

## The Life of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr.: Mostly In His Own Words

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In today's service honoring the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. we want to tell the story of his life through his own words; for King was one of the most eloquent writers and effective orators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

We will follow him from his birth on January 15, 1929, as a child growing up with middle class values in a traditional Black church led by his father –through a period of anger and hostility toward white people –through a period of increasingly liberal religious belief and introduction to non-violent processes for change – and through a reconversion toward neo-orthodox theology brought on by his direct experiences of evil in the world .

We will look at his period of leadership in the Civil Rights movement –showing his impatience with white liberals and culminating in the March on Washington and his most famous and most hopeful “I have a dream” speech given on August 28, 1963 before a crowd of 250,000 people, with millions of Radio and Television auditors world wide

Finally, we will consider his increasing radicalization, his growing pessimism, and the shift of his central concerns from racial equality to anti Viet Nam War and economic justice issues from 1966 to his death on April 4, 1968. For MLK has bequeathed to us not just a powerful, peaceful, and rosy vision of racial equality but also a darker vision of the violence and injustices perpetrated in the name of human greed and capitalism.

**Boyhood** – the passages in this section and the next come from an autobiography that King wrote in 1950 for a seminary class, so they do not necessarily represent his mature beliefs:

Reading 1.

I was born into a very congenial home situation. My parents have always lived together very intimately, and I can hardly remember a time that they ever argued or had any great falling out. I have never experienced the feeling of not having the basic necessities of life. These things were always provided by a father who put his family first ...

The community in which I was born was characterized with a sort of unsophisticated simplicity. No one in our community was in the extremely poor class. This community was not in the slum district. It is probably fair to class the people of this community as those of average income. Yet I insist that this was a wholesome community, notwithstanding the fact that none of us were ever considered members of the “ upper upper class.” Crime was at a minimum in our community, and most of our neighbors were deeply religious. I can well remember that all of my childhood playmates were regular Sunday School goers, not that I chose them on that basis, but because it was very difficult to find playmates in my community who did not go to Sunday School.

I was exposed to the best educational conditions in my childhood. At three I

entered nursery school. This great childhood contact had a tremendous effect on the development of my personality. At five I entered kindergarten and there I remained for one year until I entered first grade . . .

It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where loving relationships were ever present. It is quite easy for me to think of the universe as basically friendly, mainly because of my uplifting hereditary and environmental circumstances. It is quite easy for me to lean more toward optimism than pessimism about human nature mainly because of my childhood experiences.

But not everything about his boyhood was happy and loving:

### **Racial Awareness**

#### Reading 2

From about age three up until [age six] I had had a white playmate who was about my age. We always felt free to play our childhood games together. He did not live in our community, but he was usually around every day until about 6:00 ; his father owned a store just across the street from our home. At the age of six, we both entered school – separate schools, of course. I remember how our friendship began to break as soon as we entered school, of course, this was not my desire, but his. The climax came when he told me that his father had demanded that he play with me no more. I will never forget what a great shock this was to me. I immediately asked my parents about the motive behind such a statement. We were at the dinner table when the situation was discussed, and here for the first time I was made aware of the existence of a race problem. I had never been conscious of it before. As my parents discussed some of the tragedies that had resulted from this problem and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it, I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person. As I grew older, this feeling continued to grow. My parents would always tell me that I should not hate the white man, but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him. . . I did not conquer this anti White feeling until I entered college and came in contact with white students through working with interracial organizations.

### **The Call to Ministry, Liberal Theology & Its Rejection, Accidental Leadership on Civil Rights**

When he was still in high school Martin determined that he would enter the ministry largely because of his admiration for his father. His education in sociology at Morehouse College in Atlanta raised severe religious doubts and removed what he called “the shackles of fundamentalism” from his mind, leaving him in a theological position much like that of many liberal Unitarians. This liberal theology was reinforced both at Crozier Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, -- where King was student body president and Valedictorian of the class of 1951-- and at Boston University, where he got his Ph.D. in 1954.

In April of 1954, King, now married to Coretta Scott, became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama. On December 1 of the next year, Rosa Parks, a member

of the local NAACP, was arrested for disobeying segregation seating rules on a city bus. Four days later, King reluctantly became president of the Montgomery Improvement Association to lead African Americans' boycott of Montgomery's city busses. Within two months King was jailed on a speeding ticket and his home was bombed.

In 1957 he became de-facto leader of the liberal wing of the Civil Rights movement by becoming president of an organization that was soon renamed The Southern Christian Leadership Conference. That year Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which among other things, mandated desegregation of schools. Violence broke out at the court ordered desegregation of Little Rock High School and in the following year King barely survived a stabbing at a book-signing in New York.

In 1960 King published a new autobiographical article in the Christian Century reflecting his new understanding of human-kind.

Reading 3:

[When I was a senior in theological seminary, I was still] a thoroughgoing liberal. Liberalism provided me with an intellectual satisfaction that I could never find in fundamentalism. I became so enamored of the insights of liberalism that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything that came under its name. I was absolutely convinced of the natural goodness of man and the natural power of human reason.

The basic change in my thinking came when I began to question some of the theories that had been associated with so-called liberal theology. Of course there is one phase of liberalism that I hope to cherish always: its devotion to the search for truth, its insistence on an open and analytical mind, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason. Liberalism's contribution to the philological-historical criticism of biblical literature has been of immeasurable value and should be defended with religious and scientific passion.

