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

David J. Garrow

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Martin Luther King, Jr., began his public career as a reluctant leader who was drafted, without any foreknowledge on his part, by his Montgomery colleagues to serve as president of the newly created Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). Montgomery's black civic activists had set up the MIA to pursue the boycott of the city's segregated buses called by the Women's Political Council (WPC) immediately after the December 1, 1955, arrest of Rosa Parks.<sup>1</sup>

King was only twenty-six years old and had lived in Montgomery barely fifteen months when he accepted that post on Monday afternoon December 5. Two years later King explained that "I was surprised to be elected . . . both from the standpoint of my age, but more from the fact that I was a newcomer to Montgomery." On December 5, however, King was as much anxious as surprised, for his new post meant that he would have to deliver the major address at that evening's community rally, which had been called to decide whether a fabulously successful one-day boycott would be extended to apply continuing pressure on bus company and city officials to change the bus seating practices. King later explained that he had found himself "possessed by fear" and "obsessed by a feeling of inadequacy" as he pondered his new challenge, but he turned to prayer and delivered a superb oration at a jam-packed meeting that unanimously resolved to continue the protest.<sup>2</sup>

Initially King and his MIA colleagues mistakenly presumed that the boycott would be relatively brief, that white officials would be eager to negotiate a quick solution to the dispute. Indeed, the MIA's three modest demands asked not for the

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<sup>1</sup> On the crucial role of the Women's Political Council, see David J. Garrow, "The Origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," *Southern Changes*, 7 (Oct.-Dec. 1985), 21-27; and David J. Garrow, ed., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Peter C. Mohr, "Journey Out of Egypt: The Development of Negro Leadership in Alabama from Booker T. Washington to Martin Luther King" (B.A. thesis, Princeton University, 1958), 54; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York, 1958), 55-58. See also Martin Luther King, Jr., "Address at Holt Street Baptist Church," Dec. 5, 1955, Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers (Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia); *Montgomery Advertiser*, Dec. 6, 1955, p. A1; *ibid.*, Dec. 7, 1955, p. A4; and *Birmingham World*, Dec. 13, 1955, p. 1. For fuller accounts of King's selection, see Ralph D. Abernathy, "The Natural History of a Social Movement: The Montgomery Improvement Association" (M.A. thesis, Atlanta University, 1958), 29-32; and David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), 20-22.



Rosa Parks rides the Montgomery, Ala., city bus on December 21, 1956, after the Supreme Court banned segregation on the city's buses.  
*UPI/Bettman Newsphotos.*

abolition of segregated seating, but only for the elimination of two troubling practices that the WPC had been protesting for several years: black riders never could sit in the ten front "white only" seats on each bus, no matter how crowded with black riders a bus might be, and black riders seated to the rear of the reserved section had to surrender their seats to any newly boarding white riders for whom front seats were not available. Instead, the MIA proposed, blacks would seat themselves from the rear forward, and whites from the front backward, without the two races ever sharing parallel seats. There would be no reserved seats, and no one would have to give up a seat once taken.<sup>3</sup>

Only on Thursday afternoon December 8, after the first negotiating session had ended with the city evincing no willingness to compromise with the MIA's requests, did King and his colleagues begin to realize that the modesty of their demands

<sup>3</sup> Garrow, "Origins"; J. Mills Thornton III, "Challenge and Response in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956," *Alabama Review*, 33 (July 1980), 163-235.

would not speed white concessions. WPC president Jo Ann Robinson, reflecting back on the white obstinacy, explained that "they feared that anything they gave us would be viewed by us as just a start." The intransigence of the city and bus company officials continued at a second negotiating session and then a third, where King objected strenuously to the addition of a White Citizens Council leader to the city delegation. His objection angered several whites, who accused King himself of acting in bad faith. Still anxious about his leadership role, King was taken aback and left temporarily speechless. "For a moment," he later remembered, "It appeared that I was alone." Then his best friend and MIA partner, Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, spoke up to rebut the white's claims. Thanks to that crucial assistance, King overcame his first major anxiety crisis since the afternoon of his election.<sup>4</sup>

After that tense session, however, King's doubts about his ability to serve as the boycott's leader increased. He confessed to "a terrible sense of guilt" over the angry exchanges at the meeting, and he became painfully aware that white Montgomery had launched a whispering campaign against him personally. "I almost broke down under the continuing battering," King stated two years later. His MIA colleagues rallied around him, however, and made clear their full support.<sup>5</sup>

