream” speech, or the invitation made to the white preachers in the march to Selma. But these were the small challenges.

The greatest challenge lay in putting into action that belief in the immortality of the soul that he had already acquired, at least intellectually, at age seventeen or eighteen. In relation to this we can trace a crescendo of spiritual experiences that are well documented. All in all there were three marking experiences accompanying attempts on his life and bombings. In between these was a barely unsuccessful attempt by a mentally unstable woman who stabbed King and came close to severing his aorta. These marking episodes bear great similarities among themselves, and in them we can see an intensification of King’s spiritual experiences.

After the police started harassing the Montgomery carpool, they also arrested King for speeding in January 1956. In jail for the first time, King was prey to very strong emotions. Due to pressure exerted from his supporters gathering outside the jail, King was released and scheduled to return for his trial. At this point started the threats of hate letters often signed KKK, obscene phone calls, and more. King felt very jumpy, scared, and guilty about submitting his family to these ordeals. He started considering an honorable way to get out, and turned to prayer. He reports that he “felt something, a presence, a stirring in himself.” And it seemed that an inner voice was speaking to him with quiet assurance “Martin Luther King, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And, lo, I will

be with you, even unto the end of the world.” He saw lightning flash and heard thunder roar. It was the voice of Jesus telling him to still fight on. And “he promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.” Coming out of this experience he felt stronger and had the energy to face the coming days. He realized, “I can stand up without fear. I can face anything.” The calming presence brought home the experience of the personal God he had so long sought to understand. The meeting point of transcendence and immanence that he had struggled to apprehend in his PhD was coming a step closer to immediate experience.

Soon after his arrest, King’s house and church in Montgomery were bombed. Moreover, after the victory the city ordered the bus company shut down. This brought back the ghosts of guilt. In this state of mind King went to the church service of January 15, the date of his twenty-eighth birthday.

King was still deeply affected by the events and for the first time broke down in public during a church service. He called for prayer but was unable to pray. Two ministers came to him and embraced him, and for several minutes he was unable to move. Finally they helped him to sit down. King explained, “Unexpectedly this episode brought me great relief.” During the prayer he expressed his hope that there would be no killings and that if someone needed to die, that it would be him. The event probably allowed him to relieve himself of accumulated guilt for believing he had caused all that suffering. Once again he felt God beside him and he felt he could relinquish the fear of dying. This is what he expressed on January 27 after various other

bombings, and after an unexploded bomb had been found on his own house's porch: "Tell Montgomery that they can keep bombing and I'm going to stand up to them. If I had to die tomorrow morning I would die happy, because I've been to the mountaintop and I've seen the promised land, and it's going to be here in Montgomery."

* * *

We are now coming to the days preceding King's death. At this stage of his militant career King wanted to highlight all kinds of social discrimination. But the plan of the next march on Washington was so grandiose and risky that many of his people and former supporters doubted it. King had in mind a Poor People's Campaign with an Economic Bill of Rights, and wanted the nonviolent operation to last three months or longer. This attempt was his way to forge a Christian path that would be neither of capitalism or socialism, an old dream he had awakened during his studies.

King announced his new campaign on December 4, 1967, but his mood remained deeply pessimistic. He was caught between the tragic and explosive dimension of the race question, and the need to act boldly to spare further tragedy to his country. He also felt increasingly guilty for his personal sins and the cost they took on him and the movement, and many times in private he now spoke of the likelihood of death. It was almost always present in his mind and put him under great strain, causing him to be unable to sleep. In spite of all of this he did not slow down. He was distressed by the lack of support within his

own ranks, and in reality he was also apprehensive himself of how the operation could turn out.

In February of 1968 King was still under great strain. According to his colleagues he was also acting strange, such as on a plane to Acapulco when he repeated his self-eulogy (“A Drum Major for Justice”) to Abernathy. He was in what others described as a recurring depression and displaying sense of doom. In his public appearances, however, he called himself an optimist, and was secure in his knowledge that “God loves us. He has not worked out a design for our failure.”

King had become involved in the protests of the black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, with whom Mayor Henry Loeb had no desire to negotiate. King was enthusiastic of the link he was forming between this cause and his projected march on Washington. He had entered the fray in Memphis without receiving notice about the local problems, particularly of the violent fringes of the protest.

On March 28 he led a march with some very unruly elements. When riots erupted with smashing and looting, King announced that he refused to lead a violent march. He called it off but the violence continued and by the end it had affected some 150 stores; one youth had been killed and sixty people injured. King was upset because of this and because he had been kept in the dark about potential violence. These events also threatened the perception of his march on Washington. A mass meeting in which he planned to speak had to be canceled. Besieged by guilt, he could not manage to sleep, and he desperately wanted to come back to Memphis to lead another march with the same factions that had resorted to violence previously. He

perceived this as crucial for his future plans. He announced that he would be back in town between the 3rd and the 5th of April. As King had feared, the press linked the failure of the march to the risks of the projected Poor People's Campaign. They were linking his presence to the likelihood of riots.

