

# “KING’S NONVIOLENCE: ASLEEP AFTER 40 YEARS?”

A Commemorative Lecture by Taylor Branch

WASHINGTON NATIONAL CATHEDRAL

MARCH 31, 2008

To Warden Howard Anderson and all your colleagues, friends of the National Cathedral, sisters and brothers in civic faith and spiritual communion, first let me confess that it is a trembling honor to speak with you on this occasion. Exactly forty years ago today, in this hallowed space, very likely with some of you present, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered what would be his last Sunday sermon, on his way to back to Memphis. That same night, President Johnson shocked the world by announcing that he would not seek re-election in 1968.

I was a senior in college. My mother was visiting four nights later when all conversation suddenly hushed in a busy restaurant. A waiter whispered that Dr. King had been shot. Most of my professional life since then has been absorbed with the transforming impact of his career, which spanned my own formative years.

Civil rights, Vietnam, Dr. King, Memphis—these were historic landmarks at the time and remain so today. Even so, this year is a watershed. Because Dr. King lived only 39 years, this 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death marks a crossing over in historical memory. For the first time, and from now on, he will be gone longer than he lived among us. Two generations have come of age since Memphis. Dr. King now moves inexorably from contemporary witness and interpretation toward the settled pages of history.

This does not mean that our understanding is accurate or complete. A certain amount of gloss and mythology is inevitable for great figures, whether they be George Washington chopping down a cherry tree, Honest Abe splitting a rail, or King preaching a dream of equal citizenship in 1963. Far beyond that, however, I want to suggest that we have encased King and his era in pervasive myth, false to our heritage and dangerous to our future. Please bear with me. For without King’s oratorical gifts, I want to speak bluntly against the prevailing sentiment of our time. I believe we

have distorted our entire political culture to avoid the lessons of Martin Luther King's era.

He warned us himself. When he came to this magnificent Canterbury pulpit forty years ago, Dr. King adapted one of his standard sermons, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." From the allegory of Rip van Winkle, he told of a man who fell asleep before 1776 and awoke twenty years later in a world filled with strange customs and clothes, a whole new vocabulary, and a mystifying preoccupation with the commoner George Washington rather than King George III. Rip could not understand why he was a free citizen instead of a loyal British subject.

Dr. King pleaded for his audience not to sleep through the world's ongoing cries for freedom. He said it was possible to see the world upside down. When the ancient Hebrews achieved miraculous liberation from Egypt, we are told that they became disoriented and lost. Many yearned to go back to Egypt. Slavery looked like freedom to them, and freedom like slavery. Pharaoh's familiar lash seemed better than the covenant delivered by Moses, and so the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness. It took forty years to recover their bearings. In the Bible, forty years is the framework of perspective on great events. Dr. King has been gone forty years now, but we still sleep under Pharaoh. I hope to suggest why. It is time to wake up.

Let me remind you at the outset that Dr. King almost did not come here. Only the day before, he had quarreled with his staff and advisers in an emotional showdown. He walked out in anguish, disappearing for hours. No one knew whether he would make his flight to Washington. This was the most intense of five internal crises that had compelled King downward from the height of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize into prophetic isolation. First, he resisted the fervent desire of many around him to celebrate victory in the long struggle against racial segregation with five or ten years of banquets and testimonials. "Oh, this is a marvelous mountain top," said King. "But the valley calls me."

He went from Oslo to Selma, and soon back to jail. From Selma's landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, he dragged his staff to Chicago, proving graphically that racial hatred was not and never had been merely a sectional curse. In 1967, King defied a nearly unanimous vote of his advisers to deliver his broadside speech against the Vietnam War at Riverside Church. Before the end of that year, he defied his inner circle yet again to propose a Poor People's Campaign, modeled on the Bonus Marches

by World War I veterans in the depths of the Great Depression. Some thought he was crazy to imitate obscure white soldiers, who had been ridiculed and routed, but King said their nonviolent witness bore fruit in the G.I. Bill of Rights.

Finally, he detoured to Memphis. A mechanical malfunction had crushed two sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, because city rules forbade black employees to seek shelter from rain anywhere but in the back of their compressor truck, with the garbage. In Memphis, looting broke out from the ranks of a march led by King, for the first time, and he was desperate to restore the integrity and discipline of nonviolence by marching there again. He pleaded with his staff.