By mid-January 1956, as the ongoing boycott received increased press coverage, King became the focal point of substantial public attention. That visibility made King a particular target when Montgomery's city commissioners adopted new, "get tough" tactics against the MIA. On Thursday, January 26, while giving several people a lift as part of the MIA's extremely successful car pool transportation system, King was pulled over by two policemen and carted off to the city jail on the fallacious charge of going thirty miles per hour in a twenty-five-mile-per-hour zone. For the first time since the protest had begun, King feared for his immediate physical safety. Initially, he was uncertain as to where the officers were taking him. "When I was first arrested," he admitted two years later, "I thought I was going to be lynched." Instead, King was fingerprinted and jailed for the first time in his life, thrown into a filthy group cell with a variety of black criminals. In a few moments' time, Abernathy and other MIA colleagues began arriving at the jail, and white officials agreed to King's release. His trial would be Saturday.<sup>6</sup>

That arrest and jailing focused all the personal tensions and anxieties King had been struggling with since the first afternoon of his election. The increased news coverage had brought with it a rising tide of anonymous, threatening phone calls to his home and office, and King had begun to wonder whether his involvement

<sup>4</sup> Jo Ann Robinson in Steven M. Millner, "The Montgomery Bus Boycott: A Case Study in the Emergence and Career of a Social Movement" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1981), 199; King, *Stride*, 113, 120. See also *Montgomery Advertiser*, Dec. 20, 1955, p. A1; Abernathy in Dorothy Cotton, "A Conversation with Ralph Abernathy," *Journal* (UCC), 9 (Nov.-Dec. 1970), 21-30, esp. 26; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 30-31. On the WPC's earlier efforts, see Garrow, "Origins"; and an extremely significant letter, Jo Ann Robinson to Montgomery Mayor W. A. Gayle, May 21, 1954, in Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* (New York, 1986), 41-42.

<sup>5</sup> King, *Stride*, 121, 122-23; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 51-52.

<sup>6</sup> *Montgomery Advertiser*, Jan. 19, 1956, p. A4; William Peters, "The Man Who Fights Hate With Love," *Redbook*, 117 (Sept. 1961), 36ff., esp. 96. See also King, *Stride*, 127-31; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 55-56.

was likely to end up costing him, his wife, Coretta, and their two-month-old daughter, Yolanda, much more than he had initially imagined. The next evening, January 27, King's crisis of confidence peaked. He returned home late, received yet another threatening phone call, and went to bed, but he found himself unable to sleep. He went to the kitchen, made some coffee, and sat down at the kitchen table. "I started thinking about many things," he later explained. He thought about the obstacles the boycott was confronting, and about the increasing threats of physical harm. "I was ready to give up," he remembered. "With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward," a way to hand over the leadership of the MIA to someone else. He thought about his life up until that time. "The first twenty-five years of my life were very comfortable years, very happy years," King later recalled.

I didn't have to worry about anything. I have a marvelous mother and father. They went out of their way to provide everything for their children . . . I went right on through school; I never had to drop out to work or anything. And you know, I was about to conclude that life had been wrapped up for me in a Christmas package.

Now of course I was religious, I grew up in the church. I'm the son of a preacher . . . my grandfather was a preacher, my great grandfather was a preacher . . . my daddy's brother is a preacher, so I didn't have much choice, I guess. But I had grown up in the church, and the church meant something very real to me, but it was a kind of inherited religion and I had never felt an experience with God in the way that you must . . . if you're going to walk the lonely paths of this life.<sup>7</sup>

That night, for the first time in his life, King felt such an experience as he thought about how his leadership of the MIA was fundamentally altering what had until then been an almost completely trouble-free life.

If I had a problem, I could always call Daddy—my earthly father. Things were solved. But one day after finishing school, I was called to a little church down in Montgomery, Alabama, and I started preaching there. Things were going well in that church, it was a marvelous experience. But one day a year later, a lady by the name of Rosa Parks decided that she wasn't going to take it any longer. . . . It was the beginning of a movement, . . . and the people of Montgomery asked me to serve them as a spokesman, and as the president of the new organization . . . that came into being to lead the boycott. I couldn't say no.

And then we started our struggle together. Things were going well for the first few days, but then, . . . after the white people in Montgomery knew that we meant business, they started doing some nasty things. They started making some nasty telephone calls, and it came to the point that some days more than forty telephone calls would come in, threatening my life, the life of my family, the life of my child. I took it for a while, in a strong manner.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Thou Fool," sermon, Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, Aug. 27, 1967, pp. 11-14, King Papers.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

That night, however, in the wake of his arrest and jailing and the continuing telephone threats, King's strength was depleted. Then, in what would forever be, in his mind, the most central and formative event in his life, Martin King's understanding of his role underwent a profound spiritual transformation.

