"Who Cares about King?"

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Michael Eric Dyson in his intriguing and insightful book on Dr. King entitled *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* relates a story of a sermon delivered by Charles Adams at the historic Riverside Church in July 1998. Dyson recounts the sermon as he seeks to make plain the complexity of the forces which surround King's memory, his progressive agenda, and his personal vision. In a manner described by Dyson as a brilliant illumination of a subject by panoramic vision and exhaustive exegesis, he quotes Adam's analysis of why King's birthday was made into a national holiday.

> The same Congress and President which signed Martin King's birthday as a national holiday had refused to pass a new civil rights bill in the 1980s. They mandated that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday be a federal holiday, but they had refused to demand the immediate release of Nelson Mandela; refused to protect affirmative action; devastated the Civil Rights Commission; amputated the legs and arms of the systems for the poor; snatched fifteen billion dollars away from poor babies, in order to reduce the tax liabilities of the wealthy; took away seven hundred and fifty billion dollars from the cities; cut off anti-poverty programs; polluted the air; destroyed jobs; carried on an illegal war in Nicaragua; despoiled the environment; de-neutered public education. And these are the same people that made Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a paid federal holiday! Now why did Ronald Reagan sign that bill? [Dyson quotes Adams to ask.] Could it be that Mr. Reagan understood that the easiest way to get rid of Martin Luther King, Jr. is to worship him? To honor him with a holiday that he never would have wanted. To celebrate his birth and his death, without committing ourselves to his vision and his love. It is easier to praise a dead hero than to recognize and follow a living prophet. The best way to dismiss any challenge is to exalt and adore the empirical source through which the challenge has come.

Regardless of what you believe about Adams's comments about King, you must readily admit that great ambivalence exists about King's place in our society. What is the precise legacy of King? Is he someone whose legacy and accomplishments we should honor, as some suggest, or should we downshift our praise for King who is more and more revealed through trickling

historical accounts as a man of clay whose indiscretions and moral failures tarnish his legacy?

It is plain that King is a figure whose place within American society is ambiguous - King is one whom many either love to endorse and to vilify. He is seen as by some as a chief American statesmen, potent Christian theologian and pastor, strategic civil and human rights worker whose legacy opened up our society at one of its most volatile and violent moments. These would point to King's nonviolent engagement for the purpose of enfranchisement, open housing, job fairness, and changed attitudes in society.

By others, including many within the African-American community, King is perceived as a naive assimilationist whose efforts, although praiseworthy at one level, have in the long run had only marginal impact on the actual life chances of the poor and oppressed in America. These would argue that King's accomplishments were helpful to a certain extent for a small privileged minority who benefited most from the Civil Rights gains. They would suggest that more people make up a kind of permanent underclass in America today than when King marched thirty ago, and that King's efforts were less than satisfying in their power because he capitulated too much to the powers that were, and likewise did little or barely nothing to enhance those least able to take advantage of the doors his initiatives had opened.

In light of our current state of race, class, and culture relations, what difference does King make now? Frankly speaking, who cares (or should care) about King today? Although we celebrate his birthday with marches, speeches, lectures, and memorials, who really seeks to revisit his vision and make real in our day the elements of the dream which he so often spoke, and for which he so often suffered. Outside of the fanfare and hoopla of a holiday celebration, what ought to be, if anything, the dimensions of King's vision which we ought to seek to understand and exemplify in our lives and efforts to give proper place to our honor of King?

I believe that King's vision of human community should not only be studied and discussed, but implemented and cherished. While there are a host of legitimate and convincing reasons that could be argued for a serious rediscovery of King's vision today, I want to focus on

three simple yet I believe profound elements which would add to our dialogues about race, culture, and class in contemporary American society.

First, we should care about King's vision because of the hope his vision generates for us in pursuing the good for each other in our shared relationships. Regardless of how difficult or intractable the problem of race and cultural relationships were in society, King asserted that we share what he called a "cosmic companionship" in our efforts, a kind of distinct divine intervention which precedes, underpins, and guarantees all authentic efforts towards forgiveness and reconciliation. This theological conviction asserted that God was the guarantor of our justice seeking, and elevates our engagement with each other from mere argument about economic fairness to fundamental human dignity.

Second, we ought be concerned about King's legacy because he anchored all issues of justice and peace making between individuals and peoples in the fundamental dignity of all human beings. Underlying our need to forgive each other and dialogue together regarding our shared destiny King asserted that every person, regardless of how obscure or unimportant was endowed with a fundamental dignity which deserved to be respected, cared for, and cherished, purely because they were a human being made in God's own image.

Finally, I believe we ought to care for King's vision in a serious way because of his understanding of the interconnected and shared realities of all peoples and nations on earth. King asserted that because our human being together is interconnected in one seamless garment of destiny, as he put it, we can never trivialize or ignore what takes place in any people group or individual, however insignificant or modest. To be a human being is to recognize our shared status, position, and destiny, and to work together for the sake of our shared human calling and potential. Let's briefly look at each of these elements of King's vision in turn, keeping in mind my appeal for us to go beyond the annual celebration to a serious, ongoing discovery of King's relevance for our reconciliation and community building today.

To begin with, even the most cursory reading and interpretation of King's articles, books,

sermons, speeches, and interviews reveals a deeply theological strand which underpins his notion of human freedom and human liberation. Rather than removing the theology of his Black church experience from his public advocacy, King brought his theology, his God-talk and conception of God, to center stage in both his personal advocacy for civil rights and human equality. King grounded his understanding of the struggle against racism, militarism, and poverty on the basis on his faith in the personal God of the Jewish-Christian Scriptures, a deity whose mandate was plain regarding our sacrifice on behalf of the poor and needy:

> The Christian ought always to be challenged by any protest against unfair treatment of the poor, for Christianity is itself such a protest, nowhere expressed more eloquently than in Jesus' words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord."[1]

From the very beginning of his social justice efforts until his last public address prior to his assassination in Memphis--in the successful Montgomery bus boycott (1955-56), during his defeat in Albany (1961), his demonstrations and imprisonment in Birmingham (1963), his memorable "I Have A Dream" speech and march to Washington in 1963, his march for voting rights in Selma (1965), his marches and time in Chicago (1966), his dialogue with Black power advocates in Meredith Mississippi in 1966, and his preparation for the Poor Peoples March and stand against Vietnam in 1967--at every stage of his outward encounter with the forces of racism and recalcitrant social structures King invoked his confidence in God to engage and overthrow any and every force of evil which sought to dehumanize, degrade, and destroy human life.

In his *The Measure of a Man* King discusses what he deems to be the three dimensions of a complete human life. The first dimension involves the full acceptance of one's own integrity and inner powers, determining to use them fully as we have opportunity. The second dimension involves the altruistic love of all human beings, breaking out of one's own individualism into a

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[1] Martin Luther King, Jr. ***Stride Toward Freedom*** (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986, p. 84

kind of authentic, human altruism. The third and most important dimension, is the affirmation of God as the ultimate ground of all life and the center of human liberation and well-being. Speaking of those persons who master the first two dimensions but ignore the third, King suggests:

> They develop their inner powers; they love humanity; but they stop right here. They end up with the feeling that man is the end of all things and that humanity is the end of all things and that humanity is God. Philosophically or theologically, many of them would call themselves humanists. They seek to live life without a sky. They find themselves bogged down on the horizontal plane without being integrated on the vertical plane. But if we are to live the complete life we must reach up and discover God.[2]

No human being can be fulfilled only by loving themselves, which is the length of a person's life, or even loving their neighbor as they love themselves, which is its breadth or width. The first and even greater commandment, according to King, which underlies and gives purpose to life's joys and struggles and integrates every dimension of that life is the cultivation of a love for God. This love, properly sought, understood, and realized, is the most significant dimension of a life that is fully human, fully alive, and complete. This love, says King, represents the "height of life. And when you do this, you live the complete life."[3]

Only through the power of God, who underlies life and provides providential care to all things, can any human being, regardless of their culture, clan, nationality, or social categorization, find the necessary hope to sustain themselves in a world filled with bigotry, cruelty, confusion, and pain. What is central in King's vision of the divine is that all humankind, in all of its diverse and distinct manifestations of color, culture, race, gender, and history, derives its elemental worth and strength from the God that undergirds all of life.