And when Dr. King showed up here that Sunday morning, he was scarcely the toast of the United States. Headlines in Memphis called him, “Chicken a la King,” with accusations that he had run from his own fight. FBI propaganda seized gleefully on the looting to brand him both a coward and a terrorist. The St. Louis *Globe-Democrat* called King “the most menacing man in America,” illustrated by a wild-eyed minstrel cartoon of him aiming a huge pistol from a cloud of gunsmoke, with the caption, “I’m Not Firing It—I’m Only Pulling the Trigger.” More respectably, *The New York Times* said King’s poverty campaign served only “to solidify white opinion” against him, and warned him not to repeat Gandhi’s “Himalayan miscalculation” by asking his people to adopt civil disobedience before they understood or were ready for it—as though “his people” were a thing apart. The *Washington Post* tried brooding sarcasm that morning. “Let us have a march, by all means,” said its editorial. “But why not turn it around and have its route run from Washington to where the poverty is, instead of from where the poverty is to Washington?”

So King stood in this pulpit a marked man, scorned and rebuked, beset with inner conflicts. This had been his lot since the Montgomery bus boycott. Yet as always, he lifted hope from the bottom of his soul. He urged this congregation to be alive and awake to great revolutions in progress. “I say to you that our goal is freedom,” he cried here. “And I believe we’re going to get there because—however much she strays from it—the goal of America is freedom!” He refused to abandon his proclamation in Oslo that “the freedom movement is spreading the widest liberation in human history.” Heading back to Memphis, he restated his thesis for what would be a posthumous article. “The American people are infected with racism—that is the

peril,” wrote King. “Paradoxically, there are also infected with democratic ideals—that is the hope.”

All of us here tonight feel at least an inkling that Dr. King was right. History has vindicated his mediation between prophecy and patriotism, politics and faith. In Selma alone, he negotiated privately with all three branches of the federal government while holding together a fragile coalition of neophyte marchers, willing martyrs, and embittered radicals. Together they set many miracles in motion, but we have buried the cumulative impact in a mountain of myth. Ever since Dr. King’s death, the dominant idea in national politics has been that government is bad, inherently unsuited to his purposes. We have made government an instrument for doing harm to our enemies, not for helping each other. We have spurned his summons derived from the Constitution’s preamble, “to establish justice...promote the general welfare...and secure the blessings of liberty.”

Our children and grandchildren have grown up with a gaping disconnect between their true inheritance and the everyday language of politics. The watchword of political discourse has degenerated from “movement” to “spin.” Starting with the humble bus boycotters, Dr. King made the word movement grow in meaning from a personal and tentative inspiration into leaps of faith, then from shared discovery and sacrifice into upward struggle, spawning kindred movements until great hosts from Selma to the Berlin Wall literally could feel the movement of history. They changed lives and conditions for generations to come.

Now we have “spin” instead, suggesting that there is no real direction at stake from political debate, nor any consequence except for the players in a game. Such language embraces cynicism by reducing politics to entertainment.

I do not mean to exaggerate here, but to suggest the possibility of great error. There is daunting precedent in American history. Our nation has slept for decades under the spell of myths grounded in race. I grew up being taught that the Civil War was about federalism, not slavery. My textbooks even used a religious term, the “redeemers,” to describe politicians who restored white supremacy with Ku Klux Klan terrorism late in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. So did President Kennedy’s textbooks at Harvard. Modern Hollywood was founded on the emotional power of that myth in a film “The Birth of a Nation.” Progressive forces advocated racial hierarchy with a bogus science of eugenics.

More than once, the dominant culture has turned history upside down to make itself feel comfortable. And when a civil rights movement rose from the fringe of maids and sharecroppers, making it no longer respectable to defend racial segregation, wounded voices adapted again to cuss government as the agent of general calamity. We have painted King's era as a time of aimless, unbridled license, with hippies running amok. Democratic balance has slept forty years, and we face a world like Rip van Winkle run backwards. We wake up blinking at Tiger Woods, Condoleezza Rice, and Barack Obama, while our government demands arbitrary rule by secrecy, conquest, and dungeons. King George III seems reborn.

Please resist any partisan connotation. Our problem is far too big for that. Indeed, I think the most pressing challenge for admirers of Dr. King is to recognize our own complicity in the stifling myths about civil rights history. Battered, longsuffering allies of King discarded him as a tired moderate long before the reactionary campaign to make the word "liberal" a kiss of death for candidates across the country. Similarly, forces called radical and militant turned against liberal governments for taking so long to respond to racial injustice, then for prosecuting the Vietnam War. Only a convergence of the political left and right could cause such lasting erosion for the promise of free government itself.

On another front, many of King's closest comrades rejected his commitment to nonviolence. The civil rights movement created waves of history so long as it remained nonviolent, then stopped. Arguably, the most powerful tool for democratic reform was the first to become passé. It vanished among intellectuals, on campuses, and in the streets. To this day, almost no one asks why.

