

**The Radical Legacy of MLK:
Beyond Service Projects**
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This week we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr., Baptist pastor and civil rights activist whose name we associate with the movement that began in 1955 with the Montgomery Bus Boycott when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man and move to the back of the segregated bus. King, who was settling into a comfortable new job as pastor of a prestigious black church in Montgomery, Alabama and finishing his doctorate in philosophical theology, was called upon to be the spokesperson for the boycott and president of the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association. With that first speech on the eve of the Boycott in which he announced “that there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression,” the powerful preacher became the voice of a movement about to unfold.¹ Resistance to racial segregation did not begin with King or even with Parks – indeed, there were black organizations like the Congress on Racial Equality that were embracing, as early as 1942, the nonviolent direct action King became famous for, and Rosa Parks was certainly not the first courageous soul to refuse to go along with the dehumanizing system known as Jim Crow and get arrested for it. But the moment was right when she did, and leaders in the NAACP and the Women’s Political Council recognized that all the pieces were in place to launch a mass citywide protest that historians would

later mark as the beginning of the civil rights movement, a movement that would spread throughout the South and travel up to the urban North. The King era of the movement spanned from that December day in 1955 until April 4, 1968 when King was assassinated on a hotel balcony in Memphis while offering his support to the Sanitation Workers' Strike.

The King holiday was established a little over a decade later, in the 1980s when our country decided to honor King as a national hero. But our hero is, as scholar and activist Vincent Harding has famously said, an inconvenient one.² King is an inconvenient hero, that is, if we are committed to move beyond the sketch of King many of us are familiar with, beyond the King of our national mythology – the King of dreams we assume we've already achieved – and come to know instead the King of history, the King who sharply challenged the dominant views of his time and whose words still do the same in ours; the King, whose radical political vision, we do not all agree with. Instead of well meaning people being honest about this fact, or perhaps even knowledgeable about what King actually said throughout his ministry, we dishonor him by reducing him to a figure we can universally affirm. In order to honor King in the 1980s, a decade as politically polarized as today, the witness and legacy of King had to be domesticated; it had to be interpreted in a manner that the dominant culture could comfortably support. So then and now, we focus on a few famous lines from

King's "I Have a Dream" speech delivered on the National Mall in D.C. in 1963, where, in front of the Lincoln Memorial, he appealed to "a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."³

We focus on this at the expense of other central ideas, like this one that frames the entire speech. King proclaims, "Instead of honoring this sacred obligation [promised in the Declaration of Independence], America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'"⁴ In 1963, King's "bad check" was something of a metaphor, but as he got more radicalized in the last three years of his life, this line from the "I Have A Dream" speech – "We've come to the nation's capital to cash a check," became literal and concrete in his 1967 speech, "Where Do We Go from Here." He writes a year before his assassination that African Americans "need to organize our strength in terms of economic and political power. No one can deny that the Negro is in dire need of this kind of legitimate power ... We must develop a program that will drive the nation to a guaranteed annual income."⁵ As we celebrate King today, we forget that his critique of communism and growing analysis of capitalism led to an economic vision approaching democratic socialism. Instead of taking seriously his economic and social analysis born from intimate struggle on the ground, we

focus instead on these uplifting words, “I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character...I have a dream that one day...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today!”⁶

We love to celebrate this dream, because it has become a reality, at least in the form of legal desegregation. King challenges us, though, not to rest in what we have already accomplished but to work for we have not. To honor King in this way not only means reevaluating our economic system, it also means facing some hard realities about the deceptive persistence of racism. With the election of our first black president, for example, we proclaimed ourselves to be a post-racial, colorblind society, unaware that we were using King’s dream to sustain the nightmare of structural racism – that less obvious, more insidious form located not simply in interpersonal encounters but embedded in the social, political, and economic systems of our nation. In other words, the fulfillment of King’s dream of a colorblind society has been used to deny that racism still exists and that it is as destructive and pervasive as ever before. Our society can get away with this because, as the poet Carl Wendell Holmes has written, King is “now safely dead.”

Now that he is safely dead
Let us praise him
build monuments to his glory
sing hosannas to his name.

Dead men make such convenient heroes;
They cannot rise to challenge the images
we would fashion from their lives
And besides,
it is easier to build monuments
than to make a better world.⁷

If King were here to challenge the images we have fashioned from his life, he would point us back to words that led the majority of Americans to denounce him, words he spoke as the black church and broader black community were dramatizing love of neighbors and love of enemies through nonviolent action, in other words, as they were embodying Jesus' life and death and teachings in the Sermon on the Mount – as they displayed, in King's words, "Christianity in action." He would then steer us toward the end of his life, when war raged in Vietnam and King began connecting the violence of racism with the violence of war, when former allies turned against him as he spoke harshly against the country he loved: "The greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," he said in 1967, "is my own government."⁸ During those final years, he called for "a radical revolution of values" that would confront the "the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism." "The dispossessed of this nation," he wrote "– the poor, both white and Negro – live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against that injustice, not against the lives of ... their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to ... lift the load of poverty."⁹

He was murdered in Memphis as he was planning this interracial grassroots movement called “The Poor People’s Campaign.”

