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DREAM AND REALITY

*The Modern Black Struggle
for Freedom and Equality*

Edited by

JEANNINE SWIFT

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2 A Tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr.

David J. Garrow

I think it is particularly apt to reflect on King's message and the lessons we can draw from his life in light of how the organizers of this conference have used the "Dream and Reality" title. There is nothing that Dr. King himself would want us to appreciate more, after his death, than the fact that many of the goals that he struggled for, in fact most of the goals that he talked about following 1965, have not been achieved and, indeed, in some respects, have not even been advanced.

Reflecting on Dr. King and his legacy, I wish to stress two points. First, I want to examine briefly Dr. King's emotional evolution and his own understanding of the role he played during the years between 1955 and 1968 when he devoted his life to the Civil Rights Movement. Second, I want to address his political evolution, the increasingly radical evolution in his views and hopes for American society that Dr. King underwent in the final years of his life.

To grasp Dr. King's understanding of his own life is to appreciate that King thought of himself as first and foremost a minister, a pastor. Younger people today, in particular, only see images of King from television news clips that show him as a person giving speeches and leading marches, which do not highlight his fundamental attachment to the ministry and his fundamental roots in the church. Appreciating the centrality of religion and the church for Dr. King is crucial if we are to make sense of the very selfless way, the very humble way, he devoted himself and made himself of service to the movement.

Almost without exception, the people closest to Dr. King always want to point out to those of us who are younger that he was very self effacing, nonegotistical, and at times even shy. Dr. King was someone who had no desire, no need, to be a public figure or a celebrity. He was not someone who enjoyed being in the limelight. Especially when one looks back at the beginning in Montgomery, the start of the boycott there, and the very crucial role that women--the black professional women's group in Montgomery--actually played in getting the boycott under way, one can appreciate even better how King was chosen as the spokesperson, as the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, not through any initiative, or desire or self-promoting on his own part; he was very much drafted for that job and drafted in part because his colleagues recognized, even then, what a very special speaking ability, what a special ability to articulate the cause of black freedom Dr. King possessed. We must keep in mind as well with reference to Montgomery just how young Dr. King was at that time--he was only twenty-six--when he was drafted for that position; he was only thirty-nine at the time he was killed.

What one particularly sees in that early part of the Montgomery boycott is Dr. King somewhat painfully making a commitment of service to

the movement, realizing that this was a calling that he was being asked to take. This was a commitment and really a self-sacrifice that he was being asked to make, and it was one that he was initially a little bit hesitant about accepting. Dr. King in later years very often stressed to friends and acquaintances that he would have been quite happy simply to be a pastor; and so when he made that decision early in Montgomery that the movement leadership role to which he was called was something that he was going to accept, he made that decision to go forward out of a fundamentally religious and faith-oriented belief that this is what God and Jesus were asking him to do. One must appreciate how King understood his acceptance of that role in terms of religious faith and calling if we are really to appreciate the way in which he went forward with his leadership throughout the late 1950s and 1960s.

In terms of that calling and that basic sense of mission that was really at the core of Dr. King's life and being, I think one as well has to underline (and this is a point that Vincent Harding and James Cone have emphasized as much as I believe I have) that we need to see Dr. King as a product of the Black Church. One sees this, I think, most clearly and most impressively when one has the chance to look at his sermons, both the early sermons in Montgomery and those from the later years, the years after 1960, especially his sermons from his home church, Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. When one looks at those sermons rather than at the more public, formal speeches to northern audiences or labor groups, one really comes away realizing that the Bible and the church heritage are the most important sources from which Dr. King spoke. And although I'll touch on it only very briefly here, when one looks at his earliest statements and speeches during the Montgomery boycott, King is not talking so much about Gandhi or Thoreau or reflecting the influence of what he read in graduate school (which has been the emphasis of much of the academic literature in trying to explain the influences on Dr. King), but rather what one sees as the real sources of his thought and beliefs is the Bible. He talked about nonviolence and about love from day one in Montgomery, but he talked about them in terms of the teachings of Jesus, and he talked about them in terms of Bible stories. Both in the context of the roots of King's thought as well as in the context of what motivated, what drove this man, I think we have to stress that centrality of religious roots and faith if we are to appreciate what he was about.

One of the ironies, perhaps one of the most striking of all the ironies of the FBI wire tap transcripts of hundreds of Dr. King's phone conversations with his friends and advisors (preserved for us and now released under the Freedom of Information Act), from the years 1962 and after is that those transcripts give a more immediate, a more powerful sense of how devoted, how tough, how self-critical King was about his own responsibilities and his role, than perhaps any other source we have or could have. What one sees in those telephone transcripts, and more public statements as well, is a real deepening and strengthening of Dr. King's understanding of his calling to be of service. We see that even though he very consciously did not want to be on the public stage 365 days a year, he nonetheless increasingly came to an acceptance, at times a somewhat begrudging acceptance, that this was not a commitment of five years or ten years that would at some point end and allow him to go back to a quieter, less public life, but that this was a lifetime commitment, something that would end only with his death.

