

Martin Luther King, Jr.: Litany and Words in Memoriam

7 April 1968

San Francisco, Calif.

We thought it rather important that at a time when all of the thought and imagination of people around the earth will be concerned about the image, the contribution, the lifestyle of this very remarkable human being that it would be well for us in our simple service in memory to call attention to the children. So that it is with this intimate, primary, personal touch that I invite you to read with me the litany. I am sorry that there aren't enough for everybody who is standing but those who have them have them.

We want a special part of this service dedicated to you. During these days you will be hearing over and over again how great was your father and how truly wonderful are your mother and all the rest who make up the house of Martin Luther King. But we in San Francisco think of the four of you in this moment and send warm love and appreciation.

[All:] We send warm love and affection to Yolanda, Martin III, Dexter, and Bernice Albertine.

[HT]: We thank you for being your father's children, for without you he could not have sustained his inspiration to struggle on so courageously. You were secure in his thought at all times. Remember when he spoke of building a better world for you in the picture of his dream that day, August 28th, before the thousands assembled in Washington.

[All:] For your sake we rededicate ourselves this day to the imperative to make the dream come true.

[HT:] He would want his eldest to greet the sunrise each morning. You, Yolanda, are lovely, kind, and beautiful. We need so much of what you are in our world today. Your father will be so happy to see you developing year after year into a full-blown rose. Each day we will think of you with the rising sun.

[All:] We shall think of you each day with the rising sun.

[HT:] Martin the III has a wonderful heritage. His face shines with optimism and goodwill. He loves people and makes friends. He was so proud that his father could go so many places and in his son's own words, "continue helping people all the time." Whatever your life work happens to be, young Martin—your father would want you to choose any field that you like best—you will carry on in this worthy tradition of loving and helping people.

[All:] And we shall continue to join you, Martin, in this tradition of loving and helping people.

[HT:] Dexter, named for the church in Montgomery, Alabama where your father's work began. Like your father you were born in the first month of the year and you are a very special person, too. You will have rich seven-year-old memories of things your father left for all people which his death cannot destroy. Keep a singing heart that the future is ever bright for you just as your father made it.

[All:] We join to make the future brighter for you, Dexter, and for all children everywhere.

[HT:] Bright-eyed Bernice, just five years old a little more than a week ago. You were the last of the children and you brought so much delight and happiness to your father and to his many friends.

[All:] We send our love and thoughts to all of you each day with the rising and the setting sun.

Now I'd like for us to sing as a part of this dedication, the hymn. The tune may not be familiar to you, so that those of you who have the text before you, sing with your hearts. It doesn't matter what your voice sounds like. This is the mood and the spirit.

Behold a Sower! From afar  
He goeth forth with might;  
The rolling years His furrows are,  
His seed, the growing light;  
For all the just His Word is sown,  
It springeth up I;  
The tender blade is hope's young dawn,  
The harvest, love's new day.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable  
in Thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Drop Thy still dews of quietness 'til all our strivings cease. Take from  
our souls the strain and stress and let our ordered lives confess the beauty  
of Thy peace. Amen.

The words in memoriam are divided into three parts. The first is a paragraph from a very remarkable book written many years ago by Gaius Glenn Atkins called *Pilgrims of the Lonely Road* and the paragraph has a very important insight to share.

Life does not grow simple with the passing years, but its deeper needs are unchanging. The secret of peace is not to be sought at the end of the road, but in the spirit in which we journey. It is to be sought in the consciousness of the sustaining love of a God who is committed to real participation in all our strife; who does not release us from the battle, but who shares the fight; who does not set us free from the possibility of pain and tears, but who feels the hurt of our wounds, the salt bitterness of our sorrow; who spends Himself, not only with us, but for us, and in the travail of redemptive passion anticipates the victories of the spirit. And finally whatever pilgrimage we undertake must be undertaken, in spite of the interior loneliness of all great spiritual processes. We are never to forget that we are all so tied up in one bundle that peace and reconciliation in which others are not involved are quite impossible. The note of service must be deepened and in our care for those who lie wounded or broken along the road we shall forget our own wounds and our own wearinesses. So conceived, so reinforced, life is never impossible, but does indeed become an adventure whose greatness is its own best justification and whose difficulties may become for the faithful and the discerning but stairs of ascent to radiant and to triumphant regions.

Now the second part is a statement which I shall read to you but which I prepared for the KPFK station in Los Angeles and it occurred there as a tape. But it summarizes what I wanted to

say and what I felt and I want to be sure that you have it because in part three I want to interpret certain facets of the impact of Martin Luther King's legacy. So I'll read this in toto:

Martin Luther King, Jr. is dead. This is the simple and utter fact. A few brief hours ago his voice could be heard in the land. From the ends of the earth, from the hearts of our cities, from the firesides of the humble and the mighty, from the cells of a thousand prisons, from the deep central place in the soul of America, the cry of anguish can be heard.

