

AMERICA'S SELECTIVE REMEMBERING AND COLLECTIVE FORGETTING OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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What an individual, a culture, a people, or even a species chooses to remember and forget, where it makes the cut between what will be allowed in and what will remain outside, defines that entity even more than one's fingerprints or biological heritage. Our identities are bound up with what we—as a people and a culture—choose to forget as well as what we select to remember.

— Dennis Patrick Slattery¹

As early as 1957 and at the tender age of 28, Martin Luther King, Jr. formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), was elected its president, and declared in no uncertain language his personal and professional mission in its motto—*to save the soul of America*. Such language befitted King in his role as a powerful preacher, but as I argued elsewhere,² he was also one of the country's most effective depth psychologists and cultural therapists, and as such, he was just as likely to use psychological language to discuss the ailing

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soul of the country. Thus, he looked deep into the psyche of America and declared his diagnosis—schizophrenia, psychosis, and neurosis.

King's sermons, speeches, and books are rife with this psychological language. In a typical example, he wrote, "America has been something of a schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against herself. On the one hand we have proudly professed the great principles of democracy, but on the other hand we have sadly practiced the very opposite of those principles."³ King just as often referred to America as neurotic, telling his staff, "we live in a sick, neurotic nation" and that the campaign he would never live to see complete, the Poor People's campaign, was based on "the hope that we can move this sick nation away from at least a level of its sickness."⁴ He even went so far as to express fear that America would move from being neurotic to psychotic, writing,

but it is not too late to return home. If America would come to herself and return to her true home, "one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice of all," she would give the democratic creed a new authentic ring, enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men. If she fails, she will be victimized with the ultimate social psychosis that can only lead to national suicide.⁵

This highlights one of King's greatest contributions to depth psychology: he took terms originally associated with the individual psyche and applied them to the nation at large, bringing them to the forefront of American consciousness.

King offered the country not only diagnosis, but cure. 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.⁶ 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. These measures in turn would ultimately lead toward the manifestation of what King called *the beloved community*, his term for an individuated culture. For a while, America subjected herself to the treatment he extolled, 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 years

of the movement, including the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

I believe it is *this* King that *this* country selects to remember, the King that led a successful Civil Rights Movement that abolished most overt forms of racism and segregation. We remember the King Victorious, the man raising his arm high and declaring his dream for his country. We remember the King of "We Shall Overcome Some Day," a day most Americans today would consider largely realized. What we don't remember is the King that was overcome himself by depression and despair, the King who spoke of his own shattered dreams, the King who died days before he was to preach a sermon called "Why American May Go to Hell." No King and country victorious here, but *this* King we collectively choose not to remember.

As Dennis Patrick Slattery says in the epilogue to this essay, "Our identities are bound up with what we—as a people and a culture—choose to forget as well as what we select to remember." That we have selected as a country to remember King is clear. He is one of only two Americans who has a Federal holiday in his name, guaranteeing a *time* set aside to remember him.⁷ He is one of only five Americans in history, all others Presidents, to warrant a memorial on the Mall at our nation's capital, guaranteeing a *place* set aside to remember him.⁸ However, in this essay, my interest is to bring to light the King we have chosen to forget in order to illuminate something of the shadow of America and point to the way back toward "a more perfect union."

THE EVIL TRIPLETS

After achieving his initial victories in the Civil Rights Movement, King came to understand that they were not enough, in and of themselves, to bring about the kind of cultural transformation he sought. He realized that America's neurosis extended beyond the dysfunction of racism, and thus he needed to extend himself beyond racism to facilitate her healing. He stated,

I now had to give a great deal of attention to the three problems which I considered as the largest of those that confront mankind: racial injustice around the world, poverty, and war. Though each appeared to be separate and isolated, all were interwoven into a single garment of man's destiny.⁹

The garment analogy is an appropriate one—the more he unraveled the threads of racism in this country, the more he came to see how those threads were interwoven with other threads, and as he began to tug on those, he came to see that the whole garment was flawed and needed to be re-made. He began to see that

the black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.¹⁰

He narrowed the interrelated flaws down to three, which he termed the three evils, or “the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism.”¹¹

