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SHAPED BY THE COURAGE OF OTHERS

A MLK's portrait

There¹ are different ways to understand Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy. Living in Europe and travelling around the world, I often encounter celebrations of MLK as a peacemaker and this is no doubt a true understanding of his legacy.

King was indeed a man of peace and rare moral courage. He encouraged and led a nonviolent struggle against a brutally racist system of social control in the United States. The choice of nonviolence provided a pathway to reconciliation in a context where bitterness and frustration could easily have taken control. That is remarkable and worth celebrating. Alongside his contribution to the fight for equality, King astutely knew the contradiction between U.S. domestic policy and the image the U.S. sought to present to the rest of the world. In 1957 he visited the newly independent nation of the Gold Coast (Ghana) at the invitation of Kwame Nkrumah. This visit symbolically linked the struggle that black Americans were facing to the anti-colonial struggle in Africa and elsewhere in the world. While there, King told then Vice President Richard Nixon that the black American's in Alabama were fighting for the same freedom that Nixon's presence in Ghana was meant to celebrate. We know, that King's criticism of U.S. Foreign Policy grew more intense

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later in his life. In 1967, he declared his opposition to the Vietnam War, alienating the administration of President Lyndon Johnson, and many of his allies who wanted him to focus on a narrow agenda. Combined with his criticism of U.S. military power, King's criticism of U.S. economic policy solidified his identity as a threat to the status quo; not just to the segregated South but also to the liberal American establishment would denounce his criticism of the Vietnam War.

However, there are more layers to the person the man who Martin Luther King Jr. became, that I fear international audiences can sometimes miss. Among the most important lessons, I learned about King from those who knew him was that the best way to understand who he was, is to understand the movement that he came to represent. In fact, we dishonour him, if we celebrate him out of the context of the movement that produced him. You cannot understand him well without the people around him, singing, marching hand in hand towards armed policemen, water cannons and dogs sent to attack. That movement, commonly called the American Civil Rights movement, was actually just one moment in centuries-old struggle for freedom and dignity that began when the first Africans were enslaved and brought to the "New World." That centuries old struggle might best be described as the "black freedom struggle." It is a series of moments in world history where the people whom Europeans sought to colonize and enslave decided to resist.

If one understands the Black Freedom struggle in the United States, then one gains a sense of appreciation for how King's radical thought came to be. It was all made possible by the courage and hope of everyday people. If one considers carefully the inhumanity of the segregated Southern U.S., one realizes the defiance that mere survival sometimes required. In an environment where the world around you is convinced that you are less than human and meant to be the permanent servant class of the nation, the small things you do to assert your humanity can require tremendous bravery. Daring to learn, daring to send your children to school, daring to aspire to something more than the circumstances into which you were born could be punished with death.

This is not hyperbole, if one did not assume a subservient posture in the presence of white society in the Segregated South, one could be charged with a crime at best and lynched at worst. In 1906, just over

10 years before Martin Luther King Jr. was born, Atlanta's black community experienced a horrendous massacre when white mobs descended on the black neighborhood killing 24 people and injuring several others. White Supremacy was enforced with brutal terrorism. The memory of this massacre loomed large in Atlanta's black community and without doubt, it impacted King's parents and the community around him. It was in this environment, that parents chose to send their children to school and taught them not to believe themselves to be inferior. Martin Luther King Jr. existed not just because of the courage of his mother and father, but because of the courage of black teachers, barbers, mechanics, nurses and lawyers in Atlanta who created the community that produced the man who King would become.

King's ideas and insights were shaped in conversation with those who came before him, people whose names are not as world renown but whose names are important to the Black community in the United States. Names like the abolitionist Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglas both of whom escaped slavery to become fierce champions in the struggle to free their people. People like W.E.B. Dubois, the famed intellectual who eventually left the United States for Ghana permanently, convinced that the U.S. was irredeemable. All of these people formed a backdrop against which King's identity was formed. King was in conversation with those of his father's generation, like his mentor Howard Thurman, who was the first African American to meet Mohandas Gandhi. It was to Howard Thurman that Gandhi said, "it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world." King, carried Thurman's book "Jesus and the Disinherited" with him almost everywhere he went. It was among the few items that could be found in his suitcase after he died.

King's ideas were tested in conversation with his contemporaries in the Black Freedom struggle, people like Ella Baker, a remarkable organizer who challenged sexism within King's organization. Young people in the movement often pushed King to do more, or say more; the leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were often pushing for more radical action in nonviolent campaigns. More vociferous critics contributed to King's thought too, including Malcolm X, who is too often contrasted with MLK as if they were polar opposites; they were

not. Both men, more than any differences between them, wanted to end the suffering of their people.

