

MLK- THE MOST DANGEROUS NEGRO IN AMERICA

It's hard to talk about MLK, Jr. and be interesting because every conscious person on the planet has seen the films and videos of his life, read the books he wrote and heard the news about him. But I'll try! I thought you might like to hear how Dr. King was chosen to lead the new, modern civil rights movement and the four pivotal events that redefined and changed the direction of the movement during his lifetime. But why did the FBI call him the most dangerous Negro in America? Because he was. He was a danger to the stability of the Black churches, which had been extremely conservative; he was a danger to his followers in Birmingham, where the KKK was more openly active and terrifying than any other place in the South; he was a threat to the established order because it was unclear that he could control his followers and maintain their non-violent stance; and therefore it was unknown whether the FBI and other Law Enforcement agencies could maintain public order, which it turns out they couldn't. The real danger, though, was that his rhetoric was so fiery and fire begets fire and fire can be really uncomfortable. Fire can blaze out of control as well as smoldering and bursting forth when least expected and least appropriate. He definitely was the most dangerous Negro in America.

Here's how MLK was chosen to lead and organize the 381-day bus Boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, the beginning of his activism. The 150-year old Civil Rights Movement had existed quietly and almost invisibly before Rosa didn't go to the back of the bus. We didn't have television then. The only people who really knew what was going on were the people involved, such as: the underground railroaders, the Urban League, Marcus Garvey's United Negro Movement, the NAACP, CORE, and small groups here and there plus those who heard the oral stories from their elders. Also, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had appointed The Fair Employment Practices Commission with his Executive Order #8802 in 1941 and his wife Eleanor was deeply involved with the Negro struggles and integration efforts in the South. Following that there was a strong effort to integrate the railroad unions. In 1956, when the bus driver told Rosa Parks 3 times that she had to move from the front row of the black section because the white section was filled and she refused, he said he would call the sheriff and have her arrested. She replied with four small words that were heard and seen around the world, on television, igniting the public conscience and heart -- the words, "You can do that" and he did. A white attorney, James Durr, and his wife, Virginia, bailed her out and together with several black attorneys contacted the NAACP, where Rosa was active and well known and the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association. The Montgomery Improvement Association, founded by a black attorney whose name I can't remember, and the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, called for a public meeting of African-Americans and there it was decided that there would be a boycott of the buses, not only by blacks but by all who ride buses and wished to participate. It is estimated that 42,000 bus rides were lost in the year that followed, although the bus company terminated service in that area shortly afterwards. Martin Luther King, Jr., the new, young pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and newly-elected President of the Improvement Association, was asked if he would be the spokesman for the boycott and help organize it. He and Coretta had just had their first baby, Yolanda, and he knew that he would be a target for dissenters; so he was reluctant but did agree. He was also very fearful and with good reason. A short time later his house was fire-bombed while he was at a meeting and a few weeks after that a bomb was found on his front porch. The following year, at a book-signing event, a woman stabbed him in the heart, barely missing the

aorta and he nearly died. From then on he lived with high stress and anxiety and always feared that each appearance would be his last. After Martin's first speech to a gathering of 5,000, his destiny was sealed. His impact on that huge gathering was the first real test of his non-violent philosophy. When the boycott ended because the Supreme Court had decreed discrimination on public transportation in Alabama to be illegal, he rode as many buses as he could, in different cities, as did thousands of students in every southern state, attempting to integrate Public Transportation all over the South. These bus rides, called Freedom Rides, were a prelude to the famed 1963 & 1964 Freedom Rides in which many were killed, numerous more beaten and terrorized and thousands jailed for "Disturbing The Peace". Your Unitarian minister, James Reeb, was beaten by a gang of thugs after the march to Selma and died three days later. At that time, the Unitarians were deeply involved in Peace efforts; the Presbyterian Church had launched its "Ban the Bomb" efforts and churches everywhere were taking sides on the question of Peace and non-violence. The success of the bus boycott had convinced the leaders of the African-American community that they needed a coordinating center and formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which organized numerous sit-ins, protest, boycotts, etc. throughout the South. 1960 saw numerous such activities and it was then that Dr. King called on the Fellowship of Reconciliation, (FOR), well-known trainers of non-violent protest to help the movement remain non-violent. These trainers went into the schools to talk to the teachers about how to prepare the children for the backlash that would probably occur. FOR had founded CORE, (Congress on Racial Equality), in 1942 for the training of passive resistance and non-violent, direct action. I was a member of a small group who founded the 1st Campus chapter of CORE at Pasadena City College. A racially mixed group, we went together to restaurants, musical events, roller-skating rinks and other public places and were always asked to leave. When we refused we were always arrested. I was 19 at the time and that was three years before Rosa didn't go to the back of the bus.