The power to engage in acts of self-sacrifice on behalf of those least cherished and most vulnerable does not well up from within humankind unaided. Our ultimate hope is not rooted even in our ability to rediscover and apply the vision of a King. In his view, all the resources and

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2 Martin Luther King, Jr. ***The Measure of a Man.*** Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988. pp.49-50.

3 ***Ibid***., pp.55-56.

passion necessary to sustain the "Freedom Movement" as the civil rights struggle was called in the late 1950s was not merely a struggle of Black people on their on behalf. On the contrary, King asserted that the very cosmos was structured with this just predisposition towards the hopeless and the helpless. Those who suffer unjustly and those who commit to suffer alongside them can be assured of the moral underpinning of all things, and the resources of God Godself to aid in the ultimate victory over evil. As Noel Erskine said of King's vision here, "There was a theological commitment from King to work for the justice of those edged out on the margins of society, and he believed that God was involved in the stuff of history."[4] James H. Cone is correct in his observation that whether we speak of the Montgomery boycott, the demonstrations in Birmingham, or the Selma march, whether we address King's dialogue with Black Power or Vietnam, King consistently turns to the faith of the Black church in moments of his frustration and despair.[5]

> In a sermon entitled, "How Should a Christian View Communism," King suggests that:
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> At the center of the Christian faith is the affirmation that there is a God in the universe who is the ground and essence of all reality. A Being of infinite love and boundless power, God is the creator, sustainer, and conserver of values. In opposition to Communism's atheistic materialism, Christianity posits a theistic idealism. Reality cannot be explained by matter in motion or the push and pull of economic forces. Christianity affirms that at the heart of reality is a Heart, a loving Father who works through history for the salvation of his children. Man cannot save himself, for man is not the measure of all things and humanity is not God. Bound by the chains of his own sin and finiteness, man needs a Savior.[6]

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[4] Noel Leo Erskine. AKing and the Black Church.≅ ***The Journal of Religious Thought*** 48 (2) (Winter-Spring 1991-92): p.13. Erskine also notes the profound sense of God-relatedness in King=s vision, which he attests to the close relationship King had with the church throughout his years as leader of the civil rights movement. AIn alluding to the inexpressible joy he experienced when he learned that the United States Supreme Court had ruled Alabama=s state and local laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional, he cited with approval the exclamation of a bystander: AGod Almighty has spoken from Washington!≅, (***ibid***.).

[5] Cone, ***The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr***., p. 27

[6] King, ***The Strength to Love***. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963, p. 97.

In King's first national address in May of 1957 King stated that the victory won in Montgomery only months earlier and the new cry for freedom that had begun to unfold in Asia and Africa were in line with the unfolding work of this God actions via the means of divine providence. This cry for human dignity and freedom mirrors something essentially true about the nature of the universe, King suggested:

> It tells us something about the core and heartbeat of the cosmos. It reminds us that the universe is on the side of justice. It says to those who struggle for justice, "You do not struggle alone, but God struggles with you." This belief that God is on the side of truth and justice comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith. There is something at the very center of our faith which reminds us that Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the drums of Easter. Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by His name. There is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again."[7]

Ten years after this address, in a Christmas sermon delivered in Ebenezer Baptist Church at Atlanta on Christmas eve, 1967 King reiterated his fundamental belief that God has invested the universe with its own fundamental morality which cannot be overwhelmed, however pernicious or injurious the evil may be that appears, at least on the surface, to have extinguished any hope of justice and compassion:

> If there is to be peace on earth and goodwill toward men, we must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations. . . . Men love darkness rather than the light, and they crucified Christ, and there on Good Friday on the Cross it was still dark, but then Easter came, and Easter is an eternal reminder of the fact that the truth-crushed to the earth will rise again. . . . And so this is our faith, as we continue to hope for peace on earth and goodwill toward men: let us know that in the process we have cosmic companionship.[8]

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[7] Martin Luther King, Jr. ***I Have a Dream.*** ed. James M. Washington. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992, p. 23.

[8] Martin Luther King, Jr. ***The Trumpet of Conscience.*** New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967, p. 75.

In reminiscing about her initial days with Martin King as he had begun to lead the Montgomery Improvement Association struggle, Coretta Scott King speaks of an ongoing dialogue among the leaders why Montgomery, of all places, would be the place where a movement be born where African-Americans were able to unite peacefully for the cause of freedom. In the course of their exchange they found one final explanation.

> Though some of the impetus came from the Supreme Court decisions, and some was due to the particularly unjust actions of the city bus company, these were not enough to explain it. Other blacks had suffered equal or greater injustices in other places and had meekly accepted them. I suggested that it was due to his own leadership and to his devoted coworkers, but Martin said, "No." There was no rational explanation that would suffice. Therefore we must accept something else. The birth of the Movement could not be explained "without a divine dimension." My husband devoutly believed that there is "a creative force that works to pull down mountains of evil and level hilltops of injustice." As we have seen, he regarded himself as an instrument of this force, and he said, "God still works through history, His wonders to perform." He believed that "God had decided to use Montgomery as the proving ground for the struggle and the triumph of freedom and justice in America."[9]

While King suggests that this proposition of God's active working on behalf of the broken and beaten is not necessarily a proposition that can be readily defended or upheld in the face of the appearance of the relative success of evil, he nonetheless embraces this as a central tenet in his thought, the recognition of which has been acknowledged in ethical treatments on King.[10]

However one may wish to call it, King suggests, either the principle of concretion of Alfred N. Whitehead, a process of integration with Henry N. Wieman, the Being-itself of Paul Tillich, or a personal God, whatever the name "some extra-human force labors to create a

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[9] Coretta Scott King. ***My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*** New York: Penguin Group, 1993, p. 109.

[10] Cf. William D. Watley=s treatment of the theological and philosophical underpinnings of King=s thought in his ***Roots of Resistance: The Nonviolent Ethic of Martin Luther King, Jr.*** Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985, pp. 127-128.

harmony out of the discords of the universe."[11] King asserts "that" God performs, but not "how" God performs. God's work in history on behalf of the broken and the despised, cannot be tracked, and no prophetic gaze will ensure that they will be able to detect the timing, place, or event which will trigger such intervention from God. Yet, the intervention is certain and will happen.

God is undeniably committed to the struggle of those who are most oppressed and unjustly treated, but those oppressed are not themselves God, nor are they (or can they) ever be placed in a kind of final or ultimate category. The poor and the needy are not made divine; rather, they enjoy "cosmic companionship" as they struggle in a universe where God's providential guidance and God's own structuring of reality guarantee that evil shall not ultimately triumph, nor goodness be ultimately defeated. Hope cannot be crushed, for we will learn to care and love, if we persist and do not give in to despair and hate.

In King's thought, this principle of justice is impartial and touches all human beings wherever they live and struggle. Black suffering is not absolutized above the sufferings of any other people, nor is any ontological priority given to Black pain or experience. Yet, in the life struggle of Blacks in the American arena, and through God's direct intervention, providential orderings, and divine dissatisfaction with evil, the cause of the Black struggling poor has the sanction and resources of God and God's universe to buttress all efforts for their just, and ultimately successful, cause.