THE EVIL OF MATERIALISM

King’s initial sensitivity to the second of the evil triplets, “extreme materialism,” came early in life during his youth in Atlanta. He was born on the verge of the Great Depression, and he recalled “how I questioned my parents about the numerous people standing in bread lines when I was about five years of age. I can see the effects of this early childhood experience on my present anti-capitalistic feelings.”¹² Of his youth, he writes,

I had also learned that the inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice. Although I came from a home of economic security and relative comfort, I could never get out of my mind the economic insecurity of many of my playmates and the tragic poverty of those living around me. During my late teens I worked two summers (against my father’s wishes—he never wanted my brother and me to work around white people because of the oppressive conditions) in a plant that hired both Negroes and whites. Here I saw economic injustice firsthand, and realized that the poor white was exploited just as much as the Negro. Through these early experiences I grew up deeply conscious of the varieties of injustice in our society.¹³

His concern about economic injustice continued as he entered his twenties. His wife Coretta wrote that King “knew that the basic problem in our society had to do with economic injustice... the contrast of wealth between the haves and the have-nots.”¹⁴ She recalled discussions they had during the early months of their courtship, when King was only twenty-three years old, regarding his concern for the masses. “He talked about the unequal distribution of wealth, and he said, ‘It’s so unfair that a small percentage of the population could control all of the wealth.’ He felt that there could be a more equitable distribution of wealth.”¹⁵ He told her that though his “old man” was a capitalist, “I don’t believe in capitalism as it is practiced in the United States.”¹⁶

King was not a communist, either, though the accusation was wielded against him later during the Civil Rights Movement. As a preacher, he was not afraid to critique communism from the pulpit. In fact, he gave a sermon titled “How Should a Christian View Communism” where he clearly states that communism is antithetical to Christianity and advises Christians to “pray for the Communist constantly, but never...tolerate the philosophy of Communism.”¹⁷ Yet, in that same sermon he criticizes Christianity for being “content to mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities” while failing to be truly concerned about the economic and social conditions that strangle people’s souls.¹⁸ He says, “Surely it is unchristian and unethical for some to wallow in the soft beds of luxury while others sink in the quicksands of poverty.”¹⁹

He increasingly came to see that capitalism was not a system that fostered the noblest expression of our humanity. He stated,

The profit motive, when it is the sole basis of an economic system, encourages a cut-throat competition and selfish ambition that inspires men to be more concerned about making a living than making a life. It can make men so I-centered that they no longer are Thou-centered.²⁰

In his sermon “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” he spoke his feelings through the voice of the apostle Paul, professing “I still contend that money can be the root of all evil. It can cause one to live a life of gross materialism.”²¹ He believed that America had become a “nation suffocating with material corruption,”²² and although there had been social reforms in the twentieth century to address poverty, “True

compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."²³ The edifice could be restructured in two ways: by a return to humanistic and spiritual values whereby capitalism would be used for the highest good of all people, with the profit motive replaced by the people motive, and/or by embracing a new economic system such as democratic socialism.

He was exposed to democratic socialism in December of 1964 when he traveled to Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Days later he visited Stockholm for a reception for all the prize winners. Speaking to the SCLC staff in 1966 about the trip, he reminisced,

I am always amazed when I go there [Sweden], they don't have any poverty. No unemployment, nobody needing health services who can't get them. They don't have any slums. The question comes to us, why?... Something is wrong with capitalism.... There must be a better distribution of wealth, and maybe America must move toward a Democratic Socialism....²⁴

He admonished his country,

to work within the framework of democracy to bring about a better distribution of wealth. You can use your powerful economic resources to wipe poverty from the face of the earth. God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject deadening poverty. God intends for all of his children to have the basic necessities of life, and he has left in this universe "enough and to spare" for that purpose. So I call upon you to bridge the gulf between abject poverty and superfluous wealth.²⁵

THE EVIL OF MILITARISM

King declared militarism the third of the evil triplets, and sought its elimination from the national psyche. King deplored violence; his loyalty to the philosophy of nonviolence makes that clear. Yet while most Americans are familiar with his insistence on nonviolence during the domestic Civil Rights Movement, fewer are aware that he extended nonviolence into a critique of militarism itself, taking a radical, anti-war stance during the last few years of his life and vociferously critiquing American foreign policy.

