

“A Reluctant King”

Rev. Dr. Tony Larsen

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Although the official day for celebrating Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday is tomorrow, today, January 15th, is his actual birthday – and if he were still alive, he would be 82 years old today.

I titled my sermon “A Reluctant King” because although we have made Martin a larger-than-life hero who almost single-handedly, in the view of some, won the civil rights struggle in America and ended racism and segregation – Dr. King was, in many ways, a rather ordinary person who only reluctantly took on the mantle of leadership.

We of today tend to think of him as coming into the civil rights struggle as a full-blown leader, minister, pacifist, and visionary – when nothing could be further from the truth. For example, it was not set in stone that he would be at all religious, let alone a religious leader. It’s true that his father was a minister, his grandfather was a minister, his great grandfather was a minister, his father’s brother was a minister, and his own brother was a minister – so he sort of grew up in a religious environment. However, he himself was somewhat reluctant to take religion quite that seriously. He describes how he decided to get baptized at age 5: “Our church was in the midst of the spring revival, and a guest evangelist had come down from Virginia. On Sunday morning the evangelist came into our Sunday school to talk to us about salvation, and after a short talk on this point he extended the invitation to any of us who wanted to join the church. My sister was the first one to join the church that morning, and after seeing her join, I decided that I would not let her get ahead of me, so I was the next. I had never given this matter a thought, and even at the time of my baptism I was unaware of what was taking place. From this it seems quite clear that I joined the church not out of any dynamic conviction, but out of a childhood desire to keep up with my sister” [p. 6 in The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., edited by Clayborne Carson, 1998].

Later, when he was 13, he shocked his Sunday school class by telling them he didn’t believe Jesus physically rose from the dead. And when, at age 15, he entered Morehouse College as a freshman (having skipped a year in grade school and one in high school), he didn’t plan on a career in religion. As he later wrote: “Because of the influence of my mother and father, I guess I always had a deep urge to serve humanity, but I didn’t start out with an interest to enter the ministry. I thought I could probably do it better as a lawyer or doctor.” And this part is interesting: “I revolted, too, against the emotionalism of much Negro religion, the shouting and stamping. I didn’t understand it, and it embarrassed me. I often

say that if we, as a people, had as much religion in our hearts and souls as we have in our legs and feet, we could change the world” [pp. 14-15].

Also, his college training raised a lot of doubts about the literal truth of the bible. “[My] college training, especially the first two years, brought many doubts into my mind. It was then that the shackles of fundamentalism were removed from my body. More and more I could see a gap between what I had learned in Sunday school and what I was learning in college. My studies had made me skeptical, and I could not see how many of the facets of science could be squared with religion” [p. 15]. Eventually, he came to see through his studies that the myths and legends of the Bible contained important spiritual truths, and he realized that Christianity, understood critically and metaphorically, had a great deal to offer the world. So when he graduated from college, at age 19, he was ready to enter seminary.

But he didn’t exactly start out as ministerial material!

As another example of how he didn’t start out as the pacifist visionary we see him as today – you know, preaching love and tolerance and interracial harmony – he describes how he felt about white people from an early age. “From the age of three, I had a white playmate who was about my age. We always felt free to play our childhood games together. He did not live in our community, but he was usually around every day; his father owned a store across the street from our home. At the age of six we both entered school – separate schools, of course. I remember how our friendship began to break as soon as we entered school; this was not my desire but his. The climax came when he told me one day that his father had demanded that he would play with me no more. I never will forget what a great shock this was to me. I immediately asked my parents about the motive behind such a statement. We were at the dinner table when the situation was discussed, and here for the first time I was made aware of the existence of a race problem. I had never been conscious of it before. As my parents discussed some of the tragedies that had resulted from this problem and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it, I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person. As I grew older and older this feeling continued to grow. My parents would always tell me that I should not hate the white man, but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him. The question arose in my mind: How could I love a race of people who hated me and who had been responsible for breaking me up with one of my best childhood friends? This was a great question in my mind for a number of years” [p.7].

It wasn’t until Martin went to college that he began to find white people who were just as interested as he was in ending racism. He says: “I started working with the organizations that were trying to make racial justice a reality. The wholesome relations we had in the Intercollegiate Council convinced me that we had many white persons as allies, particularly among the younger generation. I had been ready to resent the whole white race, but as I got to see more of white people, my resentment was softened, and a

spirit of cooperation took its place” [p.121]. So King didn’t always have kindly feelings toward white people. (Understandably.)