Where one sees, I think, the greatest strengthening of that commitment on Dr. King's part is right after the Nobel Peace Prize announcement and award in 1964. That honor, like all the many other public honors that were bestowed upon Dr. King during the 1960s, had for King the most immediate impact of making him redouble his feelings of commitment and, particularly in the wake of the Nobel Prize, en-

couraged him to adopt an increasingly prophetic understanding that his first responsibility was to speak the truth, preach the truth, regardless of what the personal consequences for himself or the financial consequences for his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, might be. If one looks at this carefully and thoughtfully one sees an increasingly courageous King in those years after 1963 and 1964, a man who more and more realizes that he has the responsibility to speak the truth even if it is unpopular.

There is a quality of amnesia now, about which Vincent Harding has written very movingly in several different contexts, wherein we do not fully remember just how much criticism, how much unpopularity Dr. King encountered during those final two or three years of his life. It is in this regard that I want to discuss King's political evolution across the years towards a much more radical set of goals and understanding of American society after 1965. Many people today have simply the image of Dr. King from the "I Have a Dream" speech, the speech from the 1963 March on Washington, and that speech gives a very incomplete understanding of what King was about. When one looks at the Dr. King of the Montgomery boycott of 1955 and 1956, one sees someone who is extremely optimistic about America as a society and about the White South and white southerners' willingness to change. Even in the first week there in Montgomery, King, Reverend Ralph Abernathy, Mrs. JoAnn Robinson, and the rest of the local leadership had a very naive hope that the boycott would be only a four- or five-day endeavor, that white officials and white Montgomery would recognize the justice of the black community's cause, negotiate, and alter the bus seating practices that had sparked the boycott. It came as a considerable surprise to King and the other black local leaders that White Montgomery had no interest in meaningful negotiations or making any sort of concessions. That experience was simply the first step for Dr. King on the road towards an increasingly realistic and, in the end, at times, pessimistic attitude toward American society and particularly toward White America's interest and willingness towards making changes. One has to underline several times, however, that over the course of twelve years this was a gradual but extremely substantial and significant evolution on Dr. King's part.

In 1960, for example, with regard to the presidential campaign story that I believe many people know fairly well--about John and Robert Kennedy's phone calls on the occasion of Dr. King's jailing down in Reidsville prison in South Georgia during the 1960 campaign--during that campaign and even after the Kennedy administration took office in 1961, King had a tremendous optimism about what the Kennedy brothers could and would do, what sort of a difference active presidential leadership on behalf of Civil Rights--in contrast to the Eisenhower years--could make for Black America. But the period from 1961 through to the early part of 1963 ended up being for King a rather disillusioning experience. He, and other people in the movement, came to realize more and more during those two years that the Kennedy administration was not going to take the initiative, was not going to push for meaningful civil rights change, notwithstanding all of the 1960 campaign promises and rhetoric in that direction. It was only when the movement took the initiative, the very direct massive initiative, of organizing the demonstrations in Birmingham in May of 1963, that things began to change. Then the Kennedy brothers came to the realization that civil rights was not going to remain quietly on the back burner, that this was an issue that they were going to have to tackle and going to have to pursue whether they wanted to or not, or whether their sometime southern allies in Congress wanted them to tackle it or not. Again nowadays many people perhaps have some amnesia in this regard in not fully appreciating how pointedly critical Dr. King was of the Kennedy administration during 1962 and 1963 and how grudging and relatively late the Kennedy brothers' support for or enthusiasm for civil

rights actually was during that period.

Now, the peak years, or the "glory years" of the movement, as I think some people would call them, came between 1963 and 1965. Those years were highlighted by the tangible accomplishments of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act. Those accomplishments as of 1965 looked to King and looked to many other people in the movement as perhaps 90 percent of what the movement had been seeking in the early 1960s. I think it is quite fair to say that in that context of 1964 and 1965 there was a tremendous initial sense of accomplishment, of victory. But I think most of us often tend to forget or underappreciate what a really disillusioning period King and other people, particularly people in SNCC, went through in the wake of those legislative victories, when the awareness began to grow more and more strongly that simply that sort of formal, legal anti-segregation, anti-discrimination legislation was not going to have anywhere near as transforming an impact upon the South, upon the conditions of black people's lives in the South, as King and most other people in the movement had presumed or had thought up until that time. I believe that this slowly emerging disillusion lies at the crux of the very significant evolution which Dr. King and others began to undergo in that 1965-1966 period. It was the success of those legislative victories, the abolition of formal segregation and legal, statutory discrimination, that allowed King and others to realize that the real roots of black oppression were much more fundamentally economic than segregationist. And what one repeatedly sees time after time, almost day after day, in those final three and a half years of Dr. King's life is his focusing upon economic change and economic issues--jobs, housing, and the quality of urban schooling. Focusing upon those sorts of issues and the class implications of those issues was the next agenda, the much tougher agenda that the movement had to pursue.