Let it not be suggested that because King's understanding here on cosmic companionship is neither naive nor sentimental. King believes that the freedom struggle of the oppressed will always be, in fact, a struggle. The conflict will demand sacrifice and suffering, even death. From

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[11] ***Ibid***., p. 69. This faith in God enables us to deal creatively with shattered dreams, and gives us the confidence, even in the midst of struggle, that there is a divine Spirit who will not abandon us in our need. AHowever dismal and catastrophic may be the present circumstances, we know we are not alone, for God dwells with us in life=s most confining and oppressive cells. And even if we die there without having received the earthly promise, he shall lead us down that mysterious road called death and at last to that indescribable city he has prepared for us≅ (cf. King, ***Strength to Love***, p. 95).

the very beginning of King's public career, there were numerous, consistent threats made on his life, and that of his family, and the theme of death and the need to be free from the power of turning back in the face of hatred, violence, and cruelty was ever present in his speeches, relationships, and conversations. Melbourne Cummings and Lyndrey Niles have documented this ongoing struggle, showing the prevalence of the theme of sacrifice and struggle in order to secure the freedoms due to every human being. This notion of sacrifice was highlighted by the mention of death on certain occasions (so as neither to frighten nor discourage the protestors as they engaged in their nonviolent protests), and was prominent from the first organized meetings with the initial Montgomery conflicts and throughout his career, until the very end of his life.[12] In a sermon early in the movement, in 1956, during the boycott, King admits that their stance on behalf of equal rights and human dignity could mean that some might have to die. This taking a stand of justice, King said, will require a willingness to suffer and sacrifice:

> Sometimes it might mean going to jail. If such is the case you must honorably grace the jail with your presence. It might even mean physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing could be more Christian.[13]

In the world evil existed, and men and women who stood with God would have to fight on behalf of the good and oppose the evil.[14] Only the reality of God's presence and actions can secure the one who is engaged in the struggle for the elemental rights of another. The more one

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[12] Melbourne S. Cummings and Lyndrey A. Niles. AKing as Persuader: Facing the Ultimate Sacrifice.≅ ***The Journal of Religious Thought*** 48 (2) (Winter-Spring 1991-92): 49-56.

[13] ***Ibid***., p. 50. In a very poignant article in the ***Christian Century*** on the subject of the numerous threats against his life, King stated that his own personal sufferings had given shape to his life, that he did not consider them an imposition, but he had been nearly fatally stabbed, his house bombed, arrested several times, and received a threat of death virtually every day of his involvement in the movement (cf. ***Christian Century*** 77(27) (April 1960: p. 510).

[14] This point will have to be revisited as one of the key ramifications of King=s concept of the universal and unlimited dignity and worth of humankind. He will also argue under the notion that because human beings are of value and dignity, that any complicity with evil against them can never be tolerated.

engages the unjust situation, the greater the risk to their person, and so the greater the temptation to abandon the cause, for risk of loss, of abuse, and even ultimately of death. In King's view, this struggle to continue to engage is fundamental to both the psychology and spirituality of one who recognizes that God Godself is the ultimate ground of all justice seeking for the oppressed. As one gradually comes to understand God as ground, then a fundamental shift occurs where one's own resources and strengths are substituted for the resources of God.

This shift, however, as dramatic and necessary as it may be, does not secure the one so engaged against possible loss and or sacrifice. While the nonviolent resister is passive in the physical sense, King suggests, she is active in her nonviolent resistance to evil. Understanding both what is at stake, and understanding how God, in the midst of the suffering, is the one who undergirds this struggle, the resister is therefore buttressed, empowered to face the blows, to endure the suffering unjustly.

In King's sermon, "Our God is Able," King relates a personal experience which highlights this critical element in his view of God as the ground of life and guarantor of the struggle for human liberation.[15] King contrasts in the sermon his pre and post-Montgomery days, with the former being days of fulfillment, with no burdens or problems outside of his high school, college, seminary, and graduate school days, which were minor and of little consequence. The latter, which began when he agreed to be the leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association, was difficult from the beginning, and was often associated with trials, threats, and confrontations. From the first, King began to receive threatening telephone calls and letters in his home, and although many of the initial threats he discounted as "the work of a few hotheads," he soon discovered that many of the threats were in earnest. King said that he "felt myself faltering and growing in fear."[16]

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[15] Martin Luther King, Jr.: ***The Strength to Love***. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963, pp. 112-114. Cone recounts this same episode in his treatment on King=s theology, cf. Cone, ***The Theology of Martin Luther King., Jr***., p. 27.; also see AThou Fool,≅ 27 August 1967, King Center Archives.

[16] ***Ibid***., p. 113.

After an extraordinarily strenuous day, King speaks how one night, the evening of January 27, 1956, he received a call a few weeks after the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott. The caller said: "Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery." King hung up the phone, and could not sleep afterwards. His fears, all of them, had appeared to come down on him at once, and he recounted that he had reached, "the saturation point." While many such threats had come to King before, this particular threat stayed with him. He was tortured over it, was not able to go to sleep, went to the kitchen to heat some coffee, and began to search for answers to his dilemmas. King recites the incident:

> In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone." At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.[17]

In a different account of the same incident spoken of by Cone, King suggested that in his musings he drew upon the theology and the philosophy that he had just studied in the universities trying to give philosophical and theological reasons for the existence and the reality of sin and evil, but the answer didn't quite come there. In this moment of agony and despair, King turned to the God of his Black faith:

> Something said to me, you can't call on daddy now; he's in Atlanta, and 175 miles away…You've got to call on that something, on that person that your daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way. And I discovered then that

[17] Cone***, The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.,*** p. 27.

> religion had to become real to me and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it. Oh yes, I prayed a prayer. And I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering, I'm losing my courage, and I can't let people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage they will begin to get weak.[18]

In recalling this event again in his book, *Stride for Freedom,* King recounts again his hearing of the inner voice which said: "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world."[19]

This even was formative for King, holding a kind of singular place over the course of his entire representation in the freedom movement,[20] To take King seriously is to seek to rediscover the ground of his experience of faith and belief that the divine plays in our reconciliation and forgiveness. King's understanding of God as the ground and guarantor of his life and the freedom struggle provides the hope, the transcendent ground, and the overarching vision to sustain the struggle for justice,[21] even under the specter of physical harm and death as one commits oneself

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[18] ***Ibid.,*** 27.

[19] Martin Luther King, Jr. ***Stride Toward Freedom.*** New York: Harper, 1958, p. 135

[20] This event was still told by King a full eleven years later as a turning point in his ministry and life. When queried about his political ambitions late in his public career as social activist, King said A>I have no ambitions in life but to achieve excellence in the Christian ministry . . . I don=t plan to do anything but remain a preacher.= He spoke about the transforming experience he had had at the kitchen table in the Montgomery parsonage eleven years earlier, and how God had promised never to leave him alone. >I believe firmly in immortality. . . . I=m not worried about tomorrow. I get weary every now and then, the future looks difficult and dim, but I= not worried about it ultimately because I have faith in God. . . Sometimes I feel discouraged, and feel my work=s in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again,=≅ (cf. David J. Garrow, ***Bearing the Cross***, p. 576).

[21] King speaks of this sustenance in many places throughout his career. One notable example is during his stay in the Birmingham jail, and hearing afresh from his lawyer and friend Clarence Jones that the actor Harry Belafonte was going to raise money for the imprisoned demonstrators, King expressed his renewed confidence in God=s ability to sustain even in the darkest situation: AI found it hard to say what I felt. Jones=s message had brought me more than relief from the immediate concern about money; more than gratitude for the loyalty of friends far away; more than confirmation that the life of the movement could not be snuffed out. What silenced me was a profound sense of awe. I was aware of a feeling that had been present all along below the surface consciousness, pressed down under the weight of concern for the movement: I had never been truly in solitary confinement; God=s companionship does not stop at the door of a jail cell. I don=t know whether the sun was shining at that moment. But I know that once again I could see the light≅ (cf. Martin Luther King, Jr., ***Why We Can=t Wait***. New York: Harper & Row, 1964, p. 75).

to the work of justice and love.