During those days King continued to feel very depressed. Still he was fighting all he could to convince his staff to return to Memphis, and they finally came around to his support. It was around this time that President Johnson declined to seek reelection and the nation could see the growing charisma of Robert Kennedy. King took great strength from these signs. He felt that Kennedy would take a stance on Vietnam and favor the Poor People's Campaign, or at least help create a supportive atmosphere around it.

On April 3, King, depressed and fearful at the turnout, did not go to the speech he was going to give, sending Abernathy instead. When Abernathy showed up, it was clear that the crowd clamored for King, and the faithful friend managed to persuade King to go and give another memorable speech. He said that if God had offered him a choice of a time to live in, strangely enough he would have chosen "a few years in the second half of the twentieth century," because "only when it's dark enough can you see the stars." He recalled when he had been stabbed in New York ten years earlier; he evoked the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, the fights of Albany and of Birmingham, the "I Have a Dream" speech, the movement in Selma and up to the present in Memphis. One can't help wonder if King was retracing the life tableau a person sees upon dying.

And this went even further with the words, “Now, it doesn’t really matter what happens now . . . because I’ve been to the mountaintop. . . . and I’ve seen the Promised Land. . . . I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. . . . I have a dream this afternoon that the brotherhood of man will become a reality.” And he finished, “Free at last! Free at last! God Almighty, free at last!” The speech was both a foreknowledge of death and an affirmation of life. After all, he had specifically reasserted, “I want to live.” After the speech King broke through his despair again.

* * *

We have reviewed three experiences and traced a great thread of coherence among them. Certainly we can suspect King for using biblical language with a certain license. The fact remains that in all these experiences we have an intensification of the experience of death, with the fear that precedes it, but also of the bliss that is known to those who have had a near death experience (NDE). And, the language, though biblical, refers exactly to what it means to have an experience of the other side that is now increasingly available to more and more human beings, specifically in an NDE. However, in King’s instance this experience was reached in a higher degree of awareness than is generally the case.

And Yet Only Human

If the above meant the attainment of ultimate wholeness then Martin Luther King Jr. could be remembered as a modern saint. That is not the case, nor the perception of his close collaborators, or of King himself. We need only turn to one or two aspects to illustrate what we mean.

On some occasions King lost his cool. Such was the case with Whitney Young of the Urban League, who opposed linking the Vietnam War to civil rights because he thought it hurt the ghettos. King was very upset and sad about his own reaction; he felt depressed when he confronted his own anger, and lost control over it. And, truth be told, more often than not, he offered brilliant examples of how to face violence upon his person—up to attempts to his life—without retaliating. Things stood differently in relation to King's sexual conduct.

Soon after the 1963 March on Washington, King had invited men and women friends to his suite at the Willard Hotel. The FBI eavesdropped on sexual activity in King's room, and later used the tapes to defame the leader. Similar allegations surfaced at other times. At the time of the Selma campaign the FBI intimidated King through recordings that highlighted his womanizing. King felt that the tape was a warning from God because he "had not been living up to his responsibilities in relation to the role in which history had cast him."

At the root of this problem lay the little time that King spent at home (10 percent according to his estimate) and the paramount need for acceptance and companionship that accompanied him. Women were seeking him out very assiduously, and in moments of loneliness he found it hard to resist the temptation. He confessed, "Every now

and then you'll be unfaithful to those that you should be faithful to. It's a mixture in human nature."

King was aware of not being a messiah or a savior. His friends knew that he was very, very human. By his own admission he was a troubled soul, not only troubled by the state of the world, but by the state of his own soul waging its inner conflicts. "I am conscious of two Martin Luther Kings," and "The Martin Luther King people talk about seems foreign to me." King had reached some deeper insights into human nature when he said, "Each one of us is two selves," and "The great burden of life is always to keep that higher self in command. Don't let the lower self take over." He acknowledged towards the end of his life that there was "a Mr. Hyde and a Dr. Jekyll in us," and that "I am a sinner like all God's children." This was said in relation to his sexual infidelities.

These views were also present when King summed up all of his convictions about the condition of the human being, asking, "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?" He answered that man is first of all a biological being with a physical body. Then he added that man is also a child of God, made in his image, a being with "the unique ability to have fellowship with God." But adding that man is also a sinner, "We must admit that he has misused his freedom. Some of the image of God is gone. . . . And so in a sense the 'isness' of our present nature is out of harmony with the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts us. We know how to love and yet we hate." We can see how far King moved from the simplistic Rousseau idea of the good man perverted by an evil society. The views expressed above are much

more subtle and dynamic. They squarely place on man's soul the responsibility and challenge of the birth of a new world.