The first year in which King spoke publicly about the Vietnam War was 1965, telling a group at Howard University, "The war in Vietnam is accomplishing nothing,"²⁶ and later calling for an end to the war. In July of that year, after making his strongest statements yet, reporters questioned him about his interest in a subject not tied to civil rights. He replied, "I'm much more than a civil rights leader," and "I feel that it is necessary for me to continue to speak on it."²⁷

He spoke out against the war rather timorously by his own accounts until 1967. Early that year, King went away to Jamaica to work on a book. While in the airport, he bought a handful of magazines, and flipping through one, he came across an illustrated story called "The Children of Vietnam." His close advisor and friend, Bernard Lee, never forgot King's reaction to seeing the photos.

When he came to *Ramparts* magazine he stopped. He froze as he looked at the pictures from Vietnam. He saw a picture of a Vietnamese mother holding her dead baby, a baby killed by our military. Then Martin just pushed the plate of food away from him. I looked up and said, "Doesn't it taste any good?," and he answered, "Nothing will ever taste any good for me until I do everything I can to end that war."²⁸

Lee stated "That's when the decision was made. Martin had known about the war before then, of course, and had spoken out against it. But it was then that he decided to commit himself to oppose it."²⁹

In Jamaica, with plenty of time to think, reflect, and meditate, Vietnam weighed heavily on his mind. He stated, "I came to the conclusion that I could no longer remain silent about an issue that was destroying the soul of our nation."³⁰ When he returned in February, he gave his strongest speech yet, saying that the war was causing America's "declining moral status in the world," and was evidence of America's "deadly western arrogance," "a new form of colonialism," and "an ominous expression of our lack of sympathy for the oppressed."³¹ He returned to reminding America of the gap between her idealized and her authentic self, telling her, "before it is too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war."³²

In April of 1967, one year before his assassination, he delivered his famous speech, "A Time To Break Silence." He began by noting all the

questions he was receiving as to why he was speaking out against the war, given his obvious fame as a civil rights leader. He pointed out that winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 charged him with the mission of bringing peace to all, not just to blacks and whites in America but to communists and capitalists and all God's warring children worldwide.

He reiterated his advocacy for a revolution of values, a recapturing of the revolutionary spirit that would send Americans out "into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism."³³ If the revolution of values was genuine, it would mean that "our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies."³⁴ He ended the speech with a call for America to begin to "rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter—but beautiful—struggle for a new world."³⁵

SHATTERED DREAMS

Publicly, King continued to speak his hope that America could hear and would answer the call, but privately he struggled with depression and despair over his own shattered dreams for the country. King biographer David Garrow chronicles King's bouts of depression during many moments in his life, but especially in his final days, referring to him as dispirited, despondent, and melancholy.³⁶ To begin with, he questioned the efficacy of the Civil Rights Movement. Harry Belafonte, a loyal supporter of the movement and of King, wrote,

I remember the last time we were together, at my home, shortly before he was murdered. He seemed quite agitated and preoccupied, and I asked him what the problem was. "I've come upon something that disturbs me deeply," he said. "We have fought hard and long for integration, as I believe we should have, and I know that we will be victorious. But what bothers me is that I've come to believe that we're integrating into a burning house."³⁷

King came to realize that his victories over segregation meant very little unless economic conditions changed. He wondered, what good was it if blacks won the right to eat a hamburger at a lunch counter with whites when they couldn't afford the burger? What good was it if

blacks could vote when they had nothing substantive to vote for? SCLC put out a policy statement in January of 1968 that reflected King's concern. "The right to vote or to eat in any restaurant, while important....does not actually affect conditions for living."³⁸

Near the end of his life, King spoke to a longtime family friend, confessing with despair,

I have found out that all I have been doing in trying to correct this system in America has been in vain. I am trying to get at the roots of it to see what ought to be done.... The whole thing will have to be done away with.³⁹

The deeper King came to realize the magnitude of the problems, the deeper he sank into despair. Publicly, he projected his feelings onto "the movement," saying "The movement for social change has entered a time of temptation to despair, because it is clear now how deep and how systematic are the evils it confronts."⁴⁰

KING'S DREAM TODAY

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 ask, how have we progressed against the evil triplets which King felt kept his dream from being fulfilled?