The Dignity and Worth of the Human Personality

Second, in addition to King's notion of God as ground and guarantor of life and the struggle for human liberation respectively, King also embraces a theological anthropology which suggests that our understanding of humankind[22] must be informed by the dignity and worth of each and every human personality. This view of human dignity was built upon King's notion of God as the transcendent source of all life to all creation, and may serve as the foundation for understanding his response to the Black Power movement, and the need to resist any practice, system, structure, or doctrine that called this notion of humanity into question. For King, humanity must ultimately be understood in conjunction to their God-relatedness; almighty God has stamped upon the nature of every person and every people God's own image, and therefore each individual and every people group are to be cherished, protected and defended against harm and abuse, and this applies not only to the victims but to the victimizers as well.

King asserts that each human being, regardless of their particular racial, cultural, class, or national origin, is created a free being, made in the image of God, to be understood as a token of God's marvelous creation, crowned with glory and honor, and is a child of God.[23] Despite the fact that a human person chemically, in King's estimation, is worth only around ninety-eight cents, he suggests that the artistic genius of a Michelangelo, the poetic genius of a Shakespeare, or the spiritual genius of Jesus of Nazareth cannot be explained in light of that sum. Human beings, each of them is a mysterious "being of spirit," distinguished from the lower animals, are somehow in nature but, at the same time above it. This view of humankind is not rooted in a secular tradition, but anchored in the religious heritage of the Judeo-Christian vision of human

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[22] I will quote King=s language, which refers most often to the term Aman≅ as meaning Ahumankind.≅ For the integrity of the quotation, I will stay with his usage, but am aware of its usage, and somewhat ambivalent about its use.

[23] King, ***The Measure of a Man***, p. 16-17.

being:

> Deeply rooted in our religious heritage is the conviction that every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth. Our Judeo-Christian tradition refers to this inherent dignity of man in the Biblical term "the image of God." The "image of God" is universally shared in equal portions by all men. There is no graded scale of essential worth. Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator. Every man must be respected because God loves him. The worth of an individual does not lie in the measure of his intellect, his racial origin or his social position. Human worth lies in relatedness to God. An individual has value because he has value to God. Whenever this is recognized, "Whiteness" and "Blackness" pass away as determinants in a relationship and "son" and "brother" are substituted. Immanuel Kant said that "all men must be treated as ends and never as means." The immorality of segregation is that it treats men as means rather than ends, and thereby reduces them to things rather than persons.[24]

This vision of the equal, diverse, yet unified vision of humankind for King was rooted in the Christian belief that "there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right of another."[25]

King held deeply to this notion of the dignity and worth of human personality, referring to a host of authorities, which for King was also reinforced and confirmed by a number of different sources, including documents such as the Declaration of Independence.

> "All men," it says "are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Never has a sociopolitical document proclaimed more profoundly and eloquently the sacredness of human personality.[26]

This recognition of the sacredness of human personality, the view that every single

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[24] Martin Luther King, Jr., ***Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*** New York: Harper & Row, 1967, p. 97.

[25] James M. Washington, ed. ***A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.***, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986, p. 119.

[26] ***Ibid.*** King also recognizes the same idea of the dignity and worth of all human personality in language of the Constitution, in Kant=s Categorical Imperative, and with Martin Buber=s dialogical philosophy detailing the difference between the AI-It≅ and the AI-Thou≅ relationship.

person is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth which is not earned nor negotiable, which cannot be denied or lost, which is intrinsic, even within the very worst behaving person among us, constitutes for King the greatest ramification of the priority of God and our derived worth in our relation to God. In the final analysis, a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, whatever their phenotype or physiological makeup, must be valued because they are valued by God. In King's view, the Christian ethic is elementally an ethic of recognized value, the notion that all human beings must be respected for they have been endowed with worth, value, and meaningfulness from God Godself.[27] This God-relatedness is the essential ground of personal value and interpersonal relation; all other possible grounds of whatever kind, and all other denominations among persons, however embraced or pitted against one another, only have marginal importance.

This is not to say that King advocated the dissolution of individual people groups or cultures into a kind of common generic culture where the distinctives among people were ignored or lost. King's view of integration has often times been misinterpreted to mean mindless assimilation into the mainstream of American society, with no emphasis on retaining or celebrating the rich differences between cultures, nations, and people groups. Rather than undermining difference, the affirmation of the inherent dignity and worth of every person and every people authenticates it. Within every human being and within every human grouping, one may recognize the legacy of God's own endowed investment, God's own image, which instantly and irrevocably provides every human being with unqualified value.

Despite this fundamental truth which was inherent in the Judeo-Christian tradition and embodied in the socio-political documents of the national politic, King observed another strand of affirmation deep within the American psyche in its description and relation to the Negro. Human beings are free to choose if they will affirm the truth or follow lies, misrepresentations designed for the well-being of their own in-group. Human beings are free beings made in the image of God, and are not led by instinct; they can choose between alternatives, and so can choose to reject the

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[27] ***Ibid.***, p. 122.

truth and embrace the lie, to choose the good or the evil, the low or the high.[28]

It is plain, in King's view, that many Whites chose to deny the truth of the sacredness of human personality, and the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings. They drafted another set of propositions about Blacks that appeared to contradict America's most fundamental propositions regarding the equal value of human beings, created for freedom and full participation in a free and open society. Garth Baker-Fletcher quotes King in an address to the New York State Civil War Centennial Commission where he speaks to this "imposition of inferiority" as the "slave chains" today upon the minds of Blacks:

> The imposition of inferiority externally and internally are the slave chains of today. What the Emancipation Proclamation proscribed in a legal and formal sense has never been eliminated in human terms. By burning in the consciousness of white Americans a conviction that Negroes are by nature subnormal, much of the myth was absorbed by the Negro himself, stultifying his energy, his ambition, and self-respect. The Proclamation of Inferiority has contended with the Proclamation of Emancipation, negating its liberating effect.[29]

King suggests that the inability of humankind to acknowledge, recognize, and embrace this fundamental principle of our shared sacredness under God as God's children has always lead and will definitely lead to disastrous effects. This proclamation of inferiority, despite its falsity and absurdity, leads those who embrace it to view human beings as things, not children of God. Applied specifically to the Black struggle for full participation within the society, the domain of battle would always be that struggle to find again the way back to dignity and worth, to reclaim one's sense of basic human worth and value in a political and social context designed to humiliate, shame, and degrade Blacks in their self-conceptualization. The target was the psyche of the Black man, the Black woman, the Black child, the Black family, the Black church, and the Black community. King was always sensitive to the importance this internal, invisible struggle which

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[28] King, ***The Measure of a Man***, pp. 20-21.