It was mainly the liberal doctrine of man that I began to question. The more I observed the tragedies of history and man's shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin. My readings of the works of Reinhold Niebuhr made me aware of the complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man's existence. . . . I also came to see that liberalism's superficial optimism concerning human nature caused it to overlook the fact that reason is darkened by sin. . . Liberalism failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations. . . [but] if liberalism was too optimistic concerning human nature, neo-orthodoxy was too pessimistic. . . in its revolt against liberalism's over-emphasis on the power of reason, neo-orthodoxy fell into a mood of antirationalism and semifundamentalism, stressing a narrow, uncritical biblicism. . . I am now convinced that the truth about man is found neither in liberalism nor in neo-orthodoxy. Each represents a partial truth.

### **The Turn to Nonviolence and the Montgomery Experience**

While still in graduate school Reverend Dr. King had emphasized the social justice emphasis of Christianity, taking his cue from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Social Gospel movement in the U.S., and he had

begun to explore strategies of nonviolent resistance to injustice. These two perspectives he put into action in Montgomery:

Reading 4:

The “turn the other cheek” philosophy and the “love your enemies” philosophy are only valid, I felt, when individuals are in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations are in conflict a more realistic approach is necessary. Then I came upon the life and teachings of Mohandus Gandhi. As I read his works I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. The whole Gandhian concept of *satyagraha* (*satya* is truth which equals love, and *graha* is force; *satyagraha* thus means truth-force, or love-force) was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came for the first time to see that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom ...

The Negro people of Montgomery, exhausted by the humiliating experiences that they had constantly faced on the busses, expressed in a massive act of noncooperation their determination to be free. They came to see that it was ultimately more honorable to walk the streets in dignity than to ride the busses in humiliation. At the beginning of the protest the people called on me to serve as their spokesman. In accepting this responsibility my mind, consciously or unconsciously, was driven back to the Sermon on the Mount and the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance. This principle became the guiding light of our movement. Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method ... As the days unfolded, I became more and more convinced of the power of nonviolence. Living through the actual experience of the protest, non-violence became more than a method to which I gave intellectual assent; it became a commitment to a way of life.

I do not want to give the impression that nonviolence will work miracles overnight. Men are not easily moved from the mental ruts or purged of their prejudiced and irrational feelings. . . So the nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally it reaches the opponent and so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality.

### **Civil Rights Icon**

From 1958 through early 1963 Reverend King led or participated in many Civil rights demonstrations, sit ins, and boycotts, including several in Birmingham, where in April he was again jailed – there he wrote his second most famous piece –“Letter from Birmingham Jail” – in which he criticized the White liberal clergy for their failure to support his campaigns for civil rights:

Reading 5:

My Dear Fellow Clergymen,

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities “unwise and untimely.” You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. . . It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city’s white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now, I have heard the word, “Wait.” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists [Earl Warren] that, “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothered in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see the tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking, “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”. . . When your first name becomes “nigger,” your middle name becomes “boy” However old your are, and your last name becomes “John,” and your wife and mother are never given the respected title of “Mrs.”: when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness” – then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and when men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

In August of 1963, against the expressed wishes of John and Robert Kennedy, Reverend King organized and participated in the march on Washington at which he delivered his most famous “I have a Dream” speech, a 17 min oration which every American should hear – it is available on YouTube –Just Google Martin Luther King, I have a Dream – and it cannot be summarized In a few words; so we suggest as homework that you watch or listen to it later today.

### **Radicalization**

From the middle of 1965 Reverend Dr. King increasingly focused his attention on poverty, and beginning in 1966, on the Viet Nam War. In one of his last major speeches, “Beyond Viet Nam”,

given in April of 1967 King linked the two issues and offered his most radical analysis of American military and economic policies:

#### Reading 6:

The war in Viet Nam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American Spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality, we will find ourselves organizing “clergy and laymen concerned” committees for the next generation. . . .

In 1957 a sensitive American Official oversees said that it seemed to him that our nation was on the wrong side of a world revolution. During the past ten years [ 1957-67] we have seen emerge a pattern of suppression which has now justified the presence of U.S. military advisors in Venezuela. This need to maintain social stability for our investments accounts for the counterrevolutionary action of American Forces in Guatemala. It tells why American helicopters are being used against guerillas in Cambodia and why American napalm and Green Beret forces have already been active against rebels in Peru.

It is with such activity in mind that the words of the late John F. Kennedy come back to haunt us. Five years ago he said, “ Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.” Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken, the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments. I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution we, as a nation, must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. . . .

A true revolution in values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the sea and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits with no concern for the social betterment of the countries and say, “This is not just.” A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death ...

It is a sad fact that because of comfort, complacency, a morbid fear of communism, and our proneness to adjust to injustice, the Western nations that initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world have now become the arch anti-revolutionaries. This has driven many to feel that only Marxism has a revolutionary spirit. . . . Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into the world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism ...

By the beginning of 1968 it was clear to the thirty-nine year old Reverend King that he was soon going to be killed, and in a speech given on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, one day before his assassination, he expressed his faith that in spite of his short term pessimism, in the long run both peace and

equality would be achieved. Likening himself to Moses, he told his listeners that though he would not be with them, they would eventually reach the promised land.

**MAY IT BE SO.**