

## Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Soul of Leadership

Ruth Haley Barton

*We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you... One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.*”

Martin Luther King, Jr., *Loving Your Enemies*

One of the things that disturbs me about the way we talk about spirituality and related themes within Protestant evangelicalism today is the way we often create false dichotomies between being and doing, prayer and action, contemplation and missional engagement with the world. I am baffled by the fear and suspicion that is aroused in some hearts when they hear words like *spiritual formation*, *contemplation* or *mysticism*.

I am bringing this up today—the day we celebrate the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr.—because King’s life was characterized by a powerful integration of prayer and contemplation with a profound commitment to decisive and loving action in the world. For King, it was never prayer *or* activism. It was never being *in* God or doing something *for* God. It was never missional engagement with the world *or* contemplation of the presence of God within. *It was both*. All the time. King was profoundly non-dualistic in this regard. “Life at its best,” he believed, “is a creative synthesis of opposites in fruitful harmony.”<sup>1</sup>

### Prayer that Leads to Action

On this day when we celebrate King’s presence in the world as a champion for justice, we need to be reminded that it was King’s keen spiritual insight and attunement with the heart of God that made it possible for him to *know* what many Christians and

other well-meaning individuals had somehow avoided knowing—that racism is an offense to the heart of God and contradicts the essence of the Gospel. *There is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male and female; for all of you are one in Christ.*

(Galatians 3:28) The soul force to which he often referred was the “force” of God-directed action motivated by love and emerging from the soul of a person who was in touch with the Spirit of God.

It was strength of soul that made it possible for King to live within the paradoxes inherent in a non-violent approach to confronting evil. “Through nonviolent resistance we shall be able to oppose the unjust system and at the same time love the perpetrators of the system.”<sup>2</sup> Folks, this is just not easy to do and it was King’s *spirituality* that kept his activism grounded in such radical truth. Without strength of soul it would have been impossible for him to live these truths himself, let alone lead others in it!

King’s encounters with God in times of prayer kept him in the game. His spiritual vitality was a powerful undercurrent that carried him beyond fear and concern for his own survival to the fulfillment of God’s purposes for him in his own generation. The day before his assassination, he spoke passionately about being strengthened by what can only be described as a mystical experience of “going to the mountain” and gaining a spiritual perspective on his life and the cause he was championing. “We’ve got some difficult days ahead,” he thundered, “but it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop.

“And I don’t mind.

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned with that now. I just want to do God’s will. And he allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land.

“I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!

“And I’m so happy tonight! I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”<sup>3</sup>

King’s leadership in the fight for racial justice was more than mere human activism; he understood it to be his destiny that history and God himself had thrust upon him. His actions were an out-pouring of God’s heart through the life of an individual who was willing to step up and step into the powerful flow of God’s purposes. And that action, which was met with severe disagreement and violent opposition, drove him to sink his roots deeper into the ground of his being which was God himself.

### **Action that Leads to Prayer**

King knew that God and God alone gives us the interior resources to bear the burdens and tribulations of life, especially those that come as we fulfill our call to serve others and to stand for what is right in this world. Had he not known how to move from action back into prayer—how to tap into a deeper Source than mere human activism—we would have lost him to fear and discouragement; the forces of evil would have prevailed, at least for a little while longer. In a sermon entitled “Our God is Able”, King tells a very personal story of how an intimate encounter with God sustained him in the darkest hour of his fight for freedom and equality.

Almost immediately after the Montgomery bus protest had been undertaken, we began to receive threatening phone calls and letters in our home. Sporadic in the beginning, they increased day after day. At first I took them in my stride, feeling they were the work of a few hotheads who would become discouraged after they discovered that we would not fight back. But as the weeks passed, I realized that many of the threats were in earnest. I felt myself faltering and growing in fear.

After a particularly strenuous day, I settled in bed at a late hour...and was about to doze off when the telephone rang. An angry voice said, "Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery." I hung up, but I could not go to sleep. It seemed all my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I took my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory.

"I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can't face it alone."

*At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced him.* It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying,

*"Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever."*

Almost at once my fears passed from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.

Three nights later, our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust. I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life. Let this be our ringing cry...that there is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and he is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This is our hope for becoming better [people]. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world.<sup>4</sup> (italics mine)

King's choice to *orient himself towards God* in the midst of the resistance that his action had stirred up became a pivotal moment in his life as a leader. It solidified his calling, transformed his fear into a deep sense of calm, and gave him the strength to go on. Were it not for his full engagement in the fight for justice *and* his grounded-ness in the life of prayer, he might never have had the kind of encounter with God that transformed him in the deepest level of his being.