[29] Garth Baker-Fletcher. AKing=s Late View of Dignity, 1962-1968: Seven Motivic Concepts.≅ ***The Journal of Religious Thought.*** 48 (2) (Winter-Spring 1991-1992): p. 19.

lay at the center of any valid effort to provide authentic freedom to those who had been classified as less than human, as chattel, as inferior. In commenting on the victory gained in one of the campaigns early in the freedom movement King suggested:

> I think the greatest victory of this period was . . . something internal. The real victory was what this period did to the psyche of the Black man. The greatness of this period was that we armed ourselves with dignity and self-respect. The greatness of this period was that we straightened our backs up. And a man can't ride your back unless its bent.[30]

This same assessment was made later during an interview with Merv Griffin on his program. When asked in July 1967 what the civil rights movement had done for the Negro individually King responded:

> Well, I think the greatest thing that it has done is that it has given the Negro a new sense of dignity, and a new sense of somebodyness. And this is the greatest victory we have won. Turning away from the external changes that have come about, I think that the greatest thing that has taken place is the internal change in the psyche of the Negro. And the Negro has a sense of pride that he's desperately needed all along. And, uh, he is able to stand up, and, uh, feel that he is a man.[31]

This new sense of "somebodyness"[32] was the critical, necessary ingredient for Blacks to internalize if they were to embrace their inherent dignity and worth as children of God, made in

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[30] Coretta Scott King, ***The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.*** New York: Newmarket Press, 1984, p. 47. Ron Large makes this same point when he suggests AThe notion of dignity is where the social significance of Martin Luther King=s nonviolent theory begins; it is the realization that social change, the vision of justice, lies within the transformation of character from an abject passivity to a sense of worth. A major portion of King=s involvement in the struggle for civil rights was the effort to alter the elements of character, to develop a moral character that is capable of rejecting violence≅ (cf. Ron Large. AMartin Luther King, Jr.: Ethics, Nonviolence, and Character. ***The Journal of Religious Thought.*** 37 [2] [1980-81]: p. 54). The role of the notion of dignity is crucial to every other sphere of King=s nonviolent ethic.

[31] Garth Baker-Fletcher, AKing=s Late View on Dignity,≅ p. 26.

[32] King is explicit that the positive response to the prolonged dilemma of Black despair must be to develop a rugged sense of this Asomebodyness.≅ AThe tragedy of slavery and segregation is that they instilled in the Negro a disastrous sense of his own worthlessness. To overcome this terrible feeling of being less than human, the Negro must assert for all to hear and see a majestic sense of worth. There is such a thing as a desegregated mind. We must no longer allow the outer chains of an oppressive society to shackle our minds. With courage and fearlessness we must set out daringly to stabilize our egos. This alone will give us a confirmation of our roots and a validation of our worth≅ (cf. King, ***Where Do We Go From Here***, pp. 122-23).

God's image, and therefore worthy of respect and equality. King is explicit on this point, suggesting that if Blacks were to go beyond the cultural homicide waged against them, then they must rise up with an affirmation of his own Olympian personhood. Any movement for Negro freedom which overlooked this necessity would fail, and no amount of legislation, civil rights bills, or external fiat can produce this kind of change:

> The Negro will only be truly free when he reaches down to the inner depths of his own being and signs with the pen and ink of assertive selfhood his own emancipation proclamation. With a spirit straining toward true self-esteem, the Negro must boldly throw off the manacles of self-abnegation and say to himself and the world: "I am somebody. I am a person. I am a man with dignity and honor. I have a rich and noble history, however painful and exploited that history has been. I am Black and comely." This self-affirmation is the Black man's need made compelling by the White man's crimes against him.[33]

King well realized that unless Blacks who had been classified as inferior and sub-human rejected the culturally and religiously sanctioned lies about their humanness, they would continue to live out their lives in the shadow of that same, fallacious historical conditioning which created the environment where such abuse and inequity flourished. In this sense, all true liberation for King, is anchored in the articulation of this truth, embodied in direct resistance and defiance against lies and injustice.

The question that each person must ultimately confront, King suggests, is simple yet profound: "Who am I?"[34] To grapple with that question, in the midst of the American rejection of the Negro, is what King contends is "the Negro's greatest dilemma," to accept this ambivalence of being a Negro in America, of being a "little bit colored and a little bit white:"

> The Negro is the child of two cultures-Africa and America. The problem is that in the search for wholeness all too many Negroes seek to embrace only one side of the natures. Some, seeking to reject their heritage, are ashamed of their color, ashamed of black art and

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[33] ***Ibid***., pp. 43-44.

[34] ***Ibid***., p. 53.

> music, and determine what is beautiful and good by the standards of white society. They end up frustrated and without cultural roots. Others seek to reject everything American and to identify totally with Africa, even to the point of wearing African clothes. But this approach also leads to frustration because the American Negro is not an African. The old Hegelian synthesis still offers the best answer to many of life's dilemmas. The American Negro is neither totally African nor totally Western. He is Afro-American, a true hybrid, a combination of two cultures.[35]

For King, this realization of the two-ness of the consciousness of Black people in America, a concept recognized in DuBois' understanding of Black American life, was a signal insight. On the one hand, King is quick to embrace the full meaning of the African rootedness of all Blacks in America.

> Who are we? We are the descendants of slaves. We are the descendants of slaves, the offspring of noble men and women who were kidnapped from their native land and chained in ships like beasts. We are the heirs of a great and exploited continent known as Africa. We are the heirs of a past of rope, fire, and murder. I for one am not shamed of this past. My shame is for those who became so inhuman that they could inflict this torture on us.[36]

On the other hand, King affirms with no shame his groundedness in American history and culture, as shaped as it is by the majority White culture. As difficult and terrifying as it may be, America is the home of Black Americans. They are neither fully African or fully American. Though abused and scorned though it is, the destiny of Blacks is tied up with the destiny of America, and notwithstanding all the psychological appeals of becoming more identified with Africa, King suggested that the Negro "face the fact that America is now his home, a home that he helped to build through 'blood, sweat, and tears.'"[37] The only hope is not creating a separate black nation within this nation, but as colored peoples band with people of conscience from the

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35 ***Ibid***.

36 ***Ibid.***

37 King, ***Where Do We Go From Here?***, p. 54.

too often apathetic majority to create a new, liberating environment where all could enjoy security and justice.

The freedom movement essentially, was a movement of "this growing self-respect of the Negro," where the Negro was challenged to affirm afresh a new sense of dignity and worth through nonviolent resistance, and no longer tolerate exploitation and humiliation:

> This growing self-respect has inspired the Negro with a new determination to struggle and sacrifice until first-class citizenship becomes a reality. This is at bottom the meaning of what is happening in the South today. Whether it is manifested in nine brave children of Little Rock walking through jeering and hostile mobs, or fifty thousand people of Montgomery, Alabama, substituting tired feet for tired souls and walking the streets of that city for 381 days, or thousands of courageous students electrifying the nation by quietly and nonviolently sitting at lunch counters that have been closed to them because of the color or their skin, the motivation is always the same-the Negro would rather suffer in dignity than accept segregation in humiliation.[38]

The fact that America abandoned its vision of the sacredness of human personality, and chose to exploit Blacks for economic gain reveals a kind of disconnect within the nation with its own moral vision. This disconnect requires remedy if the nation is to survive. To fail to acknowledge human beings as sacred in themselves is to depersonalize them. This depersonalization cannot be contained; it will lead the perpetrator to abuse, malign, mistreat, even destroy others without recognizing their culpability or the inherent evil of their acts. For King, to fail to treat each person as sacred in and of himself or herself is to desecrate them. When you apply this argument to the life of Black people you can, according to King, make sense of the horrendous abuse which was often tolerated even justified by many, well-meaning, even religiously inclined Whites:

> So long as the Negro is treated as a means to an end, so long as he is seen as anything less than a person of sacred worth, the image of God is abused in him and consequently and proportionately lost by those who inflict the abuse. Only by establishing a truly integrated society can we return to the Negro the quality of "thouness" which is his due

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[38] King, ***I Have a Dream,*** p. 66.

because of the nature of his being.[39]

Bigotry and discrimination is not so much about the suffering of the out-group which has been so depersonalized that the in-group may perpetrate its abuses upon it. The abuses are signs of a fundamental denial of a critical truth regarding the nature of persons. The bigot, according to King, is hopelessly deceived and in error regarding the nature of persons. Regardless of the reasons given to justify the inequities or injustices, the person inflicting the abuse is committing sacrilege. She is profaning and desecrating a human being, someone who bears God own image and personage.