There were 4 extremely pivotal events in the life of the modern civil rights movement, each of which changed the direction that the movement was going in. The first was the March on the Capitol on August 28, 1963 where the world received the "I Have a Dream" speech. After the march by over 250,000 people, Dr. King, Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson and other leaders met with President Kennedy, then adjourned to the Lincoln Memorial for King's famous speech. After that march and speech the American people were solidified into an actual historical, life-changing movement that unequivocally linked religious responsibility with social justice. His dream became our dream and it was universal.

The second pivotal action was MLK's "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail". He had been to jail a number of times after speeches and demonstrations in different parts of the country, and he used what he called 'the sacrament of imprisonment' for writing time. But in January of 1963 a group of Christian ministers, both black and white, had written to Dr. King, beseeching him to desist from his activism and to allow the courts to take care of integration and discrimination. Their reasoning was that 1) it was bringing outside agitators into the city, causing disorder; 2) that his present activity was 'unwise and untimely' because of his 'willingness to break laws', thus making black Americans targets for police attack; and, the citizens had already suffered greatly from increased activity from the KKK, fire hoses, police dogs and turmoil in the schools and churches; plus increased police brutality; 3) they commended the Birmingham Police for keeping order and preventing violence. Martin's famous response has become one of the outstanding

documents on Justice in American history. In answer to #1 he pointed out, as had Ghandi before him, that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. So anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider in this country. "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality in a single garment of destiny." As for #2, he said that it was true that the protests were never timely, "I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was well timed, according to the timetable to those who have not suffered from the disease of segregation. "For years now I have heard the word, 'wait'. It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This 'wait' has always meant never. We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward the goal of political independence while we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter." "Justice delayed, is justice denied". And the third point, "I don't believe that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its angry, violent dogs biting 6 unarmed non-violent Negroes. I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer, and their amazing discipline in the midst of the most inhumane provocation. When these disinherited children of God sat down at counters, they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thus carrying our whole nation back to the great wells of democracy that were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence." There was much, much more in this letter including the 4 elements of any non-violent campaign. A close co-worker with Dr. King, Andrew Young, asked the American Friends Service Committee to publish the "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" and they sold 200,000 copies in the first month of its publication. They called it a most eloquent expression of Quaker Peace Testimony. I have left 10 copies each of the letter on the counter and the accompanying AFSC pamphlet for those of you who may want to study it further.

The 3rd pivotal event which changed the direction of the civil rights movement radically was Dr. King's anti-war speech, BEYOND VIETNAM, challenging President Johnson's war policies. This was in May of 1966. Between 1954 and 1965, blacks had scored significant social, legal and educational victories; but along side these was the escalating war in Vietnam. Both WEB DuBois and President Eisenhower had warned the American public that the military/industrial complex would use its political power to encourage military involvement around the world. DuBois' concern was that black troops were routinely put on the most dangerous front lines and suffered an inordinate number of deaths in all wars. We learned about that again from Vernon Baker's experiences as described in his book, LASTING VALOR. Dr. King had spoken against the war from his church in Atlanta but didn't fully identify himself with the anti-war movement until he agreed to lead 5000 marchers in Chicago in May of 1966. He gave this famous speech to a group of "Clergy and Laity Concerned" at the Riverside Church in New York the following week. Almost every person on the planet has been inspired by the "I Have a Dream" speech, the Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance speech, and the "I Have Been to The Mountaintop" speech, given the night before he died. There is nothing more that can be said about them. Yet this moving and challenging speech, so seldom heard, was the one that completely changed the civil rights movement. It was Martin's 1st major speech on the war and became the focus of people's growing awareness of the link between militarism abroad and human rights at home. He lamented that we had destroyed Vietnam's most cherished institutions, the family and the village, their lands and their crops; that we had cooperated in the crushing of the nation's only non-communist

