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## The Other Woman in King's Life

A special relationship outside his marriage sheds light on the civil rights leader and his wife, Coretta.

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JUST MOMENTS after the news of Coretta Scott King's death, the first inquiring e-mail arrived: How long would it be before the woman some King scholars have for years privately thought of as "the other wife" either stepped forward or was identified by some unprincipled news outlet?

Her story is not exactly secret; it's one that was known to dozens if not hundreds of people even before Martin Luther King Jr.'s tragic assassination on April 4, 1968. A number of biographers and historians (myself included) have met and interviewed her, and several have made reference to her. But although she was his most important emotional companion during the last five years of his life, her identity has remained hidden for even longer than that of Watergate's "Deep Throat."

None of King's surviving intimates or the handful of historians who know parts of this wonderful woman's intensely personal saga will knowingly aid or abet a mass media invasion of her privacy. If she chooses to tell her story before her death, all well and good, but to date every serious student of King's life has quietly and independently concluded that that decision is hers and hers alone, and not one that should be forced on her.

Marriage to King was no bed of roses for Coretta. Less than three years after their wedding in June 1953, the remarkable Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott that King was drafted to lead thrust him into a national spotlight. Early in their relationship, Coretta and Martin had fully shared both their daily lives and a more leftward political worldview than King publicly acknowledged. But King was soon propelled into a whirlwind existence that drew him away from home for hundreds upon hundreds of days.

Incessant travel plus a hero's stature brought King into contact with countless eager admirers of both genders. Coretta yearned to participate in civil rights work too, but her traditional, sexist husband believed that a wife's primary duty was to stay home and raise the children. Their first daughter was born just before the Montgomery boycott and their first son two years later. A second son, and then a second daughter, followed in 1961 and 1963.

In addition to being saddled with the almost single-handed care of four young children, Coretta also experienced her husband's intense discomfort about acquiring material comforts for his family. King firmly believed that the movement needed all the funds he could raise, and his family subsisted on his modest pastoral salaries. Only in 1965 did the Kings finally buy their own home, for \$10,000, in a humble neighborhood on the west side of Atlanta.

"Martin didn't want me to buy these window curtains," Coretta told me during a 1983 conversation in the living room of that home, where she continued to live. King's belief that he was unworthy of many of the tributes that came his way fueled an ascetic desire to which his only exceptions were rich food, good suits, menthol cigarettes, hard liquor (eventually), and extramarital sex.

No one can master the full documentary record of King's life without acknowledging that he had various special women friends in cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Louisville. The details of those friendships fascinated J. Edgar Hoover and his minions at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, but they do not loom large in the full purview of King's life. What, if anything, Coretta knew of them she never discussed openly with her husband. Nor, to historians' knowledge, did she discuss them with anyone else.

But one of King's relationships was different. It blossomed during 1963, and over the next five years it, rather than his marriage, became King's most supportive and nourishing emotional bond. The woman was warm, positive, sensuous and reassuring -- and he saw her almost daily. Their relationship remained a centerpiece of his life until his death, notwithstanding an angry argument just hours before he was killed that reflected the profound exhaustion and pessimism that troubled him during the final months of his life.

Only after her husband's assassination did Coretta attain the independence and public role he had denied her while he was alive. Indeed, in death the widow's visible bond with her husband exceeded that which had existed between them during the last five years of his life. In her effort to create the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, and in her campaign for a federal holiday to mark her husband's birthday, Coretta made greater contributions to the perpetuation of his legacy than anyone else.

One need not engage in polite fictions about the Kings' marriage to celebrate Coretta's life and empathize with what she endured as King's wife. But funereal honors should not unduly distort the historical record, even while that record should remain rightly incomplete unless and until the lady in question chooses otherwise.