King's term for the tendency of one human being to deny the image of God in another, a denial which inevitably results in the abuse of the one who has been denied, is to "thingify" them.[40] A person, a people group, or a nation which discounts our shared God-relatedness and mutual sacredness under God can become monsters, and justify their brutalities upon others with philosophically and theologically precise arguments. To "thingify" is to exploit; since they are not persons, these "things" can be used, be made to suffer, denied basic goods, even killed and vilified as the enemy. In one sense, King's entire ethic of nonviolent direct action can be seen as the central ethical ramification of this fundamental tenet about people. Human beings, created as the children of God, stamped with God's own image, and therefore invested with unqualified dignity and worth is the reason why it would be unconscionable to kill, maim, or deliberately destroy them.

This treatment of the centrality of the notion of the dignity and worth of all human in King helps us understand his response to the Black Power movement. King refused to give special status or place to Black people on account of their suffering. He was unequivocal in affirming the legitimate value of all human beings, regardless of their particularity and in spite of

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39 James M. Washington, ***A Testament of Hope***, p. 119.

40 Martin Luther King, Jr., ***I Have A Dream***, p. 177.

their lived morality. To be sure, King recognized the positive values of Black Power, especially in its call to a "new sense of manhood, to a deep feeling of racial pride and to an audacious appreciation of his heritage."[41] Black Power was effective in arousing within Negroes a new majestic sense of their own value, and the elimination of shame in being Black. Yet, King tended to connect Black Power to Black separatism, suggesting in some sense that there might be a "separate black road to fulfillment."[42] Black Power, in its broadest and most positive meaning for King, resonated with the civil right movement's call for Black dignity and self-worth, and in its least virulent form, sought to call to Black people to garner the requisite economic and political strength in order to attain the legitimate goals Blacks were seeking[43].

Despite these similarities between the civil rights and Black Power movements, King rejected Black power as being inconsistent with the essential affirmation of the dignity and worth of all human beings as made in the image of God, and as a failed strategy for social change. King believed that no vital revolutionary movement of love and justice can flourish built on hate and disillusionment. "But revolution, though born of despair, cannot long be sustained by despair."[44] In King's vision it represented "a dashing of hope, a conviction of the inability of the Negro to win and a belief in the infinitude of the ghetto."[45] King characterized the Black Power movement as essentially a movement of negativity and hopelessness, and asserted that "today's despair is a poor chisel to carve out tomorrow's justice."[46]

In a real sense, King's repudiation of violence is anchored in his notion of the dignity and

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41 ***Ibid***., p. 41.

42 ***Ibid.***, p. 48

43 ***Ibid***., p. 36.

44 ***Ibid.***, p. 45.

45 ***Ibid***., p. 47.

46 ***Ibid***., p. 48.

worth of human beings. Violence as a strategy, in King's mind, was the antithesis of creativity and wholeness, destroying community and brotherhood. It was neither practical nor viable, and would be a suicidal act of despair, quickly quelled and thoroughly defeated. Violence against persons is fundamentally immoral.[47] Violence as a strategy is faulty because it too easily surrenders the high ground of good moral conscience to an oppressor. In the quest for power we ought never to by-pass our concern for morality and the right.[48]

To resist violence, however, is not to be equated with passivity in regards to evil. Writing in his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," King saw himself as standing in the middle between two identity extremes in the Black community, the complacent, who as a result of oppression and abuse, lost their ability to engage the injustices, but have accommodated themselves to its reality. On the other side stood the Black nationalist groups, represented by the Nation of Islam, those who concluded that Whites are the devil, the Anti-Christ, and the embodiment of what is evil in the world today. King suggested "I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the 'do-nothingism' of the complacent, nor the hatred and despair of the Black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest."[49]

As one who believes in the dignity and worth of every human being, even of the oppressed, King advocates nonviolent direct action, a proven tactic in resisting evil,[50] as well as an intrinsic deduction of the *agapic* love of God, expressed in the life of Jesus, which never for

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47 King, ***Stride Toward Freedom***, p. 212-13.

48 King, ***Where Do We Go From Here?***, p. 59.

49 King, ***Why We Can=t Wait***, pp. 86-87.

50 Coretta King neatly sums up the way nonviolent direct action had come to be regarded in the King movement. AMontgomery was the soil in which the seed of a new theory of social action took root. Black people had found in nonviolent, direct action a militant method that avoided violence but achieved dramatic confrontation, which electrified and educated the whole nation. It identified the evil, it clarified the wrongs, it summoned the latent strength of the oppressed and provide means to express their determination. Without hatred or the abject being on their knees, the demand for freedom emerged in strength and dignity. Black people had been waiting for this, and instinctively they seized the new method and opened a new era of social change≅ (cf. Coretta Scott King, ***My Life with Martin***), p. 138.

one moment lost sight of the dignity and worth of each person, even our enemies.[51] Nonviolence does not ignore or run from the oppressor but confronts and engages them; it is essentially dialogical. It gives the message AI am not avoiding penalties for breaking the law-I am willing to endure all your punishment because your society will not be able to endure the stigma of violently and publicly oppressing its minority to preserve injustice.[52]

In the affirmation of the dignity and worth of every human being, King recognized the radicality of such an affirmation for an oppressed minority. How does an abused minority group resist the unjust laws, practices, and policies of an unjust structure, while, at the same time, affirm one's deepest conviction in the humanity, the dignity, worth, and value of the oppressor?

Through nonviolent protest, King reversed the meaning within the liberative situation: the authorities were shown to be unjust; going to jail was not a disgrace any longer but was transfigured into a badge of honor. "The Revolution of the Negro not only attacked the external cause of his misery, but revealed him to himself. He was somebody. He had a sense of somebodyness. He was impatient to be free."[53] Freedom is not given, it must be earned in every generation,[54] and resistance to evil and maladjustment to the wrong is the duty of every one who affirms the dignity and worth of every human being. The transformed nonconformity, which leads to a new self-definition involves suffering, but "Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear."[55] As we affirm our own dignity and the dignity of both our peers and our enemies, we embrace a struggle which helps us to oppose the structures of evil without hating or harming those who benefit from it. King asserts that the transformation

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51 Ervin Smith suggests that in light of King=s own understanding of the worth and dignity of every human being under God, the nonviolent method suggested itself as Athe only morally justifiable method of social change≅ (cf. Ervin Smith, **The Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.**, p. 156).

52 ***Ibid.***, p. 15.

53 King, ***Why We Can=t Wait***, p. 30.

54 Coretta Scott King, ***My Life With Martin***, p. xiii.

of the psychology of the oppressed always provides momentum to their demands for full inclusion in society. They are impatient, they cannot wait, they do not bow.

> If [the Negro] is still saying, "Not enough," it is because he does not feel that he should be expected to be grateful for the halting and inadequate attempts of his society to catch up with the basic rights he ought to have inherited automatically, centuries ago, by virtue of his membership in the human family and his American birthright.[56]

This notion of the dignity and worth of every human being deserves our full attention today. If forgiveness, reconciliation, and partnership are to become reality in our interracial and intercultural relationships, we must begin by affirming the fundamental worth of all parties involved, and in asserting it, seek to operationalize that vision in our relationships, policies, and interactions together. King's view here is radical in nature.

The radical nature of this notion has yet to be explored fully in our relations between and among peoples in conflict. Acknowledging one's own security in God as the ground and guarantor of life and human liberation, and affirming the dignity and worth of every human being as participating in a fundamental God-relatedness, the resistor of evil can employ the suffering situation to tutor, instruct, and shame the oppressor into the same realization of our shared sacredness. The capacity to endure must be matched with the capacity to inflict, as in King's modified Gandhian quote:

> We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children; send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities and drag us out on some wayside road, beating us and leaving us half dead, and we will still love you. But we will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And in winning our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process.[57]

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55 King, ***Strength to Love***, p. 25.