There are no words with which to eulogize this man. Martin Luther King was the living epitome of a way of life that rejected physical violence as the life style of a morally responsible people. His assassination reveals the cleft deep in the psyche of the American people, the profound ambivalence and ambiguity of our way of life. Something deep within us rejects nonviolent direct action as a dependable procedure for effecting social change. And yet, against this rejection something always struggles, pushing, pushing, always pushing with another imperative, another demand. It was King's fact that gave to this rejection flesh and blood, courage and vision, hope and enthusiasm. For indeed, in him the informed conscience of the country became articulate. And tonight what many of us are feeling is that we—all of us—must be that conscience wherever we are living, wherever we are functioning, and wherever we are behaving.

Perhaps his greatest contribution to our time and to the creative process of American society is not to be found in his amazing charismatic power over masses of people, nor is it to be found in his peculiar and challenging courage with its power to transform the fear-ridden black men and women with a strange new valor, nor is it to be found in the gauntlet which he threw down to challenge the inequities and brutalities of a not quite human people—but rather in

something else. Always he spoke from within the context of his religious experience, giving voice to an ethical insight which sprang out of his profound brooding over the meaning of his Judeo-Christian heritage. And this indeed is his great contribution to our time. He was able to put at the center of his own personal religious experience a searching, ethical awareness. Thus, organized religion as we know it in our society found itself with its back against the wall. To condemn him, to reject him, was to reject the ethical insight of the faith it proclaimed. And this was new. Racial prejudice, segregation, discrimination were not regarded by him as merely un-American, undemocratic, but as mortal sin against God. For those who are religious it awakens guilt; for those who are merely superstitious it inspires fear. And it was this fear that pulled the trigger of the assassin's gun that took his life.

Tonight there is a vast temptation to strike out in pain, horror, and anger; riding just under the surface are all the pent-up furies, the accumulation of generations of cruelty and brutality. A way must be found to honor our feelings without dishonoring him, whose sudden and meaningless end has called them forth. May we harness the energy of our bitterness and make it available to the unfinished work which Martin has left behind. It may be, it just may be, that what he was unable to bring to pass in his life can be achieved by the act of his dying. For this there is eloquent precedence in human history. He was killed in one sense because mankind is not human yet. May he live because all of us in America are closer to becoming human than we ever were before.

I express my deep compassion for his wife, his children, and his mother, his father, and his brother. May we all remember that the time and the place of a man's life on the earth are the time and the place of his body, but the meaning of his life is as vast, as creative, and as redemptive as his gifts, his times, and the passionate commitment of all his powers can make it.

Our words are ended, and for a long, waiting moment, the rest is silence.

That's the end of part two.

Now for part three, which is more of commentary, I must look to see about the order because we had to combine this service into a regular worship service at the church.

If I were to use a text that depicts in my mind the impact of this man, it would include the words from Jeremiah which were read for you. But I would also add to it the line from the book of Hebrews characterizing the life of Abraham: "He looked for a city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God."

I am one of a few and maybe the only person who was a member of the faculty of the Graduate School of Theology at Boston University when Dr. King took his doctorate degree, who did not have him in the classroom. I think that's a mark of distinction. We had contacts, but our most primary contact was sitting around my television watching the World Series. That was . . . I've known him and his family, his mother and his father, for many years. And Mrs. Thurman and my relationship to those two young people was a personal and primary one. It was not involved in the light and the drama. My concern was about the state of his spiritual life all the time. And I felt that it was my relationship with him that gave me this right to do it, while Mrs. Thurman's interest was always in the little things involving the children and the wife of a man who had to live so much of his private life in public. And this is a great agony. I understand from one of his biographers that a book that I wrote in 1949 was very influential on his thinking: *Jesus and the Disinherited*. But I did not hear this from him and I do not lay claim to it, but lest

someone may know that it is in this biographical statement you will think that I am trying to be falsely modest by not mentioning it, so I've done it and now I can go on with my work.

Martin King, in my thought, has given a heritage to us in terms of moral leadership and this is very commonplace to say. And my—our—minds are so full of the agony of this and all the things that have been stirred up and are spilling over as a result of this act of violence that it is very difficult to have a sober mind and look at the role of this man in American society. For what we have lacked for so long a time in terms of the social struggle in America has been an authentic voice of ethical and moral awareness and responsibility that was not maudlin and sentimental and sticky.