He also didn’t always embrace nonviolence, or the belief that love really had the power to overcome evil. At Crozer Seminary, for example, although he was exposed to pacifism, and respected the people who tried to live it, he couldn’t see how it could be very practical in the big picture. He says: “Like most of the students at Crozer, I felt that while war could never be a positive or absolute good, it could serve as a negative good in the sense of preventing the spread and growth of an evil force. War, horrible as it is, might be preferable to surrender to a totalitarian system – Nazi, Fascist, or Communist. During this period I had about despaired of the power of love in solving social problems. I thought the only way we could solve our problem of segregation was an armed revolt. I felt that the Christian ethic of love was confined to individual relationships. I could not see how it could work in social conflict” [pp.22-23].

Ironically, it wasn’t until he went to a Unitarian Fellowship in Philadelphia and heard a sermon by the then-president of Howard University, Dr. Mordecai Johnson, on the life and teachings of a Hindu named Gandhi, that he came to see Christian nonviolence as a practical civil-rights tool. After that sermon he went out and right away bought six books on Gandhi!

“Like most people,” he later wrote, “I had heard of Gandhi, but I had never studied him seriously. As I read I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. I was particularly moved by his Salt March to the Sea and his numerous fasts. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships. The ‘turn the other cheek’ philosophy and the ‘love your enemies’ philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more realistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was” [pp.23-24].

You can hardly miss the irony here. King needed a Hindu to teach him about the power of Christian love. And yet Gandhi himself had needed a Christian, Henry David Thoreau, to teach him about nonviolence. And Thoreau, in his turn, had studied the Hindu Upanishads and Bhagavad-gita before all of them. From India to America to India to America; Hindu to Christian to Hindu to Christian. King didn’t become a Hindu, and Gandhi didn’t become a Christian, but both enriched their own traditions so that in the end Martin Luther King Jr. could write: “Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking” [p.24]. East to West to East to West. May the circle be unbroken.

Incidentally, King had a more-than-passing knowledge of our religion. Rosemary Bray McNatt, who is the senior minister of Fourth Universalist Society in New York City, and a black woman, once had a meeting with Coretta Scott King to discuss possibly helping her write her autobiography. “During an hour of wide-ranging conversation,” she writes, “I mentioned to her that I was in seminary to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. What frankly surprised me was the look she gave me, one of respect and delight. ‘Oh, I went to Unitarian churches for years, even before I met Martin,’ she told me, explaining that she had been, since college, a member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, which was popular among Unitarians and Universalists. ‘And Martin and I went to Unitarian churches when we were in Boston. We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian.’” [From “To Pray Without Apology” in the Nov./Dec. issue of the UU World, pp. 30 ff.]. (I don’t know if that will inspire you or not, but it’s food for thought.)

So King didn’t start out as a minister, or even all that religious;
as a believer in nonviolence;
as a lover of all races.

And he also didn’t start out as a leader in the civil rights movement – and, but for a number of odd circumstances, might never have become one.

Consider: When Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to go to the back of the bus (that was in December, 1955), Martin had been pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for barely more than a year. (Indeed, it was only one year and three months.) The Women’s Political Council called for a one-day bus boycott on Monday, Dec. 5, the day of Rosa Parks’s trial. That day the buses were practically empty of black riders. It was a wildly successful action. The question was, should they continue the boycott or might it fizzle out if they did? And in any case, shouldn’t there be some kind of group to organize it? The Montgomery Improvement Association was formed that afternoon. King was nominated to be its president. He could have said no, and if he’d had more time to think about it, he probably would have. “The action caught me unawares,” he later wrote. “It happened so quickly that I did not even have time to think it through. It is probable that if I had, I would have declined the nomination” [Autobiography, p. 56]. After all, three weeks before that, members of the local NAACP had urged Martin to run for president of that chapter and he had declined, after talking it over with his wife, because they both agreed that, now that he was done writing his doctoral dissertation, he needed to go back to spending more time with his church duties, which had suffered – not work in the community.

And yet, here he was, (1) a newcomer to town (which is probably why he was chosen – he later wrote, “They probably picked me because I had not been in town long enough to be identified with any particular group or clique”) [p.56];

- (2) reluctant because of his age (he was only twenty-six) – surely there were ministers with more maturity and experience, and certainly a fuller knowledge of the community who could do a better job, he thought;
- (3) and nervous, because a president he was expected to give the address at the mass rally planned for that night, a rally that would determine whether and where they went from there.