56 King, ***Why We Can=t Wait,*** p. 32.

57 King, ***Stride Toward Freedom,*** p. 217.

The affirmation of the dignity of every person, meant that the oppressor is invested with the same dignity and value as anyone else. King is adamant in suggesting that one's struggle for justice must never be accompanied by a desire to defeat, to retaliate, or humiliate them.[58] Hate destroys one's sense of values, eliminates the possibility of relationship, and the possibility of friendship.[59] Black peoplehood does not require anti-Whiteness,[60] nor retaliation.[61] Bitterness is the true enemy in the struggle, destroying the personality of the one who embraces it, and produces a hatred that is too great of a burden to bear in those who nurture it. Only forgiveness, which removes all barriers for future relationship, creates the atmosphere necessary for a "fresh start and a new beginning," and reconciles, desiring "a coming together again." At no time must we return hate for hate, for we must love or perish.[62]

What is clear here is that for King, his notion of the dignity and worth of the individual can never be compromised, not even for the worst persons. There is no attempt to humiliate the opponent, but to win their friendship and understanding. All resistance is directed against forces of evil rather than persons, who happen to be the doers of the evil. I would suggest that the radical nature of King's notion here has not begun to be explored in our modern day contexts, and offers us important insights which may be explored for improving our interracial relationships today. The dignity and worth of each person in King gave rise to his commitment to nonviolence, non-retaliation, reconciliation, friendship making, restoring, making invitation to restored relationship. All of these products arise from the presupposition that all human beings,

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58 King, ***Strength to Love***, p. 143.

59 ***Ibid***., pp. 46-48.

60 Coretta Scott King, ***My Life With Martin***, p. 33.

61 King, ***Strength to Love***, p. 39.

62 King, ***Strength to Love***, pp. 48, 51, 91-92; King, ***The Trumpet of Conscience***, 74-75; King, ***Where Do We Go From Here***?, pp.64-5.

including and even the worst oppressor, is a sacred person, invested with the image of God, created as a child of God.

The Interconnectedness of All Things and the Beloved Community

The last of the three thematic strands in the theological and ethical vision of King we need to rediscover flows from the first two. As one canvasses the life and thought of Martin King you detect a clear line of argument: because God is the ground of all life and the guarantor of all human liberation, we can have confidence that all things work together in the universe under God's providential guidance for the cause of the just. And since God has created all human beings, endowing them in God's own image as a child of God, each person and every people is invested with dignity and worth that is unearned and unqualified. And finally, since all human beings are created by God in God's image, all human life of all peoples everywhere is interrelated and interdependent. Human beings ought to, therefore, strive with all that is within them to live together in unity, peace, and freedom in beloved community.

This third element of King's vision grows out of the first two assumptions, and in some manner, completes them. King's allegiances as a theologian and social activist were not in any way limited to the concerns or contingencies of a single group or issue. James Cone articulates this egalitarian and globalist position of King well when he suggests:

> Unlike most white theologians who do theology as if their definitions of it are the only ones and as if their problems are the only ones which deserve the attention of disciplined theological reflection, Martin King did not limit his theological reflections to the problems of one group. While he began with a focus on the racial oppression of blacks, his theological vision was universal. He was as concerned about the liberation of whites from their oppression as oppressors as he was in eliminating the racial oppression of blacks. He was as concerned about the life chances of brown children in Vietnam as he was about black children in America's cities. King's vision was truly international, embracing all humanity.[63]

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63 James H. Cone, ***The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.***, p. 36.

This statement about King's vision is accurate. The broadness and inclusiveness of his vision directly flows from his view of the nature of persons in relationship with each other, and the nature of society as it unfolds and struggles toward its divinely-mandated ideal.

A powerful illustration of King's view regarding the interrelatedness of all human beings is stated succinctly and pregnantly in his book, Where Do We Go From Here?:

> All men are interdependent. Every nation is an heir of a vast treasury of ideas and labor to which both the living and the dead of all nations have contributed. Whether we realize it or not, each of us lives eternally "in the red." We are everlasting debtors to known and unknown men and women. When we arise in the morning, we go into the bathroom where we reach for a sponge which is provided for us by a Pacific Islander. We reach for soap that is created for us by a European. Then at the table we drink coffee which is provided for us by a South American, or tea by a Chinese or cocoa by a West African. Before we leave for our jobs we are already beholden to more than half the world.[64]

King argues in a different manner than he did regarding our shared God-relatedness. In that concept, King suggests that we are connected by virtue of our shared participation in the image and creation of God, but here, the interconnection we sense is the overlapping, interlocking, and interconnecting of our existential selves in the world into one mighty web, one glorious family whose life concerns, needs, potentials, and lives interconnect. Despite the artificial things we have tended to reify and although we may assert and formalize various kinds of divisions and differences between us, we are nonetheless one single race, one humanity living together on this earth-all persons, all families, all cultures, and all peoples together. King recognizes that this level of interconnection tends to be fairly unconscious for us, but it is real, nonetheless.

In the Letter to the Birmingham jail, King reasserts this notion that all human beings and their life concerns and challenges are connected, at the level of all communities, states, and individuals:

> I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere

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64 King, ***Where Do We Go From Here?,*** p. 181.

> is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea: Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.[65]

In an alternative form of this pronouncement recorded in a sermon in King's text, *Strength to Love*, King adds to this statement by suggesting "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.[66]" Again, King asserts that states, communities, and persons are interconnected; whether we tend to be cognizant of this connection or completely unaware of its reality, a fundamental connection between persons and their lives and destinies. Whether we acknowledge, deny, or ignore this connection, King suggests it is present, affecting our lives, having made us "debtors" to countless people who expended their goods, energies, and life for my convenience, well-being, and resourcing.

King also speaks of this interrelated structure of reality in terms of a "world house." He discusses with an analogy:

> Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: "A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together." This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together-Black and White, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu-a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interest, who because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.[67]

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65 King, ***Why We Can=t Wait***, p. 77.

66 King, ***Strength to Love***, p. 70.

67 King, ***Where Do We Go From Here?***, p. 167. King carefully demonstrates that, regardless how deeply Blacks struggle and long to be secure and at peace in their Ahomeland,≅ of America, they cannot ignore this larger world house in which we also live. The larger world house, and its implications, is what I take to mean King=s struggle with securing a beloved community, a Aworld fellowship≅ where the Aworld house≅ becomes emblematic of the justice, love, and peace of the kingdom of God.

This "world house," filled as it is with diverse selves, groups, stories, longings, and challenges, is the sphere in which we must come to understanding our interrelationships. Further, King perceives, an interchangeable, inter-structural reciprocity among and between all human beings in the "world house" at every level, what he called "an inescapable network of destiny." This connection is neither nominal nor insignificant. Furthermore, this interrelated structure of reality carries within itself certain dynamic, definitive moral obligations. This inescapable unity, these multiple connections make us responsible for each other. When tragically we are unconcerned and uninvolved in each others's lives, we become culpable and complicit in the neglect of those who are really our personal responsibility, but whose livelihood I segregated out of my own life and sphere of concern.

Correspondingly, no self can be fully human and fully alive in King's view without other selves. Individualism as a life choice is ineffective and deceptive for no person can shut themselves off from the others in this world and still pretend to be living well, as God intended, in this interconnected, interrelated structure of reality:

> The universe is so structured that things go awry if men are not diligent in their cultivation of the other regarding dimension. "I" cannot reach fulfillment without "thou." The self cannot be self without other selves. Self-concern without other-concern is like a tributary that has no outward flow to the ocean. Stagnant, still, and stale, it lacks both life and freshness. Nothing would be more disastrous and out of harmony with our self-interest than for the developed nations to travel a dead-end road of inordinate selfishness.[68]

King relates this individualized self-interest not only to persons, but also to nations and racial groups, which can be concerned only about their own economic privileged position, their social status.[69] What King affirms here is worthy of rediscover and discussion today; all human

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[68] King, ***Why We Can=t Wait***, p. 180.