I mentioned earlier that if one looks at King simply in the light of the "I Have a Dream" speech of 1963, one gets a very incomplete substantive appreciation of what King was about. More pointedly, one of King's most regular closing lines or perorations in his speeches from 1966 on was that the dream he had had in 1963 had turned into a nightmare. This is essentially an exact quote of something that he used not once or twice but several dozen times. Not only is that specific line something that one rarely, if ever, sees in television newsreel excerpts nowadays, but I think that we also see very little evidence or very few reminders of that very challenging economic agenda that King was talking about in those final three years. What King had in mind by 1967 and 1968 when he was putting together the Poor People's Campaign was a very explicitly redistributive economic agenda for the United States. I think that the degree to which he believed that the country required massive economic change in terms of fighting poverty, in terms of what the society was required to do for what we now term the underclass, required that issues be articulated in class terms if we were to create a truly just and meaningfully equal society. Those sorts of calls and those sorts of demands that Dr. King was articulating in that final year are something about which many people today are not reminded and with which they are not confronted.

By 1967 King's language sometimes was so strong that especially in private, he was describing himself as a socialist, as a democratic socialist, as what interpretively one could most accurately call a Christian Socialist. But what one sees as well in King's statements and sermons from that final year and a half, is someone who is a much more critical, much more pessimistic, judge of American society than the man who started in Montgomery twelve years earlier. Where one sees this most strongly is in King's comments about White America. There is very little of the earlier optimism and hopefulness concerning people's willingness to initiate change, if simply the justice requirements of a situation are spelled out to them. There is little if any of the optimism that one can

easily see in the King of 1956-1957.

Now similarly, during those final two or three years, one sees this much more critical attitude of King towards American society in his comments about America's involvement in Vietnam and about America's behavior in the world more generally. It comes through most clearly in King's willingness to take on the Vietnam issue at a time when opposition to the war was not at all popular, and I think that's a point that really needs underlining because we tend to compact, I think, and perhaps read back into the context of 1966 or 1967, the relative popularity that opposition to the war had by the Nixon years. When King first spoke out strongly against the Vietnam war, he was denounced not only by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other major white media, but he also was criticized by civil rights leaders and civil rights organizations. Of all the contemporaneous editorial comments about King and the war, very few were supportive. Only two or three upheld both the fairness of King's statements about the war and his right as a civil rights leader to speak out on the issue of the war.

King's strength and willingness to take on the war, to take on an issue that he knew full well would make him distinctly less popular, was a willingness that stemmed quite directly from the prophetic, almost self-sacrificing understanding of his role that had been growing since the early stages in Montgomery. It had been strengthened particularly in the international context by the Nobel Prize, for to King the Nobel Prize, even more than his many other awards, could not be accepted simply as praise for what he had done before, but was instead really a renewal of his basic calling, and so it created within King an intensified sense of obligation to continue to live up to that immense responsibility.

In closing, what one sees in the Dr. King of 1968 is a quite mature and fully developed acceptance that he was going to give his life for the movement, a fuller acceptance of what had been a very realistic day-to-day awareness reaching back all the way to 1956 when the pattern of daily death threats had first emerged. One also sees in the Dr. King of 1968 someone who is setting out very strongly a political agenda for change in America that went far, far beyond what the movement had pursued and had accomplished in the 1964-1965 period.

Finally, what most deserves underlining and conscious appreciation is that what King was talking about in that final year or two in terms of the economic change that our society requires were changes and goals that we have not achieved in the years since his death. Perhaps even more pointedly, as one can see in the recent work of William J. Wilson and other people who have been looking at the growing bifurcation that has occurred in Black America over these last twenty years, our record since the time of Dr. King's death has not only been a record of little progress on the issues that he was addressing but has in some respects been a record of retrogression since that time. Hence in appreciating Dr. King and in appreciating his legacy for us today, we cannot allow ourselves to simply think of Dr. King as a successful reformer for whom the 1964 and 1965 Acts were the major accomplishments, but we must appreciate very forthrightly that Dr. King's agenda and legacy are very much unfulfilled and speak very directly to the issues and challenges that remain before us even today.