

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

1929-1968

MAKING MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.'S BIRTHDAY A NATIONAL holiday recognized the importance of his life and writings. Thinking back on his relatively brief public life, one is sometimes astonished to remember that the Civil Rights movement was already fifteen years old when he became its central figure. Still a young man in 1956, he emerged as the principal spokesperson of a host of equally remarkable men and women.

Yet by background and training, Martin Luther King, Jr. was especially well prepared to make the most of that non-violent revolution which, in transforming the South, provided a training ground, a school, a university-without-walls for social change. Just as the Wobblies, socialists, and anarchists in the decade before the First World War educated labor organizers and reformers for the radical 30s, so the new abolitionists of the Civil Rights movement taught a later generation about non-violent resistance and agitation for change.

Looking over the names of leaders in the antiwar and draft resistance movements, as well as in later campaigns against the nuclear arms race, one can point to many who went South during the 1960s, on Freedom Rides, in voter registration campaigns or the March on Selma. Philip Berrigan, for example, taught in a black school in New Orleans before he burned draft files in Maryland; Abby Hoffman ran a "Snick" (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) shop, selling crafts from Mississippi before he initiated his "revolution for the hell of it" on the Lower East Side in Manhattan; Howard Zinn and Staughton Lynd taught in a black women's college in Atlanta before Zinn joined Resist in Boston and Lynd became a labor lawyer in Youngstown, Ohio. Similarly, Rosa Parks disobeyed an

Alabama law against blacks and Fannie Lou Hamer challenged traditional roles of women in Mississippi before Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem wrote a line.

"The son, the grandson, and the great-grandson of preachers," as he so tactfully reminded the clergymen addressed in "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. Educated at Morehouse College there and Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, he was ordained a Baptist minister in his father's church at 18. In 1955, he completed a doctorate in systematic theology at Boston University. That December, he called a city-wide boycott of segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama, where he had been serving as pastor of a church for over a year. From then until his death in Memphis in 1968, he coordinated and inspired nonviolent movement for social change focusing on the rights of working people, especially blacks, and resistance to the American war in Southeast Asia.

King's power is evident, not only in his extraordinary courage, but also in his skills as a speaker and writer. His essays, for example, lose little of their effect even years after the events that prompted them have been forgotten. "The Negro Revolution," (1963), characteristic in style and language, makes its point through stories from his own life and those of his associates: "Some years ago," King begins,

I sat in a Harlem department store, surrounded by hundreds of people. I was autographing copies of *Stride Toward Freedom*, my book about the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56. As I signed my name to a page, I felt something sharp plunge forcefully into my chest. I had been stabbed with a letter opener, struck home by a woman who would later be judged insane. Rushed by ambulance to Harlem Hospital, I lay in a bed for hours while preparations were made to remove the keen-edged knife from my body. Days later, when I was well enough to talk with Dr. Aubrey Maynard, the chief of

surgeons who performed the delicate, dangerous operation, I learned the reason for the long delay that preceded surgery. He told me that the razor tip of the instrument had been touching my aorta and that my whole chest had to be opened to extract it. "If you had sneezed during all those hours of waiting," Maynard said, "your aorta would have been punctured and you would have drowned in your own blood." In the summer of 1963, the knife of violence was just that close to the nation's aorta.

Although King's name and achievement are known to many people, the deeper implications of his life, as with those of many peacemakers, are often trivialized or forgotten. This is particularly true of his deep, persistent commitment to non-violence. Fortunately, however, in *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958), he gives an account of his spiritual odyssey, beginning with his reading of Thoreau in college, and moving on to his reading of Marx, Gandhi, and Reinhold Niebuhr, and hearing A. J. Muste in the seminary.

Although he sided with Gandhi, he had to come to terms with Niebuhr's critique of pacifism. In the intellectual struggle that ensued, King noticed that Niebuhr "interpreted pacifism as a sort of passive resistance to evil expressing naive trust in the power of love. But this was a serious distortion," King concluded.

My study of Gandhi convinced me that true pacifism is not non-resistance to evil, but nonviolent resistance to evil. Between the two positions, there is a world of difference. Gandhi resisted evil with as much vigor and power as the violent resister, but he resisted with love instead of hate. True pacifism is not unrealistic submission to evil power, as Niebuhr contends. It is rather a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love. . .

Just how fully King took this principle to heart is indicated not only by his rejection of violence in the

struggle for black equality, but also in his resistance to the war in Vietnam. The piece of writing for which he is best remembered, however, is a classic essay, equal in power and eloquence to the Declaration of Independence and Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience." "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963), addressed to eight Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergymen who called King's leadership "unwise and untimely," describes the historical, religious, and political justifications for his actions and helped thereby to win a nation to his cause. Reprinted in newsletters, newspapers, pamphlets, and books, it became the *Common Sense* of the second American revolution.

In bringing together the principles of 19th century American abolitionists and nonresisters—Garrison, Thoreau, Ballou and the practical teachings of Tolstoy and Gandhi, King gave the tradition of nonviolence a new and solid grounding in the American experience. In any nonviolent campaign, he says near the beginning of "Letter from Birmingham Jail," there are four basic steps: "(1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive; (2) negotiation; (3) self-purification; and (4) direct action." Then King shows how he and his associates met each of those conditions in Birmingham, and concludes with this argument for the justice of the black liberation movement:

Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebearers labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation—yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not

stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

BY MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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And others.

ABOUT MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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