

“The Unfinished Mission of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”

Presented by Dr. Jennifer Leigh Selig



As early as 1957 and at the tender age of 28, Martin Luther King, Jr. formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was elected president, and declared his humble mission in its motto--to save the soul of America. Depth psychologist that he inherently was, he looked deep into the psyche of America and declared his diagnosis--schizophrenic, psychotic, and neurotic. His treatment of the country paralleled Karen Horney's treatment of the neurotic: he helped his client--the country--to see the gap between her ideal self and her real self.¹ He used marches and protests and demonstrations to bring America's shadow to the surface where she could no longer deny its existence, and then, rather than leaving her wallowing in guilt and shame, he offered her specific redemptive measures she could take toward healing and wholeness, which would ultimately lead toward the manifestation of what King called The Beloved Community, his term for the individuated culture. For a while, America subjected herself to the treatment, and demonstrated back to King some willingness to work on her issues, particularly around race. Some of King's greatest victories were won during the early to middle days of the movement, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

But then America's therapist started to dig too deep. He came to realize, and to speak his realization vociferously, that America had three interwoven problems, which he called the three evil triplets--Racism, Militarism, and Materialism. In the last three years of his life, he began to speak out more and more on the last two evils--attacking militarism in his speeches and protests against the Vietnam war, and attacking materialism and poverty in an orchestrated way through the Poor People's Campaign, his radical plan to bring caravans of poor people in to shut down Washington until they secured full employment or a guaranteed income for all--a campaign he did not live to see fulfilled. He began to call for the radical reconstruction of society, a complete revolution of values, and more and more, he realized that racism and militarism were manifestations of the deepest evil of all--materialism--which he considered the source of the other two. Around the time of his death, he was just beginning to speak his heartfelt belief that capitalism would have to be done away with, and replaced by some form of democratic socialism.²

In 1970, an author named C. Eric Lincoln noted of King's assassination, "America

was on trial--self-consciously on trial, and America developed a defensive psychosis which inevitably led to the removal of Dr. King. He was the symbol--the unbearable symbol--of what is wrong with ourselves and our culture.”³ So today I come here to ask, how can it be that just thirteen years after Lincoln wrote this, America became able to bear King--and not only bear him, but to idolize him, to coronate him with an honor that only one other American in history has ever received--a national holiday in his name. Is this a sign of our healing, or a symptom that our collective defensive psychosis has grown even deeper?

There is a curious plaque outside the Lorraine Motel where King was assassinated.



It reads, in part, “They said one to another, Behold, here cometh the dreamer. Let us slay him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.”



So let us start there to discover the answer to my question--let us see what has become of

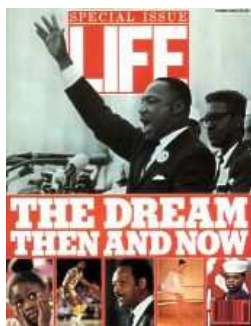
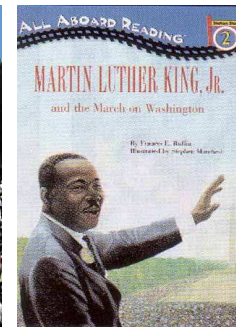
King's dreams, whether the country has upheld them or whether it has defended against them.

Actually, I think we can do that in rather short order.

Without a doubt, much progress has been made on racism, both during King's life and continuing after his death. Though institutional and individual racism still exist in both covert and overt forms, the country has come a long way in closing the neurotic gap there between our ideals and their realization. But are we any less militaristic? Has King's dream of nonviolent conflict resolution on a national and international level come true? Will any of you this morning hear with me echoes of our current militaristic situation in King's question, "Why has our nation placed itself in the position of being God's military agent on earth, and intervened recklessly in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic? Why have we substituted the arrogant undertaking of policing the whole world for the high task of putting our own house in order?"⁴ Do names like Grenada, Panama, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq echo here? And are we any less materialistic than we were in 1968 when King was killed? Have we eliminated world poverty, or even poverty in our own country? Have we closed the income gap, created full employment, guaranteed our citizens an income? Have we done away with capitalism, and replaced it with democratic socialism?

Behold, here cometh the dreamer. Let us slay him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.

And yet, the ultimate irony is that the most iconographic image we have of King is that hot summer day in 1963, his hand raised above the integrated crowd, declaring to all the world his dream.

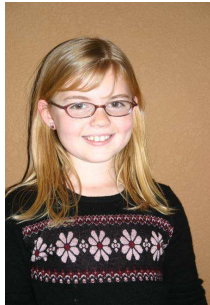


His "I Have a Dream" speech was even chosen the single most important speech of the 20th century, and whom among us will not recognize his oft-quoted line from that speech,

his desire for his four children to be judged, not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character?⁵

Every year on January 15th, the same old video clip, the same old sound-bite. On that day of the year, and in that month called Black History month, students all over America are taught the same story of King. They can repeat the myth to you verbatim. Blacks versus whites, locked in a power struggle for freedom, a struggle that was largely won, and won largely by Martin Luther King.