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 between our ideals and their realization. For example, Barack Obama is being taken seriously in his run for President and, in fact, is often compared to King, though the oft-raised question by political pundits of whether he is *black enough* is disturbing enough to make us question how deep our dialogue on race really goes in this country. Still, the man can have a hamburger at a lunch counter in Birmingham when he campaigns there, and if he rode a bus he could sit in the front no matter how many white people were on it, and that is progress.

But are we any less materialistic now than we were in 1968 when King was killed? King called for the elimination of world poverty and poverty in our own country; he called for the creation of full

employment or a guaranteed income for all citizens—none of these dreams have come true. He called for the closing of the income gap, but the gap has widened even more since his death, and in fact is now the widest it has been since 1929.⁴¹ “The income gap between the rich and the rest of the U.S. population has become so wide, and is growing so fast, that it might eventually threaten the stability of democratic capitalism itself.” These are not words spoken by King in 1968, but by Alan Greenspan in 2005.⁴²

Similarly, has equal progress been made since the 1960’s on King’s third evil of militarism? Has King’s dream of nonviolent conflict resolution on a national and international level come true? King once critiqued the militarism of the United States, asking:

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?⁴³

But since his death, the examples of militaristic intervention have only grown: Grenada, Panama, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Iraq, the list goes on. King admonished us,

We must find an alternative to war and bloodshed. Anyone who feels, and there are still a lot of people who feel that way, that war can solve the social problems facing mankind is sleeping through a great revolution. President Kennedy said on one occasion, “Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind.” The world must hear this. I pray to God that America will hear this before it is too late, because today we’re fighting a war.⁴⁴

In how many of the nearly forty years since King’s death, can we find America still fighting one war or another?

As a nation we are *more* materialistic, *more* militaristic, not less. We have elevated King, the slayed dreamer, but shattered much of his dream, and the only way we can live with ourselves is to focus on remembering the dream come true. 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 of racial

harmony. His “I Have a Dream” speech consistently appears as one of the top ten most influential speeches of the 20th century.

Every year on January 15th, the same old video clip, the same old sound-bite. On that same day of the year, and in the following month known as Black History month, students all over America are taught the same story of Martin Luther King, Jr. 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, Jr., a man with a dream.

Indulge me in an example. My nine-year-old niece Hayley called me one day and told me she was doing a report on Martin Luther King, Jr. I asked her what she had learned about him in school. This is her completely 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 part of the reason why we have selected to remember only one-third of King’s message. 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.

THE PSYCHO-POLITICS OF SELECTIVE REMEMBERING AND COLLECTIVE FORGETTING

It was Ronald Reagan who institutionalized this collective back-patting by signing the holiday honoring King 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.”⁴⁵ 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 showing how statistically blacks still aren't equal in all ways yet—for the most part, at least for white America, we feel done. “And, it worked! And so that made them all happy, and so that made life easier. And that's how it is now.”

I used to think 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, radically liberal man. Now, I just find it sadly ironic that it was President Reagan, a subsequent sufferer of Alzheimer's, 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 who, if he understood nothing else, understood the power of image. He did not want to sign the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday into law, but felt pressured into it. When one Republican governor wrote to him expressing concerns over elevating 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.”⁴⁶ So, the conservative politicians 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.⁴⁷

The last line is the conservatives' favorite line of King's—George W. Bush relied heavily on it in 2003 when he declared King's birthday a Federal holiday.

Look no further for evidence of America's neurotic defensiveness. In no way are Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush leaders whose actions are consistent with the thinking of King—nor was George H.W. Bush,

who added another conservative seal of approval onto King by signing a Martin Luther King Holiday Proclamation in 1989. To use King's language, these three politicians have grossly sinned in their allegiance to the evil triplets; they are presidents who have fallen into the worship of the golden calf of materialism, of the silver bullet of militarism, and who have certainly not supported in any way King's platform for the remediation of racism. King was *for* racial preferences, was *for* affirmative action, was *for* quotas, and even more radically, was *for* reparations for slavery.