With this in mind – the all too easy domestication of King – I want us to identify the ways in which we at Wartburg College may be tempted to avoid the hard demands the witness of his life and work make on us and consider instead how we may faithfully carry on his legacy in socially redemptive ways.

King is an appropriate model for Wartburg College because he was both a scholar and an activist. Perhaps our greatest strength as a collegiate community is our commitment to service and practical action as seen through the contextual education and service learning focus in so many courses, the student led service trips, and May term travel. But as is often true, our greatest strength can become our greatest weakness. Aren’t many Wartburg students, like students these days across the country, tempted to skirt the time intensive demands of reading hard texts assigned in our courses – the social theories or literary theories assigned in a sociology or English course, the seemingly abstract philosophers or theologians assigned in a Religion course – in order to get to the work that we think really matters: those practical tasks with measurable results? And aren’t many professors tempted to give into this growing culture in higher education, to devalue the humanities because the skills developed there are *presumed* to be of little use on

the job, or tempted simply to give into the prevailing student demands that they not work so hard?

But King calls us back to these difficult studies; he calls us to the inherent interconnection of the life of the mind and the life of service. He shows us the practical payoff of wrestling with complex ideas to such an extent that they become a part of us, to such an extent that their truths are known in our bones, are felt in the bowels of our soul. Knowledge for King was not prepackaged information for quick use; it was internalized truths born through intellectual struggle. King became the voice of the movement – articulating its purpose and vision – precisely because he could combine the ideas he learned in his university and seminary studies with what was happening on the ground, in the streets and at the lunch counters.

Indeed, he wrote one of his most famous essays, “Letter from a Birmingham City Jail,” on the margins of newspaper pages while sitting in an empty jail cell, referencing from memory seminal thinkers that could speak authoritatively to his audience, the moderate white pastors who were critiquing him as an outside agitator who came to Birmingham uninvited. So as he wrote his famous message that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,”¹⁰ he references Socrates, who understood that there is a kind of creative agitation, a stirring up of conflict, that is necessary to

liberate us from half-truths. From Socrates King learned that “there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth.”¹¹ In response to the white moderate critique that King was pushing too hard, not giving the local government time to act, King appealed to the Christian ethicist, Reinhold Niebuhr, who observed that groups are more immoral than individuals. From Niebuhr King learned that “history is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.”¹² And he quotes – word for word – Saint Augustine, the 5th century Bishop of Hippo, as he defends the activists’ civil disobedience. King writes, “Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court’s decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in public schools... One may well ask, ‘How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?’” From Augustine King learns “that there are two types of laws: there are *just* and ... *unjust* laws.... [and] ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’”¹³ Explaining what constitutes an unjust law, he then appeals to the medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, and the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. He references the twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich in order to define segregation, and thus segregationist laws, as sin. Finally, this organic public intellectual draws on biblical knowledge as he appeals to the prophet Amos and the Apostle Paul; he draws on theological knowledge as he appeals to Martin Luther; he draws on our democratic foundation as he appeals to Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson; he draws on the poet T.S.

Elliot.¹⁴ In the mind and heart of King, the complex, often abstract ideas learned in his university studies became immanently practical, indeed world altering. In the minds and hearts of us here at Wartburg, they can do the same, if we recognize their value and dedicate our time and energy to their mastery.

Finally, if we here at Wartburg commit ourselves to carry on the legacy of King, this commitment will deepen our greatest strength, our focus on service and practical action, by revolutionizing our service. The legacy of King pushes us not simply toward acts of service and mercy (as important as these may be) but toward confrontation with the powers that keep others oppressed. The distinction I am making here is between mercy ministry, on the one hand, what we commonly call “service,” that attends to individual immediate need (for example, providing the homeless person with a meal and a night at a shelter), and, on the other hand justice work, which attends to the overarching structures that create the need, blocking basic human rights from being met (for example, working toward the creation of affordable housing). King’s philosophy of personalism affirms the intrinsic relationship between the works of mercy (found in Matthew 25), which necessitates personal engagement with individuals in need, and the work of justice. It affirms the intrinsic relationship between personal and structural realities. His treatment of the story of the Good Samaritan, which spans multiple sermons and speeches, demonstrates this conviction: We must hold simultaneous concern for

individual persons and the social structures they inhabit. Affirming the sacredness of all persons means eradicating the conditions that demean their worth.

