

Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Cross of Leadership

by David J. Garrow

Martin Luther King, Jr began his public career as a civil rights activist with considerable reluctance and ambivalence. Chosen as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the black community organization formed to pursue the citywide bus boycott sparked by Mrs. Rosa Parks's initial arrest, through no effort or initiative of his own, Martin King found the burdens and responsibilities of mass leadership taxing and often unpleasant. Staunchly segregationist city officials refused to negotiate meaningfully over the MIA's modest demands — demands that did not even include integrated bus seating — and instead accused King personally of being the only barrier to a quick, easy settlement. At the same time, unofficial white representatives of a different sort peppered King and his family with a constant stream of obscene phone calls and death threats, threats that eventually culminated in the nighttime bombing of King's home.

That double-barreled campaign of attacks took a heavy emotional toll, especially on a man who had no active personal desire for a place on the public stage. Confronted both by those open attacks, and by a divide-and-conquer whispering campaign that white officials were trying to mount against him in the black community, King wondered whether he should go on. "I almost broke down under the continual battering," he later stated, and at one emotional MIA executive board meeting he offered to resign the presidency, only to have that offer unanimously rejected in the form of a vocal vote of confidence from his colleagues.¹

As the boycott entered its sixth week in early 1956, white obstinacy and harassment continued apace, and more and more press attention focused on the twenty-seven year-old King. Increasingly he wondered whether he really was up to the rigors of the MIA's presidency. He stressed to his colleagues that he as an individual was not crucial to the protest, that if something happened to him, or should he step aside, the movement would go on. Finally, on Friday night January 27, King's crisis of confidence came to a head. He had gotten home late after an MIA meeting. His wife Coretta was already asleep, and King was about to retire when the phone rang and yet another caller warned him that if he was going to leave Montgomery alive, he had better do so soon. King hung up and went to bed, but found himself unable to sleep. Restless and fearful, he went to the kitchen, made some coffee, and sat down at the table. "I started thinking about many things," he later recalled. He thought about the challenges the MIA was facing and the many threats he was receiving. "I was ready to give up," he subsequently said. "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," to surrender the leadership to someone else. He thought about his life up until that moment. "The first twenty-five years of my life were very comfortable years, very happy years," King later said in remembering back to that moment.

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 only brother is 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, and have it, if you're going to walk the lonely paths of this life.

That night, for the first time in his life, King felt such an experience as he sought to escape the pressures the MIA presidency had placed upon him.

He thought more about how trouble free his life had been until the movement began.

Everything was done [for me], and 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 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, about ten or fifteen days later, after the white people in Montgomery knew that we meant business, they started doing some nasty things. They started making 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.

But that night, unable to be at peace with himself, King feared he could take it no longer. It was the most important night of his life, the one he always would think back to in future years when the pressures again seemed too great

"It was around midnight," he said thinking back on it. "You can have some strange experiences at midnight " The threatening caller had rattled him deeply "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.²

That commitment from the Divine gave King a strength and courage he previously had not known. "Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared." He went back to bed, fell asleep, and over the following months found himself fully able to confront and overcome the hurdles that faced him as the Montgomery protest continued. Eleven months later the boycott ended in triumph as a federal court edict forced the complete desegregation of the city's buses, and King turned his own attention toward organizing a regionwide organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to expand upon the Montgomery movement's success

King fully understood that while he personally still had no active desire for a citywide, nevermind southwide leadership role, the choice of whether or not to accept those burdens and responsibilities was not his alone to make. "If anybody had asked me a year ago to head the movement," he remarked to several friends during the 1956–57 holiday season, "I tell you very honestly that I would have run a mile to get away from it. I had no intention of being involved in this way." He explained what had happened to him

As I became involved, and as people began to derive inspiration from their involvement, I realized that the choice leaves your own hands. The people expect you to give them leadership. You see them growing as they move into action, and then you know you no longer have a choice, you can't decide *whether* to stay in it or get out of it, you *must* stay in it.³