These were not views King kept hidden from the public. 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.⁴⁸

In his 1968 book *Where Do We Go From Here?*, he stated 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.” 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.”⁴⁹ Yet many people continue to invoke that one poetic comment of King's, made in 1963—about judging black children by the content of their character not their skin color—to argue against the imposition of quotas and affirmative action, measures King himself clearly supported.

A man named Charles Adams once 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.⁵⁰

I would add to *exalt* and *adore* the words to *fix* and *freeze* the source. In my view, King has come to be primarily associated with three archetypal roles—that of the warrior-hero, the peaceful dreamer, and the martyr-savior. At the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, King was seen as an archetypal warrior-hero, fighting the dynamic and dramatic battle against racism through the weapon of non-violent resistance. Later, in 1963 during the March on Washington, I would argue that King became fixed in the public eye and adored in another archetypal role as well, that of the peaceful dreamer. Then, still later in 1968 when he was assassinated, King's image became frozen and exalted by the public as an archetypal martyr-savior. What he did between 1963 and 1968 is mostly forgotten. Frankly, it is not politically expedient or psychologically safe for an ever-more militaristic, ever-more materialistic America to remember.

This selective remembering, repackaging, and retelling of the story, though I have portrayed it politically quite cynically, can be viewed in another light as a rather predictable psychological process. From very early in his career, King was already both man and myth, and with his assassination he ascended in the American psyche as a mythical figure, virtually guaranteeing that much of the actual man would be forgotten. 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.⁵¹

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, still-addicted, and still-violent 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.

INTERLUDE: A TRIP TO THE BOOKSTORE

I know I am painting a simplistic and rather dark picture here. Of course there are people who remember King's strong critique of militarism during those later years, and there are also people, though many fewer I suspect, who remember his even stronger critique of materialism. But I paint the picture this way because I fear that the people who remember the triple challenge King's message and wish to express it could lose the battle to those who remember King's message and choose to forget or suppress it. Those of us who lived through and remember the time will die, and for those who do not remember it, it will live for them through history books and the stories their teachers tell them.

My niece did not know that King was against war, and therefore did not know that the reason why George W. Bush was booed while memorializing King was because Bush was *for* war and was, in fact, raging war as he praised the King of peace. My niece did not know that King was against the rich getting richer while the poor got poorer, and therefore did not know that another reason why Bush was booed while memorializing King was because Bush had done everything in his political power to make sure that economic gap increased.

So to counteract this story she had been told, to make sure she had the full report for her report, I rushed down to my local bookstores to buy her some reference books. Of the six children's and young adult books on King available in the biography section of my local Barnes and Noble (none were available at Borders that day, though the biographies of pop stars Hilary Duff and Lindsay Lohan were in stock), *only one of them* made mention of both King's concern with militarism and materialism.⁵² The other five *made no reference to Vietnam at all* or to his anti-militaristic stance. (Though some noted he won the Nobel Peace Prize, they connected this with his peaceful protests regarding race). Three of those five *made no mention of his concern about materialism at all* and of the two that did, they made cursory mention of his support for garbage workers striking for better wages, but only to contextualize why he was in Memphis at the time of his death, and not to illustrate his vehement position on materialism itself.

If Slattery is correct and "our identities are bound up with what we—as a people and a culture—choose to forget as well as what we

select to remember," I would assert that those five books on King define America more than they define King, that they are more about America's identity, her idealized identity, than they are about the identity of the King she idealizes.

TOWARD A NEW COLLECTIVE REMEMBERING

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 suggests a solution, and it's a simple one. We can change what part of the myth we focus on. We can fix the archetypes we have fixed onto King, and thus begin to fix ourselves. If we could collectively remember another side of King, we could resurrect more of the man and redeem more of his message.