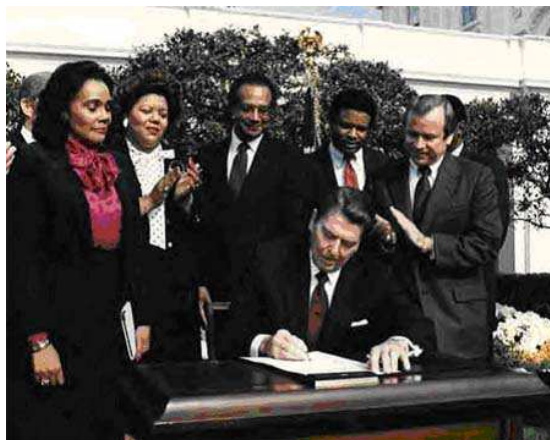
Indulge me in an example. I asked my niece Hayley, who is nine, what she learned about Martin Luther King in school.



This is her absolutely unedited response. “He wanted to have the right to have freedom from the white people, because the white people have always bossed the black people around, and he felt that that was wrong. And so he told the other black people that they are strong. They need to have the right to become free. And, it worked! And so that made them all happy, and so that made life easier. And that’s how it is now.”

In her response, I believe, lies the answer to the question of how we can bear King as a symbol now. I believe we do this because it serves as a self-congratulatory story. It makes us feel good to think of King this way, as a man who helped us come to our senses about the most overt forms of racism and discrimination. It is our defensive story, allowing us to keep our neurosis in place by patting our ideal selves on the collective back. We remember just the part of King’s message that we can bear to remember. And no more.

Ronald Reagan institutionalized this collective back patting by signing the holiday into law in 1983.



He said of King “He made it possible for our Nation to move closer to the ideals set forth in our Declaration of Independence.” The feel good part is that yes, our nation moved with King and moved far and moved quickly, and though almost everyone will follow this up by saying “but we still have a way to go,” the teachers asking students for examples of times they’ve been discriminated against and the journalists pulling up statistics to show that blacks still aren’t equal in all ways yet, for the most part, we’re done. “And, it worked! And so that made them all happy, and so that made life easier. And that’s how it is now.” And it feels great to have a day off, doesn’t it? Of course, it is not an honor to King that we take a day off of work to celebrate his life. It would be an honor to him if we got to work on that radical reconstruction instead. It does not honor him to pat our ideal selves on the back for something we did forty years ago, but it would be a real honor if instead we kicked our real selves in the ass for what we are *not* doing now.

At first, I thought there was something almost sinister about the fact that it was the very far-right leaning conservative President who literally placed his seal of approval on this very far-left leaning man, radically liberal man. Now, I just find it sadly ironic, that it was the Alzheimer’s president who institutionalized this collective forgetting, this selective remembering, who led us by his example to see that the only way we can bear to remember King is in truth--to forget him.

But Reagan was a man whom, if he understood nothing else, understood the power of image. He did not want to sign that holiday into law, but was pressured into it. When one Republican governor wrote to him expressing concerns over elevating such a radical to such stature, Reagan wrote back "I have the reservations you have, but here the perception of too many people is based on an image, not reality. Indeed, to them the perception *is* reality."⁶ So, the conservatives got to work on the perception of King, and to hear them tell it now, King was one of them. One of Reagan’s biographers, Peggy Noonan, wrote this of Reagan. “He did not believe in racial preferences, did not believe in quotas or what has come to be institutionalized as affirmative action and thought it necessary that no one be given special treatment on account to his race or religion. In this he felt he was consistent with the thinking not only of his parents and the good liberals of the 1940’s and 1950’s, but also of Martin Luther King, Jr., himself: We must be judged not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character.”⁷ The last line is the conservatives favorite line--George W. Bush threw it out as well in 2003 when he declared King’s birthday a federal holiday.



How can this be anything other than defensive psychosis? In no way are Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush--nor George H.W. Bush, who added another conservative seal of approval on King by signing a Martin Luther King Holiday Proclamation in 1989--consistent with the thinking of King--not in their worship of capitalism, not in their worship of militarism, and certainly not in their racial policies.