Nonetheless, King put less time and energy into SCLC's affairs during 1957, 1958, and 1959 than some of his movement colleagues, such as Birmingham activist Fred Shuttlesworth, thought desirable. Though nationwide speaking engagements and his Montgomery pastorship each cut heavily into King's time, many close acquaintances sensed that King simply did not desire an individual leadership role for himself. Gentle pressure from civil rights compatriots continued to build, and late

in 1959 King reluctantly decided to move from Montgomery to Atlanta, where he could share his father's pulpit at Ebenezer Baptist Church and have more time to devote to movement concerns. "For almost four years now," King explained at the time, "I have been faced with the responsibility of trying to do as one man what five or six people ought to be doing. . . . I found myself in a position which I could not get out of. . . . What I have been doing is giving, giving, giving and not stopping to retreat and meditate like I should." He hoped that the move to Atlanta would change that. Still, he admitted, "I have a sort of nagging conscience that someone will interpret my leaving Montgomery as a retreat from the civil rights struggle. Actually, I will be involved in it on a larger scale. I can't stop now. History has thrust something upon me from which I cannot turn away."⁴

King's shift to Atlanta did not overnight lead him to take a more aggressive role in the burgeoning southwide movement, whose actual leadership suddenly lay in the hands of hundreds of youthful black college students who were applying the "sit-in" tactic in scores of cities across the region. Asked by Atlanta's black student leadership in the fall of 1960 to join them in such a peaceful protest against the segregated restaurant facilities in the city's most prominent department store, Rich's, King initially hesitated but finally consented. Arrested by Atlanta police, he suddenly found himself awakened at 3 a.m. in his suburban jail cell for transfer to a south Georgia state prison on charges that his sit-in arrest violated stringent probation terms that quietly had been imposed on King following a minor traffic conviction earlier in the year. While many notables — including Democratic presidential nominee John Kennedy and his brother Robert — made efforts to secure King's release, King himself, consigned to an individual cell, found his lonely imprisonment difficult to bear. It looked like he would have to serve a full four months in that harsh, remote jail, and after summoning up his own deepest spiritual reserves, he sat down to write a reassuring letter to his wife, who had taken the sudden imprisonment very hard. He asked Coretta to make the effort, like his own, to allow their common faith to carry them through this most difficult time. She must believe, like he did, that one's suffering is not in vain, and that in the end it contributes to the broader betterment of all. "I know this whole experience is very difficult for you to adjust to," King wrote, "but as I said to you yesterday, this is the cross that we must bear for the freedom of our people. . . . I am asking God hourly to give me the power of endurance," and King instructed his family "not to worry about me. I will adjust to whatever comes in terms of pain."⁵

Released and flown back to Atlanta just a few hours after composing that letter, King's conscious awareness that the pains of leadership represented a cross he had to bear did not mean that he now was reaching out actively to assume greater movement responsibilities. Both at the time of the spring, 1961 "Freedom Rides" sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and at the outset of the remarkable local protest movement in Albany, Georgia that got underway that winter, King was in the position of reacting and responding to initiatives undertaken by other movement activists, rather than stepping forward to chart a self-determined course. Though national news coverage increasingly portrayed King as *the* principal symbolic figure in the southern black freedom movement, King himself remained, as he had been ever since the beginning in Montgomery, a man who felt he had to take up the burdens of public leadership not because he desired to, but because his God had instructed him to.

An indicator of possible change was SCLC's decision, early in 1963, to plan a

comprehensive spring protest campaign for Birmingham, in conjunction with SCLC's local affiliate there, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). Along with ACMHR's president, Fred Shuttlesworth, King and his top SCLC aides met privately to sketch out a demonstration scenario that would, for the first time, be of their own making. Though in hindsight that might appear to represent King's taking the initiative in an unprecedented fashion, close associate Andrew Young later expressed his belief that deep inside, Martin King had been no more eager to go into Birmingham than he had had to step forward in Montgomery, to join the Atlanta sit-ins, to participate in the Freedom Rides, or to be dragged into the complexities of Albany. Just like those earlier decisions, going to Birmingham was a responsibility that was thrust upon him, a responsibility King felt he could neither avoid nor evade. "He went to Birmingham," Young said of King, "because Fred Shuttlesworth pleaded with him to do it." King had spoken in their private discussions, Young and others recalled, of how one or more of them might not make it through the Birmingham effort alive. King, Young explained, "knew, more than anybody else, that every time he made a commitment to something like this he was committing his life. . . . He thought in everything he did it meant his death. He would never say it that way. He would always say it in terms of us. He would say for instance, 'Now Andy, Bull Connor doesn't play ' He said,' with a touch of hyperbole, "'They've had fifty bombings in the last year, and you might not come back You better let me know what kind of eulogy you want.' And even though he was talking about me, I knew he was talking about himself." As SCLC's Joseph Lowery later recalled, some things were just so serious that the only way you could express them was to joke about them.⁶

Whether amidst the tense challenges of Birmingham or the physical dangers of other southern hotspots, King himself returned time and time again to the memory of that night in the kitchen of the Montgomery parsonage, whose message and meaning allowed him to surmount the turmoil of many subsequent moments. "We must rise above our fears," King explained to others.