"It was around midnight," he explained years later. "You can have some strange experiences at midnight." That last threatening phone call had gotten to him. "Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now, and if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house."

I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born. . . . She was the darling of my life. I'd come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken from me any minute.

And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife who was over there asleep. And she could be taken from me, or I could be taken from her. And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak. Something said to me, you can't call on Daddy now, he's up in Atlanta a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can't even call on Mama now. You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.

And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down 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 I'm 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."

Then it happened.

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 lo I will be with you, even until 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. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.

That experience, that encounter in the kitchen, gave King a new strength and courage to go on. "Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared."<sup>9</sup>

The vision in the kitchen allowed King to go forward with feelings of companionship, of self-assurance, and of mission that were vastly greater spiritual resources than anything he had been able to draw on during the boycott's first eight weeks.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* See also King, *Stride*, 134-35; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York, 1963), 106-7. See James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King: The Source for His Courage to Face Death," *Concilium*, 183 (March 1983), 74-79; and David J. Garrow, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Bearing the Cross of Leadership," *Peace and Change*, 12 (Spring 1987), forthcoming, for additional commentary on the centrality of this experience in King's life.

It also allowed him to begin appreciating that his leadership role was not simply a matter of accident or chance, but was first and foremost an opportunity for service—not an opportunity King would have sought, but an opportunity he could not forsake. His new strength also enabled him to conquer, thoroughly and permanently, the fear that had so possessed him that Friday night in his kitchen, while allowing him to appreciate that although his calling might be unique, it was the calling, and not himself, that was the spiritual centerpiece of his developing role.

That strength and dedication remained with King throughout the Montgomery protest, which ended in success, with the integration of the city's buses just prior to Christmas 1956. In the wake of that achievement, however, some whites directed repeated acts of violence against the newly desegregated buses, and in mid-January, a series of bombings struck several black churches and the homes of MIA leaders. The violence weighed heavily on a very tired King. Then, on Sunday morning, January 27—the first anniversary of King's kitchen experience—twelve sticks of dynamite, along with a fuse that had smoldered out, were found on the porch of King's parsonage.

The murder attempt deeply affected King. In his sermon later that morning to his Dexter Avenue Baptist Church congregation, he explained how his experience one year earlier had allowed him to resolve his previous fears about the question of his own role and fate. "I realize that there were moments when I wanted to give up and I was afraid but You gave me a vision in the kitchen of my house and I am thankful for it." King told his listeners how, early in the boycott, "I went to bed many nights scared to death." Then,

early on a sleepless morning in January 1956, rationality left me. . . . Almost out of nowhere I heard a voice that morning saying to me, "Preach the gospel, stand up for truth, stand up for righteousness." Since that morning I can stand up without fear.

So I'm not afraid of anybody this morning. Tell Montgomery they can keep shooting and I'm going to stand up to them; tell Montgomery they can keep bombing and I'm going to stand up to them. If I had to die tomorrow morning I would die happy because I've been to the mountaintop and I've seen the promised land and it's going to be here in Montgomery.<sup>10</sup>

Those remarks, uttered in January 1957, and so clearly presaging the very similar comments that King made in Memphis, Tennessee, on the evening of April 3, 1968, bring home a simple but crucial point: that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s mountaintop experience did not occur in April 1968, nor even in August 1963, but took place in the kitchen at 309 South Jackson Street in Montgomery on January 27, 1956. King's understanding of his role, his mission, and his fate was *not* something that developed only or largely in the latter stages of his public career. It was present in a rather complete form as early as the second month of the Montgomery boycott.

Appreciating King's own understanding of his role and responsibilities is really

<sup>10</sup> *Montgomery Advertiser*, Jan. 28, 1957, p. A2; *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb 9, 1957, p. 2.

more crucial than anything else, I would contend, to comprehending the kind of leadership that Martin Luther King, Jr., gave to the American black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. By 1963–1964, as that role and those responsibilities grew, King thought increasingly about his own destiny and what he termed “this challenge to be loyal to something that transcends our immediate lives.” “We have,” he explained to one audience, “a responsibility to set out to discover what we are made for, to discover our life’s work, to discover what we are called to do. And after we discover that, we should set out to do it with all of the strength and all of the power that we can muster.” As his close confidant Andrew Young later expressed it, “I think that Martin always felt that he had a special purpose in life and that that purpose in life was something that was given to him by God, that he was the son and grandson of Baptist preachers, and he understood, I think, the scriptural notion of men of destiny. That came from his family and his church, and basically the Bible.”<sup>11</sup>