revolutionary force -- the Unified Buddhist Church. One of the Buddhist leaders wrote to him, "Each day the war goes on, the hatred increases in the heart of the Vietnamese and in the hearts of those of humanitarian instincts. The Americans are forcing even their friends into becoming their enemies. The image of America will never again be the image of revolution, freedom and democracy, but the image of violence and militarism." Dr King hated that Christian Chaplains were sent into the killing fields to help young Americans become better fighters and that millions of our young people were being turned into "life-takers" instead of life givers. This speech firmly linked the anti-war movement with the civil rights movement. It also caused profound changes because so many of his followers considered it unpatriotic and distanced themselves. Many of his Civil Rights colleagues thought of the war as unrelated to civil rights and Stokely Carmichael's "Black Power" surge in the colleges, often advocating violence, were siphoning enthusiasm from Dr. King's non-violent methods. Additionally, many southern blacks did not want integration with whites. They mistrusted whites, did not believe they could be true allies and resented the upheavals that Martin Luther King had generated and his efforts at integration. We were also in the middle of the McCarthy era and the FBI promulgated the idea that Dr. King was a communist, which made him then "the most dangerous Negro in America" in the eyes of many.

Conversely, many of the already impassioned anti-war groups added new energy and impetus to the civil rights program. It brought into collaboration the American Friends Service Committee, (the Quakers), CORE, and FOR, who were already deeply involved with training conscientious objectors and entire pacifist movements. Together these became the Poor People's Campaign, which Martin helped organize but did not live to see -- but which I did -- in Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis and Washington, DC. This collaboration also brought in a stronger Gandhian influence, especially after Martin went to India to consult with and witness the work of the Indian Congress in New Delhi and the Gandhian Peace Foundation. The American Friends Service Committee organized and sponsored that trip and it was financially supported by SCLC, the MIA and the philanthropic Christopher Reynolds Foundation, which channeled its funds through the American Friends Service Committee, which organized the trip. These groups, together with the world-wide Labor Union Movement and Ralph Nader's now flourishing Global Consumer Movement moved the American Civil rights movement squarely into the International Human Rights movement.

The BEYOND VIETNAM speech is long but here is a patchwork of quotes from it: "A time comes when Silence is betrayal. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. Some of us who have already broken the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. A few years ago there was a shining moment in our struggle. It seemed there was a real promise of hope for the poor -- both black and white -- through the poverty programs. But I knew that America would not invest the necessary funds and energies in the rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such. Perhaps the more tragic realization of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor. It was sending their sons and husbands and brothers to fight and die in extraordinary high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the young black men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles

away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia that they had not found in Georgia and Harlem. So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.

Finally, as I try to delineate for you and for myself the road that leads from Montgomery to this place, I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men the calling to be a son of the living God. Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is the vocation of sonship and brotherhood and because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned, especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come tonight to speak for them.”

The fourth pivotal movement in the Civil Rights saga was the assassination of MLK exactly one year later, on April 4th of 1968. The collective national grief and shock translated into a solidarity of activism and legalism that continued to give people recourse against discrimination in housing, education and employment. It continues today in churches and organizations like yours, and mine, and yours and yours. Dr. King himself called Death the irreducible common denominator of all people. This was said at a funeral for the young girls who were killed on September 15th as they were leaving Sunday school when their church, the 16th St. Baptist Church, was bombed. He added these thoughts, “I hope you can find some consolation from Christianity’s affirmation that Death is not the end. Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door that leads man into Life Eternal. Let this daring faith be your sustaining power during these trying days.

At times life is as hard as crucible steel. It has its bleak and painful moments. Like the ever-flowing waters of a river, life has its moments of drought and of flood. Like the ever-changing cycle of the seasons, life has the soothing warmth of the summers and the piercing chill of its winters. But through it all, God walks with us. Never forget that God is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.” Those lines remind me of what I said at one of his memorials a short time later, “while a long life may not be good enough, a good life is always long enough.”