King was *for* racial preferences, was *for* affirmative action and quotas, and even more radically, was *for* reparations for slavery. These were not views King held hidden from the public--either then, nor now. In his 1964 book, *Why We Can't Wait*, he wrote, "No amount of gold could provide an adequate compensation for the exploitation and humiliation of the Negro in America down through the centuries... Yet a price can be placed on unpaid wages. The payment should be in the form of a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law."⁸ In his 1968 book *Where Do We Go From Here*, he suggested that "A society that has done something special *against* the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something special *for* him, to equip him to compete on a just and equal basis."⁹ To do this he expressed support for quotas. He wrote, "If a city has a 30% Negro population, then it is logical to assume that Negroes should have at least 30% of the jobs in any particular company, and jobs in all categories rather than only in menial areas."¹⁰ But somehow, for some people, that one poetic line about the content of their characters delivered in 1963 negates these very specific lines written after them. Reagan was around in 1968 when that book came out. In fact, he was

running for president, and of him King said, “When a Hollywood performer, lacking distinction even as an actor, can become a leading war hawk candidate for the presidency, only the irrationalities induced by war psychosis can explain such a turn of events.”¹¹

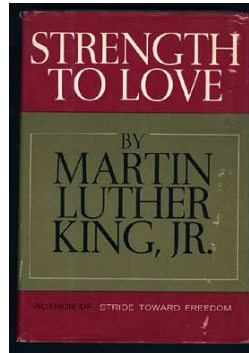
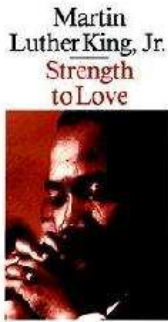
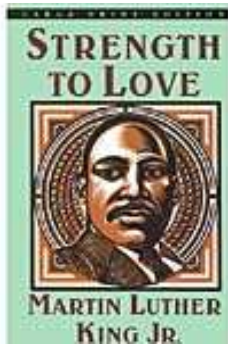
And this man signed the holiday into law?

A man named Charles Adams astutely asked, “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 loving prophet. The best way to dismiss any challenge is to exalt and adore the empirical source through which the challenge has come.”¹²

The psychological process by which this occurs is pretty obvious. King--from very early on in his career--took on mythological proportions in the American psyche, and as Pacifica's own Lionel Corbett writes, “Mythic characters personify intrapsychic processes, but there are many characters and plots in any story on which attention can be focused, and only certain of them pertain to the individual self....This helps to explain why different observers select different themes on which to focus; we are drawn to aspects of the story that resonate personally.”¹³ I would add to that argument that we are drawn to aspects of the story that resonate *safely*, that provide us with just the right amount of challenge our psyches can hold. In the case of the still-neurotic American psyche, it is obvious that she can hold very little of the challenge that King the man provided, so she selected certain aspects and themes of his story to mythologize, certain places where she can safely worship the King. It's a classic case of how mythology can serve pathology.

So is there a solution, or is America simply a helpless and hopeless case? No, let's not give up on our client just yet. Depth psychology offers a solution, and it's a simple one. We must change what part of the myth we focus on. I want to offer two suggestions for what those changes might be.

First, I'd suggest focusing less on King as the archetypal warrior fighting for freedom, and more on King as an archetypal lover fighting for harmony and wholeness. It's true that his speeches were strewn with war imagery--he used words like battle and victory and campaign--but it's also true that his speeches were equally rife and rich with definitions of love, distinctions about love, admonitions to love in thought and action even those whom we could not like. It is King the lover that my niece does not yet know, King the lover that the nation has forgotten, and I would contend that it is King the lover that the nation is in most dire need of now. King was a warrior *only because* he was a lover, and for a man to speak so openly, so often, so publicly, and so unabashedly on behalf of love in my mind alone makes him worthy of a national holiday.



If we shift from seeing King as a warrior for civil rights for blacks to seeing King as a lover of all God's children, we could have a much different national conversation every January 15th. We could begin to remember, to examine, and to embrace the other two aspects of his message--the evils of militarism and materialism. Love manifested in the world means we don't kill anybody, for all of God's children are beloved to him, and all of us are brothers and sisters in the human family. Likewise, love manifested in the world means we don't allow "the classes to take from the masses," a phrase King often used. If we are all God's beloved children, we understand what every parent knows--that it's not right for one child to make two hundred times more allowance than another, or for one child to live in the lap of luxury while another languishes on the mean streets of poverty. Seeing King as a lover allows us to embrace the fullness of his message, and apply it to the entirety of his dream.

Secondly, I would suggest focusing less on King as an archetypal hero and more on King as an archetypal gadfly. The gadfly is a social critic, the one whose task is to open up dialogue; the intention of that dialogue is to stimulate awareness followed by action that seeks to improve societal conditions. We shift the emphasis from seeing King as a Moses heroically delivering his people to the promised land, or a Jesus heroically sacrificing his life to bring others to heaven, and instead we could see King as a Socrates, who said of himself, "I am that gadfly which God has attached to the State, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you."¹⁴ In doing this, we shift from back-patting to ass-kicking. For a while we can stop listening to King's "I Have a Dream speech" and start reading the sermon he prepared to give on the next Sunday had he not died, a gadfly speech if ever there was one called "Why America may Go to Hell."