At the sanitation strike on the eve of his assassination, in poignantly prophetic words that speak to his own costly decision to come to Memphis, King highlights the need for risky personal engagement. He says of the man who fell among thieves and was left by the roadside, “Maybe the Levite didn’t stop because he was on his way to organize a Jericho Road Improvement Association and he felt it was better to deal with the problem from the causal root rather than be bogged down in individual effort.” Maybe the Levite was afraid of getting caught up in a messy and dangerous situation. “And so the first question the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’ ... That's the question.”¹⁵

We at Wartburg are good, it seems to me, at forming students to be personally engaged, certainly with those whom we see as our neighbors and especially through a model of engagement that Christian ethicist Sam Wells calls “working for.” This is the professionalization of service – one person has a need and the other skills to meet that need. The weakness of this kind of engagement, though, especially if done haphazardly (one service experience on MLK day or even one service trip during tour week), is that the recipient becomes a means for

the servant to have a sense of satisfaction of doing a good deed, “of giving back in some small way” – but without the servant’s fundamental worldview being challenged to such an extent that she becomes attuned to the dynamics of power at play in these encounters or to such an extent that she decides to live the rest of her life against the grain of an unjust status quo. Certainly our best practices for service learning, which the Center for Community Engagement emphasizes, calls us to guard against this one-dimensional model of service. I wonder, though, if we as an entire college community do enough to stress that King’s legacy demands more, to be blunt, than being Midwestern nice – than serving a neighbor in need. Have we left too much room for our community to assume we are following in King’s footsteps when really we are disgracing his name? King’s legacy is a “working with” and “being with” model that overturns dominant power relations and forces our embedded thinking to be disrupted. So much so, that we who are privileged in various ways become convicted of our own complicity in unjust structures and of our urgent responsibility to bring about their demise.

A year before his speech in Memphis, while drawing on the same biblical passage of the Good Samaritan, King demonstrates the interconnection of personal and structural realities, and he shows how enduring and authentically transformative personal engagement cannot help but lead to unsettling questions about the dominant social order. “On the one hand we are called to play the Good

Samaritan on life's roadside," Kings says; "But ... 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 is more than flinging a coin at a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that the edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."¹⁶ Working to undo unjust structures is serious business. It leads less to immediate satisfaction of a job well done, "of giving back," and more to the tension and suffering that accompanies embodied and costly engagement.

In 1967 the radical King continues, "Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and materialism."¹⁷ King, along with thousands of others, captured the revolutionary spirit by placing his *body* on the line, right in the midst of conflict and danger. The bodies of activists were beaten at lunch counters, hosed down on the streets of Birmingham, thrown into jail, and even killed. What the civil rights movement teaches us is the necessary role bodies play in real social, economic, and political change, that is, the necessity of bodily risk and sacrifice. This difficult truth – that destructive powers will only be overcome through courageous nonviolent bodily risk – was revealed through ordinary citizens like you and me, through ordinary citizens like Victoria Gray Adams of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, whose racially marked body

challenged the all-white delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention; through ordinary citizens like Ed King, the white chaplain at Tougaloo College who, with a group of black students, would place their bodies on the steps of white churches on Sunday mornings only to get door after door slammed in their faces; and with ordinary citizens like Bob Moses, director of the 1964 Mississippi voter registration drive that brought over a thousand student volunteers into the state, three of whom were viciously murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. Their courageous witnesses invite us to be formed into people ready and willing to place our bodies on the line as instruments of nonviolent social change.

Will our experiences of what we see and learn on service trips, during May terms, and during service learning activities in our courses radicalize us – students and faculty alike? They will if we are alert to what we are learning through our bodies. They will if what we see and experience causes us to question with King “the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies.”¹⁸ Will we question? Will we demand more for ourselves and our world – will we say service is crucial but not enough; the structures must be changed? Will we study the courageous witnesses of those who have gone before us and honor their lives by learning from them the amazing truth that destructive powers can be overcome – if we courageously risk conflict, if we risk nonconformity to the status quo, if we risk physical safety and comfort, if we risk...

May we at Wartburg College honor King and the great cloud of witnesses who comprised the movement by dedicating our minds and dedicating our bodies to a revolution of values – in the words of King, “to the long and bitter – but beautiful – struggle for a new world.”¹⁹

¹ Carson, Clayborne, and Kris Shepard, eds., *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2001) 9.

² Harding, Vincent, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008) 1-22.

³ Washington, James M., ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986) 219.

⁴ *A Testament of Hope*, 217.

⁵ *A Testament of Hope*, 246-247.

⁶ *A Testament of Hope*, 219-220.

⁷ Carl Wendell Himes, Jr., “Now That He Is Safely Dead,” in *Drum Major for a Dream* (Thompson, CT: InterCulture Associates, 1977) 23. Quoted also in Harding, 3.

⁸ *A Testament of Hope*, 233.

⁹ *A Testament of Hope*, 650.

¹⁰ *A Testament of Hope*, 290.

¹¹ *A Testament of Hope*, 291.

¹² *A Testament of Hope*, 292.

¹³ *A Testament of Hope*, 293.

¹⁴ *A Testament of Hope*, 297.

¹⁵ *A Testament of Hope*, 285.

¹⁶ *A Testament of Hope*, 241.

¹⁷ *A Testament of Hope*, 242.

¹⁸ *A Testament of Hope*, 240-241.

¹⁹ *A Testament of Hope*, 243.