Martin Luther King, Jr did not just dream -- he had a plan and an agenda, an agenda he believed could turn his dream of universal freedom and human solidarity into reality, an agenda that was spiritual, political, social and economic. The social portion of that agenda included the unfinished business of combating rampant racism and poverty in our own nation. He asked us to remove and heal the racial scar extending across the length and breadth of the continent, to commit ourselves to the daily quest for justice on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised. He asked the poor in our country to stand up to Presidents, the FBI, death-dealing military and corporate systems, in the non-violent traditions of Ghandi, a Hindu, Abdul Ghafar Khan, a Muslim, of Glenn Smiley, his mentor from the FOR and of Dubois, Luthuli, Lumumba and Mother Claudia Jones. He had completely embraced the non-violent philosophy, learning first from his mentors at Morehouse College, Dr. Benjamin Mays and Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, the professor of religion at Morehouse. Later, while pursuing his Ph.D at Crozier, he studied the life and teachings of Ghandi with Dr. Abraham Muste, then president of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Dr. Mordecai Johnson, the president of Howard University. He had learned well from them that non-violent resistance is the strongest form of human power and it takes the strongest and the bravest to wield it.

The time is up and I would like to close with my own personal observations of Martin Luther King, Jr. Several years ago, the Regional CAA, now CAP, held its annual banquet in Lewiston on Martin Luther King's birthday. They asked me, as a board member, to give the opening talk. And this is what I presented. It is as true for me today as it was then and has been for over 40 years:

I am so grateful to be able to speak for a few minutes about a person who influenced my life more than any other, and about whom I know a great deal. His name at birth was Michael Martin King, Jr., later changed to Martin Luther King, Jr. Today is his birthday, and I am celebrating all the good that has come to me because of him.

My good fortune was to be a civil rights worker with CORE (The Congress on Racial Equality) for three years before Rosa didn't go to the back of the bus. The Civil Rights movement was already in progress in the early fifties, but Rosa Parks' refusal to give her seat on the bus to a young white man in 1955 was the incendiary event that exploded into what became known officially as the modern Civil Rights Movement. The black churches in the South formed a coalition that later became known as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist minister, became its titular leader. A man of fire -- and fire begets fire in others -- in his case, many others. But it was the fire of Love. Everything about him was about Love.

When he was preparing his workers for a housing march to protest red lining, Martin said the words that became the theme for my life, which up to that time had been a young life of good intentions but no direction, no focus. Like many young activists, I was all over the map. Then he said, "We must use the Will as the servant of Love." That became the focus and theme for my young life then, and forty years later, when I became a minister, it became the theme of my ministry; and I still hear the words coming from his mouth to our hearts. "WE MUST USE THE WILL AS THE SERVANT OF LOVE." It was because of love that he pursued a life of non-violence, and the methods of non-violent protest and civil disobedience.

As he sat in a Birmingham jail, sick and being denied medication, Martin wrote to the association of ministers, "Never allow anyone to bring you down so low as to hate them. We must use only the weapon of love." And when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in December of 1964, he voiced the same theme in the words, "I believe that unarmed Truth and Unconditional Love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant." and "I accept this prize on behalf of all people who love peace and brotherhood."

Twenty-five years earlier, Mahatma Gandhi had said, "God dare not appear to the poor except in the form of bread." But King believed that the Love of God comes to all in the form of affordable housing and literacy programs, so that everyone can have a chance for a step up. And he believed that God comes to all in the form of equal opportunity in employment and a living wage, the last thing he talked about at the Riverside Church on the Sunday before he died, where he coined the phrase, "There can be no Peace without Justice". It was these things that comprised the Poor Peoples' campaign, which he inaugurated, together with CORE and the American Friends Service committee, but whose accomplishments he did not live to see. President Lyndon Johnson, however, caught that vision and was determined to use his administration to implement many

aspects of that program, including the passage of The Civil Rights amendment to the constitution, guaranteeing people of color the right to vote. So the work he began, is the work we continue. We walk in his shadow and in his footsteps. I am proud to have worked with Dr. King, and I am proud to be here with you tonight.

So -- now I will close with one more quote from this great gentleman whose birthday we celebrate today. And here it is: "POWER AT ITS BEST IS LOVE IMPLEMENTING THE DEMANDS OF JUSTICE. JUSTICE AT ITS BEST IS LOVE CORRECTING EVERYTHING THAT STANDS AGAINST IT." No matter how long we live, those who knew him will always feel his Spirit walking through the walls and whispering in our ears, "We must use the Will as the servant of Love." Thank you all for all you do and thank you for allowing me to express my gratitude tonight to Martin Luther King, Jr. for all that he contributed to my life. mb