While space does not allow me to fully explore what all of those "archetypal fixes" might be, I do want to offer one: the role of the gadfly. The literal gadfly is the annoying fly that circles around cows and pesters them. The archetypal 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 undertaken with the goal of improving societal conditions. An early gadfly was 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."⁵³

I am suggesting that we need to hear King's voice buzzing in our collective ear, arousing us and persuading us and reproaching us for all we have not done yet. Perhaps the peaceful dreamer could give way to the provocative gadfly if we would forget for a while King's "I Have a Dream" speech and remember his gadfly sermon mentioned earlier, "Why America May Go to Hell." In doing this, we could shift from remembering King by patting ourselves on the back to really honoring him by waking up and getting to work on the monumental task of manifesting King's vision of heaven on earth—the beloved community.

Here we are not creating a mythological role where none exists, for it is 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 men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights."⁵⁴

But rest we do when we mythologize King as a warrior-hero who won the battle, a peaceful dreamer whose dream came true, a martyr-savior who gave his life and saved us. Rest we do when we are taught, like my niece, "And, it worked! And so that made them all happy, and so that made life easier. And that's how it is now."

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.⁵⁵

King can be seen as that gadfly sent by God to America, but America did not spare him and struck him dead too, then went back to sleep. Now we even have a holiday in King's name 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. He lies in a tomb 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 weapons and our idolization of money. The true axis of evil we have yet to fight is not those countries declared to be evil by George W. Bush, but those concepts, "the three triplets," declared by Martin Luther King, Jr.—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.”⁵⁶ This is not mere hyperbole. King, like Jesus, like Gandhi, like the other warriors and dreamers and martyrs and gadflies before him, gave us enough wisdom to live by for centuries. Recall G. K. Chesterson’s line, “The problem with Christianity is not that it has been tried and found wanting, but that it has been found difficult, and left untried.”⁵⁷ The same can be said of King, that his message has been found politically dangerous to the status quo and psychologically dangerous to the American soul, and therefore has been left, for the most part, untried.

But in order for us to try it, we have to remember it.

“OUT OF THE MOUNTAIN OF DESPAIR, A STONE OF HOPE”

In 2008, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial will open on four acres at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The centerpiece of the memorial will be a 30-foot-tall rough stone called “The Stone of Hope” in tribute to one of King’s oft-repeated statements, “With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.”⁵⁸ On the side of the stone facing the Jefferson Memorial, King’s likeness will be carved. Standing at the Lincoln Memorial where King delivered the “I Have a Dream” speech, the stone will be visible.

From perusing the pages of the Memorial website, it appears that soon a much richer story of King will be told there for future generations to read than those now available in our local chain bookstores. When explaining why now the time is right to build the Memorial, the site states,

Dr. King once reminded the nation of “the fierce urgency of now” while warning against “the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.” The time is now a historical perspective. Many young people have heard of Dr. King, but are unaware of the significance of his contributions to America and the world.⁵⁹

From looking at the site design plans, there are references to the struggle against racism, of course, but there are also references to peace and economic justice. In fact, the vision of the Memorial is described as such:

The Memorial will evoke the memory and spiritual presence of Dr. King. It will honor not only a great man, but the values that empowered his leadership, including courage and truth, unconditional love and forgiveness, justice and equality, reconciliation and peace.

It is an appropriate turn, to look not just at the man and the myth and the movement, but at the message that encircles them all. In the end, everything came down to values for King, a revolution of values. He wrote,

For its very survival’s sake, America must re-examine old presuppositions and release itself from many things that for centuries have been held sacred. For the evils of racism, poverty and militarism to die, a new set of values must be born.⁶⁰

For every new generation that is born, this Monument will serve, literally, as a touchstone for those values.

Though I have taken on the role of a gadfly myself during much of this essay and resonate with King’s despair over the future of this country, I do have hope as well, and it is this Memorial in part which gives me that hope. Against the movement of the American psyche to forget King, there seems to be a countermovement always to remember him and the radical integrity of his message, a countermovement even in the political realm where his message is most dangerous. In Slattery’s words, “where [a country] makes the cut between what will be allowed in and what will remain outside, defines that entity even more than one’s fingerprints or biological heritage.” The American psyche is not definitively defined: the cut is not carved in stone.