There is nothing to be afraid of if you believe and know that the cause for which you stand is right. You are ready to face anything and you face it with a humble smile on your face, because you know that all of the eternity stands with you and the angels stand beside you and you know that you are right.⁷

With the tumultuous events of Birmingham, the impressive numbers of the March on Washington, and the heartening congressional approval of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Martin King saw the southern movement take a leading place on not only the national but the international stage during 1963 and 1964. His "I Have a Dream" oration at the August March reinforced King's position as the movement's principal spokesman, and at the turn of the new year, *Time Magazine* anointed King as their "Man of the Year" for 1963. Increasingly King had to face up to the symbolic qualities being accorded his person. He felt profoundly uncomfortable with the fame and recognition that came his way, insisting time and time again that he deserved no personal rewards for the role he had come to hold. The achievements of the civil rights movement, he emphasized, were just that, the achievements of a movement that counted tens of thousands of persons among its ranks, and not the personal achievements of Martin Luther King. His close advisor Stanley Levison later explained King's emotional attitude toward the praise and prestige he was accorded.

Martin could be described as an intensely guilt-ridden man. The most essential element in the feelings of guilt that he had was that he didn't feel he deserved the kind of tribute that he got. [He believed] that he was an actor in history at a particular moment that called for a personality, and he had simply been selected as that personality . . . but he had not done enough to deserve it. He felt keenly that people who had done as much as he had or *more* got no such tribute. This troubled him deeply, and he could find no way of dealing with it because there's no way of sharing the kind of tribute with anyone else — you can't give it away; you have to accept it. But when you don't feel you're worthy of it and you're an honest, principled man, it tortures you. And it could be said that he was tortured by the great appreciation that the public showed for him. If he had been less humble, he could have lived with this kind of acclaim, but because he was genuinely a man of humility, he really couldn't live with it. He always thought of ways in which he could somehow live up to it, and he often talked about taking a vow of poverty. . . .

Martin found it very difficult to live comfortably because he had such a sensitive conscience and such a sense of humility . . . Martin was always very aware that he was privileged . . . and this troubled him. He felt he didn't deserve this. One of the reasons that he was so determined to be of service was to justify the privileged position he'd been born into . . . [He felt] he had never deserved and earned what he had, and now he didn't deserve nor had he earned in his own mind the acclaim that he was receiving.⁸

King's personal discomfort was counterbalanced, however, by his firm and growing conviction that the burdens of his role were a necessary self-sacrifice he simply had to make for the movement's greater good. Additionally, King increasingly tried to view the public acclaim accorded him as not simply personal praise, but as recognition for the entire movement, of which he perchance had become the predominant human symbol. Furthermore, as Levison and other close friends realized, the greater that public commendation became, the more King felt it morally and spiritually necessary to devote his full energy and complete being to the movement's cause.

In early October of 1964, exhausted by a seemingly endless round of travels and speeches, King checked into an Atlanta hospital for some badly needed rest. It was there that he learned in a telephone call from his wife that the announcement had been made in Oslo that King had been awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. The news had not come as a complete shock to Coretta, for both she and Martin had known of his nomination for the award by eight Swedish legislators and of the prize committee's July request for copies of his books and speeches. Just one week earlier Oslo sources had told reporters that King was a "heavy favorite" for the Peace Prize, but Coretta's own initial reaction to the actual notification was happiness tinged with some concern. At the moment, Martin badly needed several days of rest, and announcement of the prestigious international award would certainly bring that time of quiet to a loud and abrupt halt. On the other hand, however, the awkwardly-timed news also represented a perfect cure for the depression that came with complete exhaustion. "I realized that this was exactly the sort of lift Martin desperately needed," Coretta later recalled, and as her sleepy husband realized that his wife's call was neither a dream nor a practical joke, his mood became quiet and serious.

Nine months earlier he had told Levison that *Time's* "Man of the Year" award was nothing special, that he already had some two hundred plaques at home, and "what's one more," but this, the Nobel Peace Prize, was very different. This was not simply one more personal award, but the most significant possible international endorsement of the American civil rights struggle. This was not a prize or recognition being given to one individual man, King thought, but the "foremost of earthly honors" being accorded the entire movement that he had come to symbolize.