Here we are not creating a mythological role where none exists, for it clear that King saw himself as this sort of gadfly. He wrote, “If something doesn’t happen soon, I’m convinced that the curtain of doom is coming down on the U.S.” Continuing, he said, “America, I don’t plan to let you rest until that day comes into being when all God’s children will be respected, and every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. America, I don’t plan to allow you to rest until from every city hall in this country, justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. America, I don’t plan to let you rest until you live it out that ‘all. . . are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.’”¹⁵

Socrates said of himself, “You will not easily find another like me, and therefore I would advise you to spare me. I dare say that you may feel out of temper (like the person who is suddenly awakened from sleep), and you think that you might easily strike me dead as Anytus advises, and then you sleep on for the remainder of your lives, unless God in his care of you sent you another gadfly.”¹⁶ Using Socrates’ language, God sent America Martin Luther King, Jr. as a gadfly, but America did not spare King, striking him dead and then returning back to sleep. Now we even have an extra holiday upon which to catch up on our sleep, and a new batch of drugs--these ones legal--to make our apathy more comfortable and our lethargy less depressing.

King is asleep now too. I titled this talk the “Unfinished Mission of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” but really, his mission is done. He lies in a tomb upon which reads “Free at last, free at last. Thank God almighty, I’m free at last.”



King is free at last, but it is we who are still enslaved, still shackled to our worship of the golden calf; more people probably spend the King holiday shopping than anything else. The true axis of evil we have to yet to fight is not those countries declared by George W. Bush, but those concepts declared by Martin Luther King--racism, militarism, and materialism. These are the real evils that terrorize Americans every day--these are the real evils Americans use to terrorize the world every day. I know I suffer from a case of homeland insecurity, and I know I am not alone. I have a dream--that one day someone will rise up, call 911, and declare the so-called United States a disaster area.

But wait. We had a King who already did that. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, introducing King to an audience in Memphis right before his death said "The whole future of America will depend upon the impact and influence of Dr. King."¹⁷ This is not hyperbole. King, like Jesus, like Gandhi, like the other prophets and saviors and lovers and gadflies before him, gave us enough wisdom to live by for centuries.



The future of America still depends on the impact and influence of King, not the man, not the myth, but the message--and in remembering the message in its full glorious meaning. For that to occur, we must not make King a temple and worship there, but instead see his work as a template, and continue to define and refine that template and apply it to cultural transformation and liberation. Nothing less than our collective souls are at stake, and nothing in the end matters more.



- ¹ Horney, K. (1937). *The neurotic personality of our time*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
Horney, K. (1950). *Neurosis and human growth: The struggle toward self-realization*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- ² An expanded and in-depth analysis of King's work with America's neurosis, as well as other themes in this presentation can be found in my dissertation entitled *Cultural therapy: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work with the soul of America* (2004).
- ³ Lincoln, C. E. (1970). *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A profile*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- ⁴ Quoted in Albert, P. & Hoffman, R. (Eds.). (1990). *We shall overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black freedom struggle*. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 207.
- ⁵ King, M. L., Jr. (1986f). I have a dream. In J. M. Washington (Ed.) *A testament of hope: The essential writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (pp. 217-220). San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins. (Original speech delivered 1963)
- ⁶ <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig/epstein9.html>
- ⁷ Noonan, P. (2001). *When character was king: The story of Ronald Reagan*. New York: Viking Books, p. 234.
- ⁸ King, M.L., Jr. (1963i). *Why we can't wait*. New York: Signet Classic, p. 127.
- ⁹ King, M.L., Jr. (1967b). *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?* New York: Bantam Books, p. 106.
- ¹⁰ King, M.L., Jr. (1967b). *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?* New York: Bantam Books, pp. 169-170.
- ¹¹ <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig/epstein9.html>
- ¹² Quoted in Dyson, M. E. (2000). *I may not get there with you: The true Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: The Free Press, p. 283.
- ¹³ Corbett, L. (1996). *The religious function of the psyche*. London: Routledge, p. 89.
- ¹⁴ <http://socrates.clarke.edu/aplg0106.htm>
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Albert, P. & Hoffman, R. (Eds.). (1990). *We shall overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black freedom struggle*. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 210.
- ¹⁶ <http://socrates.clarke.edu/aplg0106.htm>
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Harding, V. (1996). *Martin Luther King: The inconvenient hero*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, p. ix.