NOTES

1. Dennis Patrick Slattery, "Remembering the Terezin Ghetto," *The Progressive Christian* 181, vol. 8 (May, 2006): 14.

2. An expanded analysis of King's work with America's neurosis, as well as other themes in this essay can be found in my dissertation entitled *Cultural Therapy: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Work with the Soul of America* (2004).

3. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The American Dream," in *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), p. 87.

4. King, quoted in David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), p. 584.

5. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 99.

6. Karen Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1937) and *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1950).

7. George Washington is the only other American honored with a Federal holiday. Abraham Lincoln's birthday is a legal holiday in some states, but not a Federal holiday, though some states have joined his birthday and Washington's into one called President's Day, which coincides with the Federal holiday for Washington. There is only one other Federal holiday that honors an individual: Columbus Day.

8. Those Presidents are Theodore Roosevelt, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln.

9. King, in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: Warner Books, 1998), p. 262.

10. Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Testament of Hope," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1969), p. 315.

11. King, *Autobiography*, p. 340.

12. Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Autobiography of Religious Development," in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Vol. 1. Called to Serve, January 1929-June 1951*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), p. 359.

13. King, *Autobiography*, p. 9.

14. Coretta Scott King, "Thoughts and Reflections," in *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Freedom Struggle*, ed. Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 253.

15. King, quoted in *Bearing the Cross*, p. 46.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Martin Luther King, Jr., "How Should a Christian View Communism?," in *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 100.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

20. *Ibid.*

21. King, "Paul's Letter to American Christians," in *A Knock at Midnight*, p. 28.

22. King, quoted in *Bearing the Cross*, p. 429.

23. Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Time to Break Silence," in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 241.

24. King, quoted in Robert M. Franklin, "An Ethic of Hope: The Moral Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* XL, no. 4 (1986): 46.

25. King, "Paul's Letter to American Christians," pp. 28-29.

26. King, quoted in *Bearing the Cross*, p. 394.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 430.

28. Lee, quoted in *Bearing the Cross*, p. 543.

29. *Ibid.*

30. King, quoted in *Bearing the Cross*, p. 543.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 545.

32. King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, p. 213.

33. King, "A Time to Break Silence," p. 242.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

36. David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), p. 598.

37. Harry Belafonte, "Is America a Burning House: We Need a Voice of Moral Courage to Offer a Vision for the Twenty-first Century," *Essence* 27, November 1996, p. 218.

38. King, quoted in *Bearing the Cross*, p. 591.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 580.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 581.
41. Bill Moyers, <http://www.racematters.org/josephhough.htm>
42. Peter Grier, "Rich-poor Gap Gaining Attention," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 14, 2005, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0614/p01s03-usec.html>
43. King, quoted in James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Third World," in *We Shall Overcome*, p. 207.
44. King, "Remaining Awake During a Great Revolution," in *A Knock at Midnight*, p. 219.
45. Ronald Reagan, "Message to the Congress of Racial Equality on the Observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day," <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/11686b.htm>
46. Marcus Epstein, "Myths of Martin Luther King," <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig/epstein9.html>
47. Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King: The Story of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Viking Books, 2001), p. 234.
48. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Classic, 1963), p. 127.
49. King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, p. 170.
50. Adams, quoted in Michael E. Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), p. 283.
51. Lionel Corbett, *The Religious Function of the Psyche* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 89.
52. The one that mentioned all of the triplets was *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Photographic Story of a Life* (2004) by Amy Pastan. The others reviewed that day were *Heroes of America: Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1996) by Herb Boyd, *My Brother Martin* (2003) by Christine King Farris, *I Have a Dream: The Story of Martin Luther King* (1986) by Margaret Davidson, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2003) by Mary Winget, and *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Young Man With a Dream* by Dharathula H. Millender (1983).
53. Socrates, *The Apology*, <http://socrates.clarke.edu/aplg0106.htm>
54. King, quoted in Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. ix.
55. Socrates, *The Apology*.
56. Heschel, quoted in *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero*, p. ix.
57. G. K. Chesterton, "What's Wrong with the World?" (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1910. Reprinted, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), p. 37.
58. King, "Remaining Awake," p. 224.
59. <http://www.mlkmemorial.org/>
60. King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, p. 157.