Even Diane Nash, who is a hero for me right up there with my friend John Lewis, renounced nonviolence after nearly a decade of pioneer witness and innovation. If she had helped accomplish so much by submitting herself to die but not to kill, Diane wondered how much more she could do by knocking over a few banks as an urban guerilla. With unflinching candor, she told me she looked up ten years later to find that she hadn't knocked over any banks, or so much as visited a rifle range. She said she had merely disengaged from active citizenship, and from the glorious pangs of democracy, behind a noisy pose.

I think race inhibits examination of nonviolence in history. Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael denounced it as a weapon reserved for the weak, asking why

America admired nonviolence only in black people. They claimed the right to be as tough as John Wayne or James Bond. King argued that nonviolence was a leadership discipline above the standards of general society, not beneath them. Cross-racial conversations on this sensitive subject still are rare. Perhaps young people can jar them loose. They are vital to restore King's legacy for our future.

We must reclaim the full range of blessings from his movement. For King, race was in most things, but defined nothing alone. His appeal was rooted in the larger context of nonviolence. His stated purpose was always to redeem the soul of America. He put one foot in the Constitution and the other in Scripture. "We will win our freedom," he said here and many other times, "because the heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands." He put one foot in the doctrine of equal votes and one foot in the doctrine of equal souls. On these two feet, he served as nothing less than a modern American founder. He and his cohorts did just what Jefferson, Washington, and Madison did. They confronted systems of hierarchy and subjugation, and created from them a new politics of common citizenship. To see King and his cohorts as anything less than modern founders of democracy—even as racial healers and reconcilers—is to diminish them under the spell of myth.

Less than a century ago, the world was canopied with emperors, dictators, and monarchs. At the funeral of King Edward VII in 1910, they made poor Teddy Roosevelt march way at the rear among the few non-royal representatives. After that, in a blink, fascism and communism came and went, drenched in iron and blood and grand predictions, insisting that democracy was too weak to survive. Yet democracy still stood, a hope of the world. King's people, though excluded themselves and largely invisible, took the fragile promise of democracy in their hands.

King said the movement would liberate not only segregated black people but also the white South. Surely this is true. You never heard of the Sun Belt when the South was segregated. The movement spread prosperity in a region previously unfit even for professional sports teams. My mayor in Atlanta, Ivan Allen, said that as soon as the civil rights bill was signed in 1964, we built a baseball stadium on land we didn't own, with money we didn't have, for a team we hadn't found, and quickly lured the Milwaukee Braves to Atlanta. Miami organized a football team called the Dolphins.

The movement also de-stigmatized white Southern politics, creating two-party competition. It opened doors for the disabled, and began to lift fear from homosexuals before the word "gay" was invented. Not for two thousand years of rabbinic Judaism had there been much thought of female rabbis, but the first ordination took place soon after the movement shed its fresh light on the meaning of equal souls. Now we think nothing of female rabbis and cantors, and yes, female Episcopal priests and bishops, with their colleagues of every background. Parents now take for granted opportunities their children inherit from the Montgomery bus boycott.

We must lay claim to these results and many more. It is both right and politic for all people, including millions who are benign or indifferent toward the civil rights movement, or churlish and resentful, to see that they, too, and their heirs, stand with us on the shoulders of Rosa Parks, Medgar Evers, and Fannie Lou Hamer.

To do all this will take us beyond racial reconciliation. Even if we worked at it every day, instead of just one day a year on Dr. King's birthday, we will accomplish little if our sense of national politics remains atrophied. It distorts history, and undermines our national purpose, to limit King's movement or ourselves to race.

Dr. King showed most profoundly that in an interdependent world, lasting power grows against the grain of violence, not with it. This inspiration went around the world. Both the Cold War and South African apartheid ended to the strains of "We Shall Overcome," defying all preparations for Armageddon. The civil rights movement remains a model for new democracy, sadly neglected in its own birthplace. In Iraq today, we are stuck on the Vietnam model instead. There is no more salient or neglected field of study than the relationship between power and violence. In my experience, professional soldiers are more sophisticated than civilians about the political limits of military force.

Here in this cathedral, we are accustomed to treat nonviolence as something close to the heart of ecumenical faith, albeit too frequently overlooked or set aside. Ours is a meek lamb of God, and prince of peace. King believed that transcendent love becomes a force for peace in this world, as well as for salvation. By mysterious destiny, he said the whole world measures time itself by the estimated birth year of Jesus.

We recoil from nonviolence at our own peril. In a more novel twin assertion, King rightly saw nonviolence at the heart of democracy. Our nation is a great cathedral of votes—votes not only for Congress and for president, but also votes on Supreme Court decisions and on countless juries. Votes govern the boards of great corporations and tiny charities alike, along with your Little League, your PTA, your houses of bishops, colleges, civic groups, and committees. Visibly and invisibly, everything runs on votes. And every vote is nothing but a piece of nonviolence, hewn from a stubborn past when power rested on sword and conquest alone.