[69] ***King, The Trumpet of Conscience,*** p. 46. In a homily on the Good Samaritan, King makes the argument that nations or racial groups can live in pretension, as if their own nationalistic or cultural or racial concerns, status, and well-being alone was the key to their prospering and fulfillment. Even in this context of the world which

beings are involved in a single process and destiny, one which either consciously or unconsciously is affecting us all simultaneously for good or ill. Our attentiveness to act and our willingness to expand ourselves beyond the most elementary ways we view our own interest is the key to our moral responsibility of the other.[70] Ultimately the end of the race problem will demand that we recognize that the fate of humanity is single, that our lives are interconnected and intertwined, and that we cannot possibly flourish while other human beings are abused, languish, or perish.[71]

Beloved community, therefore, is an ongoing task of all humankind. While court orders, proper legislation, and enforced policies will eliminate the last vestiges of illegal discrimination in a society, there is and never will exist any kind of order, legislation, or bill that will place within the hearts of men and women the longing "for genuine intergroup and interpersonal living."[72] Human beings need to become obedient to the "unenforceable obligations" of the beloved community, where men and women of all groups live in mutual self-interest, empathetically, cognizant of our interconnectedness, and invested with the requisite willingness to suffer and sacrifice until every person, group, and nation, participates as full and free member of the human community.

In order to operationalize this vision, to live in harmony in the "world house" and to constitute the "beloved community," King suggests that we must exercise ourselves as moral

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seems to be inundated with the details of personal need alone, King asserts that Athere is still something to remind us that we are interdependent, that we are all involved in a single process, that we are all somehow caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. Therefore whatever affects ones directly affects all indirectly.

[70] It seems highly possible that some of the organizing or undergirding principles which makes this thoroughgoing interconnected mutuality feasible, are some of the principles we spoke of earlier, that is, God as the ground of our lives together and guarantor of our shared struggle for human liberation, with all humankind being invested with an elemental dignity and worth which cannot be earned or bartered. These two insights, which we looked at earlier in this chapter, seem to be applicable to this discussion of the interconnection and mutuality of all things.

[71] King, ***Where Do We Go From Here?***. p. 100, 141.

[72] ***Ibid***., p. 100.

agents, as particular characters for others in this ongoing and ever-changing single interrelated structure of reality. We must reach out, beyond our bounded interests and experiences, and seek to incorporate others, even radically different others, within our own self. The community can only be embodied when we first become aware that as human beings our lives are interconnected, and then shift our loyalties to the well being of others in addition to our own. Full humanity is learning daily, in King's view, to move beyond the narrow confines of self-interests (whether as an individual, a family unit, or a cultural, racial, or national group), to that our shared, mutual human interests together.

King's vision explicitly calls us to expand our loyalties and reorient our lives in such a way that the concerns, burdens, problems, needs, and aspirations of others become your own. One comes to affirm the other to such an extent that you include them within your own self, your own concern. In effect, the life concern and experience of the other, through empathy and loyalty shifting, becomes your own. Remarkably, King seems to assert that this expansion of the other into your self can happen at all levels, from the personal self all the way up to and including a national self (e.g., America). Ideally, as emblematic of the beloved community where this mutuality and reciprocity is affirmed and defended at all times, we ought to seek practically the ever growing and ever expanding dimension of our selves until we can include all peoples and all humanity into them:

> Now let me suggest first that if we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone; and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war in this world. Now the judgment of God is upon us, and we must either learn to live together as brothers or we are all going to perish together as fools. Yes, as nations and individuals, we are interdependent.[73]

King expresses this expanded self when in empathy and experience, he often comes to feel

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[73] King, ***The Trumpet of Conscience***, p. 68.

the misery of the other.[74] On his visit to India, King spoke of many "depressing moments" he endured there, those which could not be avoided as he beheld with his own eyes evidences of millions of people going to bed hungry, sleeping on sidewalks at night. Realizing that in our country we spend millions to store excess food, King exclaimed, "I know where we can store that food free of charge-in the wrinkled stomachs of the millions of God's children in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and even in our own nation, who go to bed hungry at night."[75] The ability to empathize, that, for all practical matters, results in a kind of twofold result: one, we come to understand their situation, not merely statistically or dispassionately, but in a sense that we connect with them. Second, such expansive empathy results in an inclusion of the other in us, to the extent that we resolve to address their need, and share their experience, for the sake of their well-being. King speaks as if any person of group can intentionally and purposefully transcend their narrow perimeter of care, as a unit of moral agency, and then expand to include others within it, by a willingness to encounter, serve, and sacrifice for the other. This care is sustained with practical care and love as the members of the "world house" or beloved community continue to stay cognizant of their connectedness, and reach out to each other in authentic empathy.

It is against the backdrop of this interrelated structure of reality where all human beings are connected to a single process of inescapable mutuality that King calls for beloved community. It is a community of love, born, sustained, and fulfilled in love, in the affirmation of our shared human dignity and worth in our fundamental God-relatedness, one which transcends the particularities of race, sex, class, and others debilitating categories that men and women use to

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[74] In many places within King=s writings he calls for a new level of empathy from Whites on behalf of the Black plight for freedom in America, and on this point, King was greatly criticized in the Black theological and ethical camp. King argued, among other things, that the failure of Black Power was its inability to see the Black need for White involvement in the movement. King saw the need for empathy between Blacks and Whites, i.e., AIn the final analysis the white man cannot ignore the Negro=s problem, because he is a part of the Negro and the Negro is part of him. The Negro=s agony diminishes the White man, and the Negro=s salvation enlarges the White man. (Cf. Coretta Scott King, ***The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.***, p. 22). The difficulty to get selves, which are disconnected and disjointed to want to see one another and sense each other=s experience is the heart of the issue, both then and now, in intergroup relationships.

[75] King, ***The Trumpet of Conscience***, p. 69.

harm and ignore each other. King sought for nations to develop an overriding loyalty for humankind while joyfully preserving the best in their own individual societies.

> This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all embracing and unconditional love for all men. This often misunderstood and misinterpreted concept has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man. When I speak of love, I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. The Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the First Epistle of Saint John: Let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love. . . Let us hope that this spirit will become the order of the day.[76]

Conclusion

In spite of the differing views surrounding King's overall effectiveness and historial legacy, I have no that we as a nation will continue to wrestle with the meaning of the life and teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I am convinced that despite all the controversy surrounding his person, Dr. King deserves to be rediscovered in a fashion that will go beyond mere memorial service, but in a way that will look at his moral, theological, and spiritual vision with fresh eyes to see how and in what ways he can inform our peacemaking and justice seeking.

King's notions of God as the ground of all human liberation, his view on the dignity and worth of all human personality, and his articulation of the interconnected reality and destiny of all human persons offer us fruitful and intriguing reasons for caring for his legacy, and to spur us to move beyond hero-worship of this remarkable leader, to that of open dialogue partners with him. Engaging King's theological and ethical vision afresh in these and other areas will certainly prevent us from seeking to "rid" ourselves of King, as Charles Adams suggests, by substituting solemn and sincere celebrations of his birthday while failing to engage critically his life and vision. Let me requote Adams from the beginning of my lecture, "The easiest way to get rid of Martin

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[76] King, ***Where Do We Go From Here?***, p. 191.

Luther King, Jr., is to worship him. To honor him with a holiday that he never would have wanted. To celebrate his birth and his death, without committing ourselves to his vision and his love."

Who cares about King? In my mind, all who long for justice, reconciliation, and peace should make it their business to care about him and his vision for human community.