Martin had twenty minutes to write what he would later call “the most decisive speech of my life.” He spent the first five minutes worrying about the newspaper and television reporters who would be recording it. And then he turned to God in prayer, put together a loose outline, and ended up giving a speech to thousands of blacks that managed to do two things that seemed to be contradictory. One: arouse the group to action by insisting that their self-respect was at stake. Two: get the group to act with love – not hatred or violence, but love.

It worked.

After his speech was done, the Montgomery Improvement Association offered a resolution to the thousands of African-Americans in attendance that was actually fairly moderate. It didn’t ask for a repeal of segregation on the city bus lines. It allowed for whites to be seated in the front and blacks to be seated in the back, as before; it said only that, after someone was seated, they shouldn’t have to give up their seat for someone else. It also asked that bus drivers be courteous and that routes that were predominantly black have black drivers. So it was fairly moderate.

Given that, and the great success of the boycott’s first day, Martin and the other leaders figured the city council would agree to it fairly soon, and the boycott wouldn’t have to go on. But they didn’t, so it did. (Again, had Dr. King known how long it would take to integrate the buses, or how long some people would have to get up at 3:00 every morning to walk 12 miles to get to work, or that a bomb would be thrown on the porch of his home less than two months into the boycott – he might not have agreed to lead the boycott.)

It took over a year – with appeals all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, along with police harassment, conspiracy charges from the city for illegally “hindering” business, and Montgomery’s attempt to stop the operation of car pools – before the Montgomery Bus System was integrated, giving civil-rights activists more than they had actually demanded.

The other event that highlights Dr. King’s reluctance – and how things could have turned out very differently – happened about six weeks into the boycott. He got a phone call at midnight that said, “Listen nigger, we’ve taken all we want from you; before next week you’ll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery” [p. 77]. As Martin later recalled, “Some days more than forty telephone calls could come in, threatening my life, the life of my family, the life of my child. I took it for awhile, in a strong manner.

[But that night] I started thinking about many things... I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward....I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it.... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, 'Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak....' And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world'" [p.77].

Now, we might not all agree on whether a divine voice actually spoke to Dr. Martin Luther King. It could have been his conscience or an inner strength he didn't know he had, or the power of love or integrity (and, of course, maybe these are all the same thing anyway – I don't know). But what I do know is that Martin Luther King could have bowed out; and that, in any case, he was indeed a reluctant king.

As was Moses, who said, "Don't send me, Lord – I have a speech impediment." As was Jesus, who said, "Let this cup pass away from me if it is at all possible." A reluctant king.

And this is important to remember, I think, because when someone's life becomes the stuff of legend, as Dr. King's has, their fears and flaws are usually glossed over or at least explained away, with the result that their stature as an almost mythic figure makes them much easier to admire and revere from afar than to ever think we could perhaps do something similar ourselves. But to believe that is to do a disservice to ourselves and to the potential that lies within us, whether you call that potential the power of love or the power of God.

Now, it's true that most of us will never end up being as famous as Martin Luther King (so famous that there are kids who think the founder of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, was named after Martin Luther King, rather than vice-versa). But Martin himself never expected to be famous either. It was a series of accidents, you might say – particular circumstances that could have been rather different and could have been dealt with in ways quite other than they in fact were – that helped to catapult him into the leadership role he came to embody.

When asked once how he came to be the leader he was, he said, "I just happened to be there. You know, there comes a time when time itself is ready for change. That time has come in Montgomery, and I had nothing to do with it" [p. 78].

Dr. King was not an ideal human being. Besides the fears and flaws we have already mentioned, it's now clear that he broke the vows of his marriage a number of times – a fact which led the FBI to bug his

hotel rooms and use the recordings to try to blackmail him into committing suicide before he could receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

He was not an ideal human being. But he did have a dream. And he overcame a great deal – his own prejudice, his own fear, his own reluctance – to help bring it to life.

Let me close with these words about his teenage years, because they may give us a tiny blueprint for our own lives: “I remember an experience I used to have in Atlanta. I went to high school on the other side of town – to the Booker T. Washington High School. I had to get the bus in what was known as the Fourth Ward and ride over to the West Side. In those days, rigid patterns of segregation existed on the buses, so that Negroes had to sit in the backs of buses. Whites were seated in the front, and often if whites didn’t get on the buses, those seats were still reserved for whites only, so Negroes had to stand over empty seats. I would end up having to go to the back of the bus with my body, but every time I got on that bus I left my mind up on the front seat. And I said to myself, ‘One of these days, I’m going to put my body up there where my mind is’” [p. 9].

May it be so, for all of us.