Twice, in my lifetime, two presidents of the United States have had fateful moments to be the moral voice to—how to say this—to articulate a moral conscience that had been set up as it were, by the course of political and legal events. First, in 1954 when the Supreme Court decision having to do with public education in this country, when that decision was rendered and for the first time in the history of our country, the federal government, the Supreme Court of the United States, had said in clear, simple, direct language that the will of the American people was against the walls that separated and divided; that this is the true genius of the spirit of the American people. Up to that time it had been possible for a man to be a man of goodwill, to work carefully to improve conditions for the disinherited and for the underprivileged without ever dealing in himself with the question of segregation. Within the zones of agreement he could improve things and help and be very useful and in many ways redemptive without ever having in his own spirit to deal with the moral issue that was involved. But when the Court decided that segregation was against the formal will and intent of the country as expressed in its constitution, then a man who spoke on behalf of improving conditions had, before his voice could be heard, had to say where



he stood on segregation or integration. So the liberal man in the South for instance, found himself in a pocket and he needed some voice that transcended the conflict, the pro-ing and the con-ing of the social issue, who could say clearly, this is the articulation of the formal will of the people and I as the representative of all the people, elected by the people; I voice that. And Mr. Eisenhower was silent. And into the vacuum two things happened. Liberals had to run to cover, and into that vacuum, bigotry, all the things moved. And a long trail of events flowed from that, the failure of the moral word. Petrarch in one of his letters says that if those whom it behooves to speak are silent then let any man speak that the voice may be heard; the voice of truth may be heard.

Now the second; I leap way ahead, the second happened very recently. When as a result of deep concern, the President of the United States appointed a commission and that commission worked hard—it had a cross-section of all kinds of American opinion on it, a cross-section of the sections of the country represented on it—and when the report was given and once again we needed a moral voice that transcended Republican, Democrat, black, white to say this statement in essence speaks for the soul of America. And it is the responsibility of all of us in America to relate its insight to our life on our street where we are functioning. And there was no voice for reasons that are personal and private or political. I do not know. I do not judge. All I know is that another vacuum was created and the future was betrayed again. And into that vacuum this time, something else moved, and that thing that moved was black power.

Now, Dr. King had a very deep feeling about what was at work in the souls of people that would cause them to seek quickly violence as a way for answering and dealing with their problem. He was very mindful of the statement written many years, perhaps even, I guess, yes, before he was born, by the Spanish philosopher Gasset when he talks about violence and what

violence is and how violence belongs as a part of the human situation; he says that violence operates always on an ascending and descending scale in human life or in a man's thought and reaction to the events of his life. And he says that the difference between the barbarian and the civilized man is that the barbarian resorts to violence as soon as his will is frustrated while the civilized man postpones violence until he has exhausted all other possibilities. But violence never leaves the horizon of human thought. Now this is, Dr. King saw this, and he felt that nonviolence as a metaphysic—and hear my words please, I realize I am talking too long but I can't help it now—he realized that nonviolence could not become for him a metaphysical attitude; it could not become for him a technique merely for social change. And let's think carefully for a minute about this. See, it is very simple—it is not very simple, it is possible—for a man to embrace love, to embrace nonviolence, and to establish within himself psychological distance between where he stands and this force that he is manipulating and use it as an instrument for effecting social change in attitudes all around him while he himself will remain untouched and uninvolved. I think that a man can project hate as a technique and not hate; I think a man can project love as a technique and not love.

Now, Dr. King saw this, so that he insisted that always coupled with nonviolence there must be the other words: direct action. There must be confrontation; there must be always the test, the checking out so that nonviolence would not degenerate either into a philosophy merely or into a metaphysic or even into a manipulating ethic.

Now, he may have been mistaken, you see, he may have been mistaken. But a man is under obligation to make of his life one thing. And this is what he did. And that is why he could speak to people of all kinds, and when he went among them they felt that here was a man who made it possible for them in their little world where they were, to be authentic human beings.

That's all. This was his great gift. And it says to us, we cannot change the world by any single act that we do; it may be that we cannot even take the gun out of a simple, single man's hand; it may be that we can't. But one thing we can do. We can see to it that the things that we condemn in our society this morning do not live in us, in us, in us. That I may not be able to weigh much, but all that goes against community in my world will feel the stubborn inches of my thumb. This I *can* do *where* I am.

And then the second thing and I'm through now. The second thing is, all that you have felt and experienced of fellowship and love, of friendship, of community, of holiness in human relations—these things are still true. They are still true. It is so easy to forget that what you experienced in the light is no longer true because you are in the darkness. What you experienced in the light remains true and you must hold this until the light breaks again. And if you do that, you will discover in ways that you cannot quite understand, that it is the intent of life that we shall all be one people. For better or for worse we are tied together in one bundle and I can never be what I must be until you are what you must be; for better or for worse this is the only option. And to reject it is to reject life. And to reject life not merely is to deny the validity of the life of this tremendous human being but it is to make God repent that he ever gave us a chance to live. And let us not do that.

May we go forth from this place in the spot where we are, in the places where we live, [to] speak love; to hate if you can find the word. But search yourself until the word is born in you and then give it forth and thus you will see just over your horizon, or feel a spirit nudging you on the elbow, and this will be his spirit. And I thank God that those of us who are still living have

something he didn't have and that is the benefit of his example. This separates us and gives us the kind of opportunity unlike anything which he ever knew.

Drop Thy still dews of quietness 'til all our strivings cease. Take from our souls the strain and stress and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of Thy peace, Thy peace.