So what should we do, now that forty years have passed? How do we return to the edge of Canaan, like Joshua? How do we restore our political culture from spin to movement, from muddle to purpose? In a larger sense, we must do just what John Lewis and the sit-in students did. We must move the whole country against its ingrained habit and will. We must take leaps, ask questions, study nonviolence, reclaim our history.

But we must all start small. In a profane sense, as a music fan, I would recommend the words of Paul McCartney: “The movement you need is on your shoulder.” What Dr. King prescribed here, in his last Sunday sermon, begins with something deeper. He loved the story of Lazarus and Dives, which ends the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, in part because it is so unusual. Told entirely from the mouth of Jesus, it is a parable starring Abraham the patriarch of Judaism, set in the afterlife. There’s nothing else like it in the Bible.

More particularly, Dr. King loved this parable as the text for a fabled sermon by Vernon Johns, his predecessor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. The intrepid Dr. Johns advertised his sermon title on the church bulletin board right down at the foot of the Alabama state capitol in 1949. He called it “Segregation After Death,” and sent letters to the all-white Alabama legislature, daring them to come. Some of them secretly hoped there would be segregation after death, he said, but to find out for sure, they must venture into a black church and hear him preach.

Johns told them of Lazarus, a lame beggar who pleaded unnoticed outside the sumptuous gates of a rich man called Dives. They both died, and Dives looked from torment to see Lazarus the beggar secure in the bosom of Abraham. The remainder of the parable is an argument between Abraham and Dives, calling back and forth from heaven to hell. Johns said it was to Dives’ credit that he disputed even



eternal revelation from the grave. The Bible favors those with the human gumption to question the divine, including Moses and Noah. Protest is close to true prayer.

Dives first asked Abraham to “send Lazarus” with water to cool his burning lips. But Abraham said there was a “great chasm” fixed between them, which could never be crossed. In his sermon, what Johns drew from this parable was a connection between the great chasm and segregation, of course. To any legislators present, he delivered the mixed news that if there was segregation after death, they would probably wind up on the wrong side of the great chasm, down there with Dives.

But Johns pointed out to them that Dives wasn’t in hell because he was rich. He wasn’t anywhere near as rich as Abraham, one of the wealthiest men in antiquity, who was there in heaven. Nor was Dives in hell because he had failed to send alms to Lazarus all his life. He was there because he never recognized Lazarus as a fellow human being. He never talked with him. Even faced with the verdict of ultimate reality, he spoke only with Abraham and looked past the beggar, treating him still as a servant in the third person—“send Lazarus.”

Dr. King’s sermons developed layers of meaning from this parable. He said we must accept the suffering rich man as no ordinary, nasty sinner. Dives asked only one question about getting water for himself, and when refused, he worried immediately about his five brothers. According to Jesus, by Luke’s account, Dives asked Abraham again to send Lazarus, this time as a messenger to warn the brothers about their sin and its everlasting cost. Tell them to be nice to beggars outside the wall. Do something, please, so they don’t wind up here like me. Dr. King said Dives was a liberal. He was concerned about others. Despite his own fate, he wanted to share lessons at least with his brothers. We aren’t told whether he had sisters or not.

Then King followed the argument into theology. In the parable, Abraham rebuffed this request, too, telling Dives that his brothers already had ample warning available to them in Torah law and the books of the Hebrew prophets. And Dives still persisted. He said no, Abraham, you don’t understand—if the brothers saw someone actually rise from the dead and come back, warning them to repent, then they would understand. They would get serious. Everybody has the Torah and the prophets, but how many people get a visit from the dead?

The parable closes with Abraham’s final word to Dives. Jesus quotes him saying no. If the brothers do not accept the core teaching of the Torah and the

prophets, they won't believe even a messenger risen from the dead. Dr. King said this parable from Jesus burns up differences between Judaism and Christianity. The lesson beneath theology is that we must act toward all creation in the spirit of equal souls and equal votes. The alternative is hell, which King sometimes defined as the pain we inflict on ourselves by refusing God's grace.

This was Dr. King's last message here in the National Cathedral. He went back to Memphis to stand with the downtrodden sanitation workers, with the families of Echol Cole and Robert Walker. You may have seen the placards from the sanitation strike, which read "I Am A Man," meaning not a piece of garbage to be crushed and ignored. For King, to answer was a patriotic and prophetic calling. He challenges everyone to find a Lazarus somewhere, from our teeming prisons to the bleeding earth. That quest in common becomes the spark of social movements, and is therefore the engine of hope.