

Missing Martin

The event was a huge success, as hundreds of smartly-dressed supporters crowded into the cavernous hall at the Dayton Convention Center. The room reverberated with lofty rhetoric and inspiring gospel rhythms. Still, it wasn't quite right. Something was amiss at this Martin Luther King Jr. prayer breakfast.

Maybe it was the crowd. I studied the faces of the middle-aged white contingent, trying to divine their motives. Some, it seemed, were doing PR, some were doing penance, and some just trying to do right. The African Americans in attendance were, if anything, an even more veteran group. Contemporaries of King, they had marched and sacrificed and believed. Most were now living comfortable lives.

We had all gathered to remember the dream, which, as it turned out, was very different than reliving the passion. Like planets around an extinguished sun, we were trying to maintain our orbits in the absence of its energy. The dream, however, was simply not the same without the dreamer. I was missing Martin.

Not that I ever knew Dr. King, much less on a first-name basis. I was not quite twelve years old when he fell victim to an assassin's bullet. As a middle-class white youngster growing up beyond the burbs, the injustices he battled were mostly non-issues in my world. Yet, even then, Martin Luther King, the man, the thinker, the orator, the leader, held a certain fascination for me.

I heard him called almost everything but heroic. To some he was a nuisance, to others a threat. My pastor even warned the congregation that King was a Communist.

And with that *ad hominem* attack he set fire to his own infallibility and nudged me out of the cultural nest.

Since that time I have had opportunity to live in the African-American community and participate in its religious life, an experience which has greatly deepened my appreciation for the historical and cultural stage upon which Dr. King acted. However, I miss him not because of what he did for me or even for others I care about. I miss him because we so desperately need someone of his stature in our public life.

Just what is that secret ingredient of greatness which seems to have vanished? There are, I believe, at least three elements which contribute to the making of a great ideological leader—the messenger, the message, and the moment.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a gifted messenger, but that wasn't due simply to his spellbinding oratory. He could also motivate people to action and organize them to make that action effective. What made him a truly dangerous man, however, is that he believed his message enough to die for it. Once he is well-known, such a man cannot be stopped, for even martyrdom will only increase his legend and further energize his message.

Notwithstanding Dr. King's outstanding personal qualities, there would be no day bearing his name without a message that was even bigger than the man. His message was simple. It appealed to the heart. It inspired. It was anchored in permanent moral principles that resonated with the human conscience. Had this talented advocate simply persuaded us to believe in something which later proved to be unworthy, he would not now be exalted but rather vilified by history.

The final element, the moment, is that aspect of greatness over which we mortals have the least control. In one sense history either sets this stage or it does not. But in

another sense the truly great leaders contribute to the making of their own moment. We'll never know what Dr. King's legacy would have been had he lived a generation earlier or later. But the fact of the matter is that his time became his time in part because he acted upon history to make it so.

Today our whole notion of civic leadership is on trial. Where is the public figure who cares more about principle than about himself? Where is the public figure with a transcendent vision for what we can become as a nation?

There is a famine in the land, and one day we will wake up hungry—hungry for a champion like Martin Luther King Jr. to rescue us from the age of apathy, to articulate the great moral themes of our time, and to inspire us by wagering his or her own life that right is right and that we can change for the better. And that's why I'm missing Martin.

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