Martin Luther King Jr. was just a young preacher when the Montgomery Bus Boycott started. He was talented, but in many ways, he did not yet know how his gifts were suited for the challenges he would face. He left Boston prepared for a different life than the one that Montgomery would propel him towards. He and Coretta Scott King were prepared for a quieter life but that was not their destiny. The community in Montgomery was already up to something when they arrived. That community led by courageous preachers like Ralph David Abernathy would see that King's gifts would be used for a purpose beyond what King himself may have understood. They helped shape him and helped prepare him for the movement that would be ignited when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. It was in Montgomery, that King would join the Fellowship of Reconciliation and meet Bayard Rustin, the pacifist organizer who would eventually organize the March on Washington where King would deliver his famous I Have a Dream Speech. Rustin helped King understand the value of nonviolence as more than a strategy but as a way of life.

Today, organizations and movements have often prided themselves as being "leaderless." In the U.S., for example, the Black Lives Matters movement prides itself on being decentralized and led by the masses without one single spokesperson. It is of course not that they are leaderless, the movements are full of leaders, but rather that it wants to ensure that everyone is empowered and able to participate in the work for social change. It is, in a sense, an attempt to correct the way we often tell history. It is an attempt to address the fact that we tell the story of MLK in a way that makes many feel disempowered. We neglect the many other names and then we speak of him as the "saint" that we could never be. We tell the story of a glimpse of King's life without talking about the entirety of his ideas and or without telling the story of the movement. My mentor, Vincent Harding, who was among King's friends and advisors often liked to refer to a poem by Carl Wendell Himes, Jr. to capture the problem with the way Martin Luther King Jr. is often presented.

Now that he is safely dead

Let us praise him
Build monuments to his glory
Sing hosannas to his name.
Dead men make
Such convenient heroes: They
Cannot rise
To challenge the images
We would fashion from their lives
And besides,
It is easier to build monuments
Than to make a better world.
So, now that he is safely dead
We, with eased consciences
Will teach our children
That he was a great man...knowing
That the cause for which he lived
Is still a cause
And the dream for which he died
Is still a dream
A dead man's dream.²

The problem of presenting King such a limited way is not only a problem of governments and politicians. We in the peace movement participate in the problem as well if we do not tell the story of the movement. There are two reasons why we must change the way we speak about King in this particular moment, with a rise of xenophobia and discrimination, and a myriad of other challenges in our world.

One of those reasons is because the work against racism is far from over. The United Nations has declared this the International Decade for People of African Descent. Stating "Whether as descendants of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade or as more recent migrants, they constitute some of the poorest and most marginalized groups. Studies and findings by international and national bodies demonstrate that people

² Quoted from V. Harding, *Martin Luther King Jr.: The Inconvenient Hero*, Orbis Book, Ossining (NY) 1996, p. 3.

of African descent still have limited access to quality education, health services, housing and social security.”³

This fact underscores the extent to which this particular expression of the cause that King stood for is still a cause. Yes, King wanted all people to be free, but not everyone is equally oppressed. Africa, and its descendants, was a particular target for centuries of exploitation and unconscionable crimes. The 200 million of us living in the Americas are still engaged in a Black Freedom Struggle. To disconnect King from that struggle is to ignore the community that shaped him and to ignore our collective responsibility to that struggle. Challenging racism is not the task of people of African descent. It is not, after all, a problem that we created. Ending the persistent legacy of white supremacy is a task to which all of us who would celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. must be devoted. This is not simply out of sympathy to black people, but rather because “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

The second critical reason for more fully understanding MLK within the context of the black freedom struggle, is that it helps us to appreciate the fact that just as King was not alone, just as he needed encouragement, education, criticism and support, there are many who contribute to the struggle for a free, peaceful, and just world. It helps us understand that our efforts are about more than the moment that we are in. Success is not entirely up to us. Like a runner in a relay race, King grabbed the baton and he passed it on. We labour for a world we may not live to see, and we do not labour alone. We are helped by those whom we notice, and by those we don't always see. King lived to see some victories, but he was killed before he could see many more. We commit ourselves to the struggle based upon our belief in the way the world ought to be, and our conviction that our individual efforts, no matter how small, help to make it so.

King was the transformative leader that he was, because of the courage of those around him and because he was humble enough to allow them to push and shape him. He came to understand that his own life was one to be lived in service to the beloved community. I've had the privilege of sitting with people who were with him that day in Memphis where

3 Available on: <http://www.un.org/en/events/africandescentdecade/background.shtml>

a bullet took his life. The grief that was felt both amongst those who knew them and those who didn't was profound. It was a reflection of the years of anguish that so many had endured. That bullet was not simply meant for him, it was aimed at "us." King wasn't the last person in our struggle to be killed. But the way that he lived his life, the way that he called upon us to love, made his murder hurt in a particular way. That he wanted his casket to be carried through the streets of Atlanta by a mule epitomized his identification with the communities that shaped him. Poor black families in the South could not afford a car many had only a mule. As we approach the anniversary of his death and reflect on his assassination, I hope that remembering his life; we will also remember the movement. I hope that memory will resurrect something within us and give us the courage to continue the struggle for which he gave his life.