The revelation in the kitchen gave King not only the ability to understand his role and destiny, but also the spiritual strength necessary to accept and cope with his personal mission and fate. Its effect was more profoundly an ongoing sense of companionship and reassurance than simply a memory of a onetime sensation. “There are certain spiritual experiences that we continue to have,” King stated, “that cannot be explained with materialistic notions.” One “knows deep down within there is something in the very structure of the cosmos that will ultimately bring about fulfillment and the triumph of that which is right. And this is the only thing that can keep one going in difficult periods.”<sup>12</sup>

King’s understanding of his life underwent a significant deepening when he was awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. The prize signaled the beginning of a fundamental growth in King’s own sense of mission and in his willingness to accept a prophetic role. “History has thrust me into this position,” he told reporters the day the award was announced. “It would both be immoral and a sign of ingratitude if I did not face my moral responsibility to do what I can in this struggle.”<sup>13</sup>

More and more in those years King thought of his own life in terms of the cross. It was an image he invoked repeatedly, beginning as early as his 1960 imprisonment in Georgia’s Reidsville State Prison. He focused particularly on it, and on the memory of his experience in the kitchen, at times of unusual tension and stress. In mid-September 1966, amid a deteriorating intramovement debate about the “Black Power” slogan, King talked about how his sense of mission was increasingly becoming a sense of burden.

We are gravely mistaken to think that religion protects us from the pain and agony of mortal existence. Life is not a euphoria of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown

<sup>11</sup> King’s briefcase notes, n. d., King Papers; Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life,” Chicago Sunday Evening Club, March 14, 1965, pp. 5–6, Chicago Sunday Evening Club Papers (Chicago Historical Society); Andrew Young on “Bill Moyers’ Journal,” April 2, 1979, Show #409, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> King, “Three Dimensions,” 6.

<sup>13</sup> *New York Times*, Oct. 15, 1964, pp. 1, 14; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 354–55.

we wear. To be a Christian one must take up his cross, with all its difficulties and agonizing and tension-packed content, and carry it until that very cross leaves its mark upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering.<sup>14</sup>

More than anything else, the Vietnam War issue brought King face to face with what was becoming a consciously self-sacrificial understanding of his role and fate. He had spoken out publicly against America's conduct of the war as early as March 1965 and had stepped up his comments during July and August 1965, but he had drawn back in the face of harsh criticism of his views stimulated by the Johnson administration. Throughout 1966, King largely had kept his peace, reluctant to reignite a public debate about the propriety of the nation's leading civil rights spokesman becoming a head-on critic of the incumbent administration's uppermost policy. Then, in early 1967, King resolved to take on Lyndon B. Johnson's war publicly as never before.<sup>15</sup>

King knew full well that his new, aggressive stance on the war would harm him politically and might well damage the civil rights movement financially. Those considerations, however, were not enough to shake King from his resolve. "At times you do things to satisfy your conscience and they may be altogether unrealistic or wrong, but you feel better," King explained over wiretapped phone lines to his longtime friend and counselor, Stanley Levison. America's involvement in Vietnam was so evil, King explained, that "I can no longer be cautious about this matter. I feel so deep in my heart that we are so wrong in this country and the time has come for a real prophecy and I'm willing to go that road."<sup>16</sup>

King's attacks on the war, and particularly his April 4, 1967, antiwar speech at New York's Riverside Church, brought down a flood of public criticism on his head. Even some of King's most trusted advisers, including Levison, reproached him for the tone of that speech. King, however, rejected the complaints. "I was politically unwise but morally wise. I think I have a role to play which may be unpopular," he told Levison. "I really feel that someone of influence has to say that the United States is wrong, and everybody is afraid to say it."<sup>17</sup>

In late May 1967, King spoke to his aides about how he had come to see the war issue in terms of his understanding of the cross.

When I took up the cross, I recognized its meaning. . . . The cross is something that you bear and ultimately that you die on. The cross may mean the death of

<sup>14</sup> King, "Beyond Discovery, Love," Dallas, Texas, Sept. 25, 1966, p. 8, King Papers. See also Martin Luther King, Jr., to Coretta Scott King, Oct. 26, 1960, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 394, 422-30, 436-61, 469-70, 472, 485, 502, 538-44.