For King, changing the world went hand in hand with changing himself, and that is finally what remains of most relevance in the example of what he is for future generations, and how he can inspire a movement for social change that moves beyond the surface of political tinkering alone.

Lessons for the Present

With one foot Martin Luther King Jr. walked in the aspirations of his time; with another he intuited horizons and dreams to come. His relationship with Marxism/Socialism shows how both aspects intertwined. On the one hand he saw in the Marxist early thinkers people with a fiery devotion to social justice. Nor did he fall into the trap, or the political intimidation, of anticommunism. He saw it for what it truly was—a smokescreen paralyzing people into false alternatives, a blank check used to justify excesses and discourage free inquiry.

From these premises he looked for a synthesis between capitalism and socialism, from a rather pragmatic standpoint, given his spiritual leanings that held him at arm's length from Marxist theory. His views turned toward something like the Swedish social-democratic model in which he saw no striking poverty and a consistent safety net for the underprivileged. He saw in it a “socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism.” From the theoretical perspective he was closer to Niebuhr, who married a Marxist historical analysis of the facts with the social message of the

gospels. This much is true of King the pragmatic thinker. The visionary in him showed further prophetic paths towards a future that is yet to emerge.

His analysis of the limitations of Marxism also reached further than most in his time could see. “Karl Marx got messed up, first because he didn’t stick with the Jesus he had read about; but secondly because he didn’t even stick with Hegel,” sums up King’s deeper convictions. The first objection points to Marx’s little-known early interest in Christianity, the personal battle that had thrown him into atheism and materialism. The second, deeper objection, is the recognition of Marxism’s dualistic thinking, at the antithesis to King’s Hegelian threefold thinking. Overcoming this dualistic thinking is something that goes beyond the postulation of a tame social-democratic compromise as the future horizon of humankind.

It is in the leader’s most intuitive and prophetic utterances that this finds expression. When King spoke of systemic ills he also offered a vision of what a new culture would need to rise up to. “We, as a nation, must undergo a radical revolution of values. When machines and computers, profit and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.” Note here that the revolution of values stands in contrast with materialism, certainly not a commonly held view in his time.

More prophetic still, and very timely for the new millennium’s social militancy, are King’s intimations of what a new world would imply. Already in Montgomery he had invited his followers to place the terms of choices in a wider perspective: “We stand today between

two worlds—the dying order and the emerging new. By resisting nonviolently the negro can speed up the coming of the new world.” And at the Prayer Pilgrimage he also stated, “If we indulge in hate, the new order will only be the old order.” In his view, “time was running out for America, for nonviolence, for the new moral order.” One can trace biblical origins in this restated vision. It corresponds nevertheless to an eminently practical rejection of all extremism or utopian ideals, a complete alignment of means and ends, a call for a powerful imagination that cuts across political thinking, a call to link personal and social change.

King’s vision is further expressed in his messianic understanding of the global dimension of the crisis facing humanity. Let’s turn once more to his words, to the repeated affirmation of the linked destiny of all people in the world. In an open letter to the white clergymen of Alabama, King said: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. . . . Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.” And in 1967 in a sermon given at Ebenezer Church he stated: “Before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you’ve depended on more than half the world [for your food]. This is the way our universe is structured, this is its interrelated quality. We aren’t going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.” In this too King stood as a moral force and a spiritual leader with profound understanding of the threats and positive forces between which the future stands.

The above is not written in invocation of another King to follow and lead us in the present. In King's charisma lay much of the limits to his action. In the early days of the civil rights movement, people were jokingly asking, "Where is the movement?" when they meant "Where is Martin Luther King Jr. today?" Basking in his charisma, King also led movements to their own disarray or, to say the least, to very unsatisfying conclusions.

Today we could wait in vain for someone of King's stature to lead us to new heights of civic consciousness. And dependence upon key figures would rather be the downfall than the strength of an independent civil society. Rather, it falls on all of us to be King's heirs, to affirm the most prophetic parts of his message. These we can summarize as the capacity to act out of one's own spiritual convictions; an ability to be the change we want to see in the world; an independence from the political sector together with the desire to engage with it in a constructive dialogue; assimilating and working with techniques of social technology that bring all parties to the table; and most of all changing our way of thinking away from the dualistic mindset that locks us into ideologies, party programs, and so on. New, radical approaches to social change have been developed and are fast accelerating, that will allow us to affirm the interrelatedness of all human beings, rather than holding on to old paradigms that would rely only on antagonism alone.