King's Spiritual Experiences

King was a deeply tormented soul to the last. He knew very well that the King he knew was only a pale shadow of the King people saw. His greatness lay in his striving to change and in his great determination to face tremendous fear without retreating. Not least of all, he intuited that we cannot promote collective change without the willingness to shoulder a great part of the burden personally. In that he was a modern Hiawatha, who knew himself to be both an individual of great capacities and a "cannibal." King's "cannibalism" took the form of sexual behavior. **(See sidebar)**

King on Himself

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."

King was aware of not being a messiah or savior. His friends knew that he was very, very human. By his own admission he was a troubled soul; troubled not only by the state of the world, but also by the state of his own soul waging its inner conflicts. "I am conscious of two Martin Luther Kings…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…The great burden of life is always to keep that higher self in command. Don't let the lower self take over." He acknowledged toward the end of his life that there is "a Mr. Hyde and a Dr. Jekyll in us…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 God's image, a being with "the unique ability to have fellowship with God." But he added 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 Rousseau's simplistic idea of the good man perverted by an evil society. The views expressed above are much more subtle and dynamic. They squarely place on the individual human soul the responsibility and challenge of the birth of a new world.

When King was young, the greatest challenge lay in putting into action the 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. There were three major experiences that can be seen as marking his growth. These experiences accompanied 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.

In January 1956, after the police started harassing the Montgomery carpool, they also arrested King for speeding. 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." 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 research was coming a step closer to immediate experience.

Soon after his arrest, King's house and church in Montgomery were bombed. Moreover, after that victory, the city ordered the bus company shut down. This brought back 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, 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 the porch of his house: "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."

The first two episodes found a culmination in 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 its wisdom. 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 capitalism nor socialism, an old dream that 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 toll 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 of how the operation could turn out.

In February of 1968 King was still under great strain. According to his colleagues he was acting strangely, such as when he repeated his self-eulogy ("A Drum Major for Justice") to Abernathy on a plane to Acapulco. He was in what others described as a recurring depression, and displaying a 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 about the link he was forming between this cause and his planned upcoming march on Washington. He had entered the fray in Memphis without being told about the local problems, particularly the violent fringes of the protest.

On March 28 he led a march that turned out to have some very unruly participants. 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 public perception of his upcoming planned 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. He desperately wanted to come back later 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 third and the fifth 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 re-election 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 about the turnout, did not go to the speech he had been 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. King 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 cannot help but wonder if King was retracing the life tableau that 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 foreshadowing of death and an affirmation of life. After all, he had specifically reasserted, "I want to live." After this speech King broke through his despair again.