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King, Weeping Word-Master and Master Stage-Manager

The Question: *The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated 40 years ago. What are your memories of that day? What impact did it have on you? How is King relevant to you and to us today?*

My response to QUESTION 1: After the shock of grief and wave of sadness, I said to myself, “The curtain has come down on the stage he managed, but the play has not ended.” On the staff of a national church-organization deeply supportive of “the Movement,” I knew King as a strategist as well as as a word-master and was personally conversant with his best-known lieutenants.

(We were paying the salary of one of them. King asked us to send him the checks so he could be the paymaster, and we complied. He was a tight manager of his stage-crew.)

My response to QUESTION 2: As for the impact this martyrdom had on me, it deepened my conviction that – as I had said in the New York Times – America needs to become more realistic about violence. The simple moralism that violence is evil had comforted white racism’s self-satisfaction at condemning all black threats and outbreaks of violence. (Just imagine how King George III felt about the Boston Tea Party, an instance of organized violence breaking out from a church basement. Those evil Colonial insurgents!)

Let’s stay with the stage analogy. *Act 1:* A ghetto riot and police counter-violence. *Act 2:* King leads a well-publicized non-violent protest – well publicized so that the television cameras would be ready to catch the police counter-violence (dogs, fire hoses, shouting Bull O’Connors). *Act 3:* White America is shamed into support for “the Movement.” *Act 4:* King’s martyrdom – not the end of racism in America, but the death of any further dignity for Jim Crow.

My response to QUESTION 3: We live in a world more violent because hard-and-soft technology has made violence more accessible. King continues as a model of manipulating violence to good ends while being oneself non-violent. The simple-minded extremes of militarism and pacifism (King rejected both) increasingly misfit the complex realities of this global world. But underlying all considerations of means and models is the spiritual issue of whether we are to live by fear or faith. King’s power came from his heart-and-mind consonance with the Bible’s trust and hope in God – as in the words of his last speech, “I’ve been to the mountain, and I’ve seen the Promised Land.”

I must not close without mention of an under-remarked subtle double stratagem of King. It was as if he said, in one breath, “Poor me, I’m a victim; watch out, here I come!” Some clips show both: striding boldly while wiping a smashed tomato off his face. He’s still striding boldly year by year, and as a martyr he’s a permanent victim.

Jeremiah Wright is accused of “Jeremiads” in the denouncing spirit of some of Jeremiah’s speeches in the Bible book of that name. King was capable of such – for example, his (Riverside Church, NYC) Jeremiad against our war in Vietnam. But his preferred mode was from the other Bible book from the Prophet Jeremiah, namely, *Lamentations*.

King had a resonant, beautiful, lachrymose (tearful, mournful) voice. When he really wanted us all to weep for him and his racism-oppressed people and America’s shameful history and present reality on race, he reinforced this pitiful tone with the Bible’s “*kinah*” meter and the sad rhythms of black spirituals. Of America’s great orators, he was the best tear-jerker.

Some others I knew in “the Movement” were as least as worthy as King of being the personal symbol of anti-racism in American history. But only King combined the gifts of word-master and stage-manager.

BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | APRIL 5, 2008; 9:56 AM ETSAVE & SHARE:



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MLK was one and the most significant perhaps but not the only leader of the civil rights movement. The word "reverend" is a title that suggest a religious base. In his case he used churches as a rallying point but not limited to churches. We are discussing his role here at "On Faith" with the implication that religion, faith if you must was a significant, predominant even player in the civil rights movement. Scripture can be cited, "go fourth and teach all nations..." and "love thy neighbor as thyself" to mention a couple of places where "faith" would seem to inherently play a role.

There are no facts that I'm aware of to tell us to what extent but let us not lose sight of the known. At the same time Rev King was in any black segregated church preaching for integration at the white segregated churches they were preaching for segregation. In simple words, George Wallace was a righteous man just like Dr King. At the same time in Boston the Irish/Italian Catholics were in no mood to welcome Bcukwheat into their pool parlors.

At best religion is a mixed bag. Yes, some Jews saw the black civil rights movement as good for them and some didn't. What was said at synagogue I don't have a clue, however. In response to a Jewish friend making a remark about riots that were taking place around 1965 I simply said, "how far would Jews have gotten doing a non violent demonstration against Nazi oppression."

It takes time for social change to take hold. The children see black people everywhere doing everything and in positions of authority, teachers, coaches, police officers etc in their world. The notion of segregation is as real to them as the Romans, Julius Caesar bringing back British slaves. Of course that happened according to the history teacher but it's a chore to just learn it and no kid wants to get involved in it. And most that think about it at all realize that all races were slaves to somebody at some point in history -having salve ancestors is as unique as having ears.

And yes indeed, racism is still there in the "family values." Parents teach it to their children offering them up to the Devil who loves those that hate just like parents do by taking their children to church where Devil is worshiped, honored, adored, glorified and sacrificed to. At this point in time the two great enemies of race relations are family values and a continued outpouring of emotions over past events. Family values have a little in common with guns, can be used for both good and bad.

The only way to end racism is to end the noticing of races. The same is true for sexism but it will never happen otherwise the human race will cease to exist.

POSTED BY: BGONE | APRIL 6, 2008 12:51 PM
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i think you missed the underlying critique garyd-

if mr elliot is aspiring to emulate shakespeare here- he failed-

his words ,

"subtle double stratagem of King. It was as if he said, in one breath, "Poor me, I'm a victim; watch out, here I come!" Some clips show both: striding boldly while wiping a smashed tomato off his face. He's still striding boldly year by year, and as a martyr he's a permanent victim."

are a tacky characterization-

POSTED BY: VICTORIA | APRIL 6, 2008 10:56 AM
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“Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

POSTED BY: ANONYMOUS | APRIL 5, 2008 7:53 PM
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You have defined the surface Dr. Elliot. The assassination did more damage to race relations than probably any other single event since reconstruction.

Victoria you completely missed the point of Dr. Elliot's message. Think more in terms of Shakespeare's quote rather than some assault upon MLK.

POSTED BY: GARYD | APRIL 5, 2008 5:54 PM
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Hi all!

G'night

POSTED BY: ALEX_PARANJAD | APRIL 5, 2008 3:15 PM
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your portrayal of reverend king as a showman contriving stage setups diminishes the very real and relevant oppression he challenged white america to face up to.

what can be gained by such belated backbiting?
this is an embarrassment

POSTED BY: VICTORIA | APRIL 5, 2008 1:47 PM
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