

# ***The Spirituality of Martin Luther King***

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*Speech has power. Words do not fade. What starts out as a sound ends in a deed.*  
—Abraham Heschel

**Ancient Witness:** Exodus 3:1-2, 7-8a     Deuteronomy 34:1-4

Tomorrow is the Martin Luther King holiday. And if North Church were to adopt a patron saint, he'd be a great choice. Martin Luther King, one of the great prophets in our modern age, is revered for his work in the struggle for justice. We know him for his great work for racial equality and civil rights, his advocacy for the poor, his commitment for fair wages and justice for workers, and his opposition to the Vietnam War. We know him for leading protest marches, for electrifying speeches and for openly defying unjust laws and going to jail. Finally, we know him for dying at the hands of an assassin's bullet. We know him for his courage and action.

But today I want to talk about a side to Martin Luther King that is often overlooked. We often talk about the Rev. King's commitment to justice and social change, his courage to confront the powerful and his remarkable actions. Today I want to focus a little on the internal aspect, his spirituality. What motivated this remarkable person? Why did he do what he did? And so I suggest that we follow King not just on his outward journey but that we learn from his inward journey, as well.

**First**, King's spiritual awareness came out of struggle and suffering, out of a sense of his own limitedness, his own imperfection, his own weakness, fear and anguish.

**Second**, his spirituality was based upon experience. One of his mentors, Howard Thurman, said,

*The experience of God is a living thing, but the thought about it is an invention of the mind. And by the time the mind gets through, the experience has moved on.*

King's father and grandfather were both pastors. And much of what led Martin to choose his path might have been external influences and thoughts about God. And this leads me to my **third point**. The path that MLK was on made him open to this first-hand experience. His spirituality was one that was continually searching and receptive for that fleeting, elusive experience.

And **finally**, the nature of his experience was not that of a miraculous power, an intervening force that changes the course of events. Rather, King's experience of the Sacred Reality was more simply of a presence—a still, small voice. It was a sense not of power but of love—of being loved—and that this love was lasting and eternal. King's spirituality was

a feeling that he was connected—connected to this unseen, unknowable presence—and connected to all things.

King's experience was that the nature of God was not power, omnipotence or coercive force but love, and this led him along the path of nonviolence and the method of Gandhi. He once said,

*I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: "Let us love one another, for love is of God..."*

And then he quoted Arnold Toynbee, who said,

*"Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word."*

King was not just a civil rights leader, but he was spiritually rooted in nonviolent resistance. He believed in the power of an unarmed love. Love was both the goal and the method. And as important as civil rights and racial equality are, his spiritual grounding that he had led him ever-outward, beyond these.

For example, he championed economic justice and spoke on behalf of unions, which is what he was doing in Memphis when he died. He organized the poor people's march on Washington. He spoke out against the Vietnam War. His spiritual awareness led him to say in 1967,

*A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.*

So King was much more than a civil rights leader and his spiritual awareness expanded his circle of concern.

One of the most famous episodes that points to the kind of spiritual experience that King had, happened in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. As the spokesman for the boycott, King was overwhelmed by the heavy responsibilities and threats against his life and his family's safety. Reaching the limits of his endurance, King sat at his kitchen table one night trying to figure out how to get out of the movement without appearing to be a coward.

*And I discovered that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed 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 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 I will be with you, even to the end of the world.” ...I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. Almost at once my fears began to go.*

This sense came when he was at his weakest moment, out of his own suffering, when he was ready to give up. And then he had this feeling of God’s presence within him—an inner voice—and the sense that he would never be alone. And he felt that this presence was there not just for himself but all people.

King believed that this presence connected all things, bringing a hidden wholeness that binds all people together. “Whether we call it an unconscious process, an impersonal Brahman, or a Personal Being of matchless power and infinite love, there is a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole,” said King. “All life is interrelated. All [people] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

And this awareness of the interrelatedness of all people that King found calls us to a radical compassion, to move beyond the barriers of race, nationality and religion and to see that those who are poor, suffering and oppressed are our brothers and sisters.