They should celebrate the Nobel Prize not as a personal triumph, King told Coretta and his closest SCLC aides — Bernard Lee, Dora McDonald, and Andrew Young — as they gathered in his hospital room prior to a quickly called press conference, but as a victory of moral recognition for the cause of justice. Intensely serious, King asked that they join him in prayer, for this symbolic award meant that he and they too would have to redouble their efforts and intensify even further the depth of their commitment. "It was a great tribute, but an even more awesome burden," Coretta said later in recalling her husband's reactions that morning. It meant, more than anything else, that there might well never be any escape from this life and this role, from the responsibilities and burdens that had seemed so real and constant ever since that night in the kitchen more than eight years earlier in Montgomery. The prize might mean that there would never be any respite, never any retreat to the quiet pastorship or peaceful theology school professorship that King often had thought he might prefer when he reached middle age. More than anything else, the prize made the cross loom larger. "History has thrust me into this position," King told the reporters who gathered at his hospital that morning. "It would be immoral and a sign of ingratitude if I did not face my moral responsibility to do what I can in this struggle."⁹

In early December, when King flew to Europe with a score of friends for the actual Nobel award ceremony, his spirits were low as a result of the extensive controversy that had been provoked two weeks earlier when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover publicly had labeled King "the most notorious liar in America," ostensibly because of criticisms King had voiced two years earlier concerning FBI civil rights probes in the Deep South. King's intense worries about the possible consequences of Hoover's virulent hostility seriously preoccupied him. Nonetheless, King seemed upbeat when he met with Norwegian reporters, exclaiming that he viewed the trip as an educational opportunity for him and his colleagues. "We feel we have much to learn from Scandinavia's democratic socialist tradition and from the manner in which you have overcome many of the social and economic problems that still plague a far more powerful and affluent nation," namely the United States. He beamed widely when the Peace Prize formally was presented to him by Nobel officials and Norwegian royalty in a lavish ceremony at Oslo University on December 10. He had complained to Coretta and his friends about the odd, formal "morning coat" attire that the ceremony required he wear, but the uncomfortable clothes were soon forgotten as King told the happy audience how he was accepting the prize not for himself alone but on behalf of an entire movement which he represented merely as a trustee. His brief acceptance speech was optimistic in tone, and the following day King delivered the second and lengthier official address expected of him, the formal Nobel lecture whose text King and his aides had worked on for almost a month.¹⁰

King used the occasion to link the domestic nonviolence of the American civil rights movement with the entire world's pressing need for disarmament and world peace. Many times in past years he had identified war and international violence as

evils which must be combatted just like racial segregation, but King employed the prestigious Nobel platform to issue a stronger and more detailed call than ever before for the extension of nonviolent resistance to issues beyond racial justice. The most notable aspect of the American movement, he stressed, had been the "direct participation of masses in protest, rather than reliance on indirect methods which frequently do not involve masses in action at all." He seemed to suggest that mass action be used to let all world leaders know that people all across the globe would commit themselves to ending war. Beyond racial justice, and beyond economic justice, lay the further great goal of pursuing and attaining a lasting world peace, King emphasized. Pursuing it would be personally taxing and debilitating, but he and they could not retreat from such a pressing moral necessity "Those who pioneer in the struggle for peace and freedom will still face uncomfortable jail terms, painful threats of death; they will still be battered by the storms of persecution, leading them to nagging feelings that they can no longer bear such a heavy burden," King remarked in a revealing personal statement. There would always be "the temptation of wanting to retreat to a more quiet and serene life," but one could not surrender to it. One must go forward bearing the weight of one's burden, whether one would like to or not.¹¹

From Oslo King's Scandinavian tour proceeded to Stockholm, but some unhappy civil rights news from Mississippi reminded King of the recent plans he and the SCLC had made for an upcoming protest campaign in Selma, Alabama, a racially tense city where antiblack violence might well prove likely. "It was on his mind," Coretta remembered, and King several times alluded to the contrast between their present circumstances and what lay ahead of him "He made a comment about the fact that things were going to be very difficult in Selma and that . . . those of us who were on this trip should enjoy ourselves, because somebody was going to get killed in Selma; he didn't expect us to get out of Selma without bloodshed." Thinking about that return home also sparked his deepseated worries about the FBI problem, a more painful threat in many ways than anything that might await him in Selma.¹²