## **A Powerful Integration**

Martin Luther King, Jr. was an apostle of love *and* action.<sup>5</sup> He believed that every genuine expression of love grows out of consistent and total surrender to God<sup>6</sup> and that every action we take in the world must be motivated by love—the most durable power in the world. At the heart of his message was the conviction that love is the creative force exemplified in the life of Christ and it is the most potent instrument available in the human quest for peace and security.<sup>7</sup> He believed that the ability to love our enemies was an *absolute necessity* for our survival.

King's soul was nourished and strengthened by a powerful rhythm: his intimate connection with God (prayer) propelled him to courageous and unreserved engagement with the brokenness of the world (action). And action in the world always drove him back to prayer and radical surrender to God.

Friends, this is what mysticism is—*it is the belief that God is real, that God can be encountered in the depths of one's being, and that our human existence can be radically oriented and responsive to that Presence.* All the great ones of our faith were mystics. Mysticism is Moses hearing God's voice in the wilderness and pushing through all manner of fear and resistance to do that thing he was convinced he could not do. It is Elijah on Mt. Horeb seeking a real encounter with God before returning to his call to be a prophet. It is Paul getting knocked off his horse on the Damascus road and then sitting in silence for three days until God told him what to do next. It is Peter seeing the vision of the unclean animals and changing the trajectory of his whole life to preach salvation to the Gentiles. It is John caught up in the spirit on the isle of Patmos receiving the vision that would become the book of Revelation.

This is what contemplation is—*it is being present to the One who is always present with us and being radically given over to that Presence.* As Richard Rohr writes, “True contemplatives are paradoxically risk-takers and reformists, precisely because they have no private agendas, jobs or securities to maintain. Their security and identity is founded in God and not in being right, being paid by the church or looking for promotion in people’s eyes. These alone can move beyond self-interest and fear to do God’s necessary work.”<sup>8</sup>

And that’s what real prayer is—*it is saying the truest thing you know how to say to God and not being satisfied until you hear an answer that makes it possible for you to pick your head up off the table and go on.*

### **Where the Real Action Is**

And what is the outcome of a life lived in this kind of powerful pulse? Love. Truth. Justice. Courage. Vision. Staying Power. Action. *Contemplative action.*

Contemplative action is action that emerges from our real encounters with God. It is doing what God calls us to do when he calls us to do it—no matter how afraid we are or how ill-equipped we feel. Contemplative action is the willingness to go beyond being primarily concerned for our own safety and survival to the place where we *know* that our real life is hidden with Christ in God no matter what happens to our physical life. Contemplative action is doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right Spirit, completely given over to a Power that is beyond our own—even, and perhaps most especially, when the risks are very great. This kind of action is impossible without being radically in touch with the Source of our life through prayer and contemplation. And this

kind of prayer is not possible until we stop hesitating and give in to the authority of an invisible God as it relates to our life in this world.<sup>9</sup>

As it turns out, contemplation is where the real action is. Real action is not about the absence of fear; it is the courage to look fear in face and master it through love. King was often very much afraid, but he *chose* courage which he defined as “the power of life to affirm itself in spite of life’s ambiguities. This requires the exercise of a creative will that enables us to hew out a stone of hope from a mountain of despair.”<sup>10</sup>

Real action is not about our natural preferences. As King once said, “I don’t march because I like it. I march because I must.” Real action is not about our own personal safety. After King went public with his convictions, he was never safe again from a human point of view. Real action is not about what seems humanly possible. It is about saying yes to the God with whom all things are possible. “Neither God nor man will individually bring the world’s salvation. Rather, both man and God, made one in a marvelous unity of purpose *through an overflowing love as the free gift of Himself* on the part of God and *by perfect obedience and receptivity* on the part of man, can transform the old into the new.”<sup>11</sup> (italics mine)

Today we honor a man who had a God-given dream and described that dream to the rest of us in ways that enabled us to see it and taste it and feel it. Today we thank God for a man who not only dreamed a dream but had a God-honoring plan for realizing that dream. Today we take time to be challenged and inspired by a man who was an agent of change and transformation in our world. *Thanks be to God!*

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> From “I See the Promised Land” sermon (also referred to as “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”), April 3, 1968, Memphis, TN.

<sup>4</sup> *Strength to Love*, p.114.

<sup>5</sup> Coretta Scott King, from the forward *Strength to Love*, by Martin Luther King, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1956), p.24.

<sup>10</sup> *Strength to Love*, p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.

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