And so it was like Elijah that King found himself alone, anxious and desperate. And in this darkness he heard the inner voice—the still, small voice of God. It is a voice that is at the heart of all things, connecting us all.

But it was the other prophet, Moses, with whom King more clearly identified. Moses fled the Pharaoh, fearing for his own life. It was then that he saw the burning bush and heard the voice of God speak to him, challenging him with a vision of a new reality to his people, a promised land of justice and fairness and abundance for all, not just for a few.

And it was this voice, this presence, this internal vision of God that guided him and gave him his serenity and courage to act. And he shared both his fears and assurance on the night before his death in his famous speech, saying,

*Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to have a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And [God’s] allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land.*

For King, just seeing the vision of God was enough. Like Moses, just a glimpse of the promised land, a new reality, was enough. Moses went to the top of Mt. Nebo and saw the promised land, and the ancient text says that God told him that he would not enter it. But seeing it was enough.

Jacob Needleman, in his book, *Lost Christianity* (1980), says that a true spiritual tradition is something of an earthquake. It cuts the ground out from under you completely. It takes

away what you consider most precious. It strips away so that something greater, something higher can appear.

But when a great spiritual teaching begins to spread among great numbers of people, something inevitably takes place. The edges begin to get chipped away and worn smooth. What starts out as something that is challenging and difficult begins to get more comfortable, easier, more acceptable.

He says that this is true of all religions. They begin with the idea of what it means to bring a human being to a completely different level—a new being or new creation, said Paul. And this gradually gets turned into the old thing. What was new and shattering becomes old and comfortable again, upholding the status quo and serving the wealthy and powerful.

Needleman wonders whether this process has happened to Christianity, and that Christianity itself has been lost, watered down beyond recognition.

And then people like Martin Luther King come along. People who have experienced the earth-shattering reality of the Holy Presence in their lives. They not only become truly new beings themselves, but they breathe new life into the spiritual tradition itself. And they challenge us all with that original earth-shaking vision.

The vision of the “dream of God” that King brings alive is not a superficial change but a true “revolution of values.” “On one hand,” he said, “we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only the initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion... comes to see that *an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.*”

The challenge expressed by King of two original spiritual traditions—of the Hebrew prophets and of Jesus—was to *restructure society* to reflect God’s love for all. This prophetic tradition and prophetic voice is concerned with how we act collectively as a nation, and therefore is always political. Theologian Daniel Day Williams said, “Justice is the order that love requires.” And the call to re-order and re-structure our society and government was the challenge issued by the prophet.

These days, those of us who love the vision of MLK have a lot of work to do! New obstacles to our representative democracy have emerged. The 1965 Voting Rights Act for which King and others fought was gutted by the Supreme Court in 2013. The scourge of gerry wandering undermines equality across the nation. The corruption of big corporations and billionaires buying influence and elections is out of control. Military spending has grown exponentially. Even with medical insurance, millions of people go into debt for healthcare expenses, causing over a half a million families to file for bankruptcy each year because of medical debt. The rich are getting richer, while the poor and everybody else are losing ground. Our society is crumbling. So we have work to do.

But, here’s the thing. We make a mistake if we think this challenge is only external. Often followers of King, other prophets and even Jesus, himself, focus on transforming our society and the world. And it is true that we are called into the streets and into the world if we are

to follow them. But the challenge is also internal. It calls us to restructure the way we think, to restructure the way we feel. It calls for an openness to a deep and radical spiritual transformation. It calls us each to the mountaintop. It calls us each to be blessed with the silent assurance, the deep peace and the vision of God. In the words of King,

*Only through an inner spiritual transformation do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in a humble and loving spirit.*

Friends, may we also seek and be blessed with such an internal transformation. Amen.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*

**Further reading:**

*The Radical King*, Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. Cornel West

*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, Martin Luther King, Jr.

*Why We Can't Wait*, Martin Luther King, Jr.

*In a Single Garment of Destiny*, Lewis Baldwin

*From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice*, Thomas Jackson