From Stockholm King and his party traveled to Paris and then home to New York, where the mayor and city council accorded him a hero's welcome. King told the crowd at the official ceremony that "I am returning with a deeper conviction that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time." The need for America to move forward to "economic justice" had been reinforced in his mind, King said, by his visit to Scandinavia, whose countries "have no unemployment and no slums," plus better educational and medical systems than the United States could boast "There is a deep but unnecessary economic malady in our country which must be healed here and now," King said, and he went on to call for "a broad alliance" — what in Oslo he had called "a grand alliance" — "of all forces, Negro and white, dedicated to the achievement of economic justice." Just as he had in Oslo, King seemed to indicate that the combination of the Nobel award and the FBI's unpublicized private whispering campaign against him had brought him to a deeper, more fatalistic commitment to a life of personal sacrifice, plus a clearer realization than ever before that some individuals are chosen for special roles that they had not sought but nonetheless had to fulfill "They will hold the torch firmly for others," King told his New York audience, "because they have overcome the threat of jail and death. They will hold this torch high without faltering because

they have weathered the battering storms of persecution and withstood the temptation to retreat to a more quiet and serene life.”¹³

SCLC’s successful, widely-publicized Selma campaign made the spring of 1965 a hectic time for King “If I have to go through this to give the people a symbol, I am resigned to it,” King wearily commented during an early summer speaking tour. Increasingly he spoke out about how the movement needed to challenge racism and economic injustice in the north as well as the south, and by midsummer King also was publicly condemning America’s growing involvement in the war in Vietnam. The SCLC began laying the groundwork for a major campaign against slums and discriminatory housing practices in Chicago. Though he drew back from his antiwar declarations in the face of harsh criticisms from the Johnson administration, the Chicago campaign blossomed into much the sort of broad-gauge challenge to domestic American evils that King had been hoping for.¹⁴ By the late summer of 1966, the Chicago movement’s open housing protest marches into segregated white neighborhoods were drawing violent welcomes from local homeowners, a development that further made clear to King how America’s shortcomings ran far, far deeper than the formal discrimination that had been targeted so successfully by the movement in the Deep South. The realization that the movement’s actual agenda was much lengthier, more far reaching, and more difficult to achieve than the antidiscrimination reforms that had been embodied in the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act was a painful and at times depressing truth for King to confront. He confessed his unhappiness at one movement rally at the height of the Chicago protests.

I’m tired of marching, tired of marching for something that should have been mine at first . . . I’m tired of the tensions surrounding our days . . . I’m tired of living every day under the threat of death I have no martyr complex; I want to live as long as anybody in this building tonight, and sometimes I begin to doubt whether I’m going to make it through. I must confess I’m tired. . . I don’t march because I like it, I march because I must.¹⁵

More and more King viewed his efforts and his life as a self-sacrificial undertaking, an undertaking which was both profoundly draining on a daily basis and, over the long haul, almost certain to result in physical death relatively soon. His attitude came through clearly in one fall 1966 sermon to his Atlanta congregation.

I choose to identify with the underprivileged I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity I choose to live for and with those who find themselves seeing life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit sign This is the way I’m going. If it means suffering a little bit, I’m going that way. If it means sacrificing, I’m going that way. If it means dying for them, I’m going that way, because I heard a voice saying, “Do something for others.”¹⁶

It was the same voice he first had heard in the kitchen in Montgomery more than ten years earlier, the voice whose message King saw writ large in so much of what had come his way, from the Nobel Prize on one hand to the FBI’s constant harassment on the other.

His increasingly sacrificial understanding of his role impelled King toward more

and more forthright public declarations of his economic and antiwar views. He spoke of how American society would have to undergo basic, structural economic changes, changes that would be “revolutionary” in nature, if racial and economic injustice were going to be combatted. Only by confronting “class issues,” King said, “the problem of the gulf between the haves and the have nots,” could the movement alter the basics of American life.” “Something is wrong with the economic system of our nation,” which allowed so many to live in abject poverty while thousands of others lived in profligate luxury. “Something is wrong with capitalism,” King concluded “There must be a better distribution of wealth, and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism.”¹⁷

Throughout the spring of 1967 King lashed out repeatedly, and at times stridently, against America’s deadly military involvement in Southeast Asia. “We are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society . . . We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism are all tied up together, and you really can’t get rid of one without getting rid of the others. . . . The whole structure of American life must be changed.”¹⁸ His remarks betrayed at times a bitterness and despondency that had not been present in the first ten years of King’s public career, and on occasion clearly reflected King’s mature realization that his God-given mission required him to speak the truth no matter what the personal costs and suffering. “We are gravely mistaken to think that religion protects us from the pain and agony of mortal existence,” he once explained

Life is not a euphoria of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian one must take up his cross, with all of 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. . . .