<sup>16</sup> Transcript of telephone conversation, March 25, 1967, Federal Bureau of Investigation, New York office, Stanley D. Levison file serial 100-111180-9-1254, p. 12 (Freedom of Information Act release, in David J. Garrow's possession). This wire-tapped phone conversation transcript, or "log" in FBI parlance, is one of hundreds from the numeric sub-files ("9") in the bureau's New York office file (100-111180) on Stanley Levison resulting from the bureau's long-standing electronic surveillance of Levison. See David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis* (New York, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam," Riverside Church, New York, April 4, 1967, King Papers; King to Levison, April 8, 1967, FBI New York 100-111180-9-1268A. See also Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 553-54.

your popularity. It may mean the death of a foundation grant. It may cut down your budget a little, but take up your cross, and just bear it. And that's the way I've decided to go.

No longer did he suffer from any indecision on the question of Vietnam.

I want you to know that my mind is made up. I backed up a little when I came out in 1965. My name then wouldn't have been written in any book called *Profiles in Courage*. But now I have decided that I will not be intimidated. I will not be harassed. I will not be silent, and I will be heard.<sup>18</sup>

King's determination to forge ahead in the face of discouraging political circumstances also manifested itself during the late 1967-early 1968 planning of the Poor People's Campaign, Washington protests intended to be so "dislocative and even disruptive" that the federal government would launch a full-scale program to eliminate poverty in America. On March 28 King's determination to pursue the campaign faltered and turned to despair when a protest march that he had helped lead in Memphis, Tennessee, ended in widespread violence. The next day a deeply depressed King poured out his feelings to Levison in a long phone conversation. Levison refused to accept King's assertions that the Memphis violence was an all-but-fatal blow to King's public status as a nonviolent civil rights leader. King demurred. "All I'm saying is that Roy Wilkins, that Bayard Rustin and that stripe, and there are many of them, and the Negroes who are influenced by what they read in the newspapers, Adam Clayton Powell, for another reason . . . their point is, 'I'm right. Martin Luther King is dead. He's finished. His nonviolence is nothing, no one is listening to it.' Let's face it, we do have a great public relations setback where my image and my leadership are concerned." Levison disagreed, but King insisted that the media reaction would be extremely damaging, and that he would have to help stage a second, completely successful Memphis march to overcome the damage from the first one.

King also told Levison that he was deeply pessimistic about the entire Poor People's Campaign. "I think our Washington campaign is doomed." Even though he had long been "a symbol of nonviolence" to millions, in the press coverage of the March 28 violence "everything will come out weakening the symbol. It will put many Negroes in doubt. It will put many Negroes in the position of saying, 'Well, that's true, Martin Luther King is at the end of his rope.'" Levison again responded that King ought to reject the news media's portrayals. "You can't keep them from imposing it," King answered. "You watch your newspapers. . . . I think it will be the most negative thing about Martin Luther King that you have ever seen."<sup>19</sup>

King's expectations proved largely correct. The *New York Times*, terming the Memphis violence "a powerful embarrassment to Dr. King," recommended he call

<sup>18</sup> King, "To Charter Our Course for the Future," Penn Community Center, Frogmore, S.C., May 22, 1967, King Papers.

<sup>19</sup> King and Levison, March 29, 1968, FBI New York 100-111180-9-1624A. On Memphis generally, see Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King*, 188-201; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 604-6, 609-24.

off the Poor People's Campaign since it probably would prove counterproductive to his cause. King, however, did not give up, and on Wednesday, April 3, he returned to Memphis to aid in the preparations for a second march. That evening, at the cavernous Mason Temple church, before a modest-sized but emotionally enthusiastic crowd, King vowed that both the Memphis movement and the Poor People's Campaign would go forward. Then he turned to an emotional recapitulation of his own involvement in the preceding thirteen years of the black freedom struggle, expressing how happy and thankful he was that he had been given the opportunity to contribute to and to live through its many significant events. Then he closed with the same ending he had used more than eleven years earlier in Montgomery when he had first explained how the vision in the kitchen had given him the strength and the courage to keep going forward.

I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. 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's 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 so I'm 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>20</sup>

In conclusion, then, I want to reiterate that the key to comprehending Martin King's own understanding of his life, his role, his burden, and his mission lies in that spiritual experience that began for him in his Montgomery kitchen on January 27, 1956. Martin King's awareness that his calling was to devote and ultimately to sacrifice his own individual life in the service of a great and just cause ennobled him as a human being, strengthened him as a leader, and allowed him to accept the symbolic role and accompanying fate that helped propel forward a struggle he rightfully recognized would be never ending.

<sup>20</sup> *New York Times*, March 30, 1968, p. 32; *ibid.*, March 31, 1968, p. E2; Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," Memphis, Tenn., April 3, 1968, King Papers.