Will we continue to march to the drum beat of conformity and respectability, or will we, listening to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds? Will we march only to the music of time, or will we, risking criticism and abuse, march only to the soul-saving music of eternity?¹⁹

For himself, Martin King had known the painful answer ever since those early days of his initial involvement in Montgomery. He always thought he had neither wanted nor deserved the presidency of the MIA, the leadership of the overall southern movement, or the fame and opportunities for fortune that came his way as a result of his happenstance promotion into an unsought public life. Feeling morally barred from any self-serving retreat or withdrawal, Martin King told himself he had no choice but to go forward, and to devote his entire life and being to a cause that fully merited the personal suffering and sacrifice he had been called upon to make. As his symbolic role grew, as more and more praise rained down upon him, and as the opponents of justice increasingly targeted him, Martin King took it all — the fame, the prizes, the harassment — as a powerful, persistent reminder that selflessness was the highest goal to aspire to. The more the recognition and rewards grew, the more and more burdened Martin King felt to dedicate himself completely to combatting the full range of human evils — not just racial discrimination, but all forms of economic exploitation and militaristic violence as well. As his tributes and awards increased, hence also did the weight of his personal mission. Prizes and

praise were for Martin King not so much the fruit of past labors as a command to intensify his future ones. For any feeling of satisfaction or accomplishment, there was the accompanying message that he would have to try even harder, and reach out even farther, in the days just ahead. Such a personal perception allowed Martin King increasingly to expand the goals and ambition of his political ministry, but it also meant there would never be any respite or opportunity for relaxation. Any commendation directly increased the burden of Martin King's intensely personal cross, and led him to commit himself ever more intensely to a mission which he fully realized could end only with his martyrdom.²⁰

NOTES

- 1 David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986)
2. King's entire account of the kitchen experience comes from a 27 August 1967 sermon, "Thou Fool," which he delivered at Chicago's Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, pp 11–14. King Center Archives.
- 3 Stanley D. Levison, explicitly quoting King, in an oral history interview with James Mosby of the Civil Rights Documentation Project, 14 February 1970, New York, N.Y., p. 9 Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University
4. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, chap two; and "Leader Says Time is Ripe to Extend Work in Dixie," *Jet*, 17 December 1959, pp. 12–17.
5. King to Coretta Scott King, 26 October 1960 King Center Archives
- 6 Andrew J. Young in a 1974 oral history interview with Milton Viorst, pp. 10–11, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Joseph E. Lowery in a 9 December 1982 oral history interview with this author
7. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Negro and the American Dream," 1 January 1961, First African Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia, p. 15. King Center Archives.
- 8 Levison in a 21 November 1969 oral history interview with Jean Stein vanden Heuvel, quoted in David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr From "Solo" to Memphis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981), pp 216–17.
9. This entire description of King's immediate reactions to the Nobel prize announcement is drawn from Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, chaps six and seven
- 10 Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, chap seven
11. Martin Luther King, Jr , "The Quest for Peace and Justice," 11 December 1964, in Frederick W. Haberman, ed., *Nobel Lectures — Peace, 1951–1970*, vol 3 (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1972), pp 333–46.
12. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, chap seven
- 13 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Statement on Accepting the New York City Medalion," 17 December 1964. King Center Archives.
- 14 Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, chaps. seven and eight.
- 15 Martin Luther King, Jr , "Why I Must March," 18 August 1966, Greater Mt. Hope Baptist Church, Chicago, p 8. King Center Archives

16. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Good Samaritan," 28 August 1966, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, p. 9. King Center Archives.
17. This section is drawn from Garrow, *Martin Luther King: Challenging America at Its Core* (New York: Democratic Socialists of America, August, 1983).
18. Martin Luther King, Jr., "To Charter Our Course for the Future," 22 May 1967, Frogmore, South Carolina, p. 5. King Center Archives
19. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Discovery, Love," 25 September 1966, Dallas, Texas, p. 8. King Center Archives.
20. Andrew Young expressed the essence of this development during a 27 July 1982 oral history interview with this author "The difference that I saw [in Dr. King] over the years was that he changed from the kind of person who was resisting leadership and trying to avoid the burdens of responsibility for the movement to a person who almost went to the other extreme and felt totally responsible and burdened by the movement " When had that difference first become visible, Young was asked. "Around the time of the Nobel Prize."