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The Power of the Soul, the Dignity of the Vote

based off of the faith Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his 1957 Speech, "Give Us the Ballot"

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is one of the most recognizable names in history. His speeches and his work during his tragically short life have become part of America's creation myth, and because of that, his rise and his path in life now seem inevitable. As all things from the past do, it seems as if it were destined for Dr. King to rally millions around a message of agape love and human dignity, racial and economic equality, loving thy neighbor and holding dear your country, and striving towards a perfect future that we could soon make our reality. And of course, like all things that seem inevitable, it is never so simple. As a young man, Dr. King did not have his sights set as high as he would eventually soar. He wanted to be a minister, like his father, and live a quiet life up North, away from the more aggressive racism of the American South. But forces, internal and external, would persuade him to become something more.

Being a deeply faithful man, highly educated in the traditions of Christianity, becoming a minister seemed like a logical career path for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But it was, in fact, that very same Christian faith that caused Dr. King to become more than a preacher. He viewed the fight for civil rights as a very Christian issue, one of human dignity—a virtue granted to us all by God. Voting rights revealed themselves as the perfect microcosm for this idea of the dignity that came from the ballot. If Black people were granted the right to vote, they would become a powerful voice in South politics, and they could fill the government halls with people who would create legislation that would protect the dignity of Black individuals. It was the nonviolent solution to the human rights violations that the African American community had been facing for generations.

Growing up the son of a minister, God's presence loomed large in the form of Martin Luther King Sr. A son of the Social Gospel and Liberal Protestant movements, King Sr emphasized in his ministry the importance of solving social issues. And he was willing to do more than just talk. As a prominent activist in Georgia and the greater South, King Sr. rallied and fought for voter registration, equal pay, the ending of segregation, and was a local leader for the NAACP and the Atlanta Civic and Political League. From a young age, Dr. King's parents taught him about Christian love—agape would eventually become his phrase of choice for describing that phenomenon. In a story from his autobiography, King recounts a memory from the dinner table when he was six years old. Paraphrasing Dr. King's words always feels like a fool's errand so I will quote directly from the page.

“From the age of three I had a white playmate who was about my age. We always felt free to play our childhood games together. He did not live in our community, but he was usually around every day; his father owned a store across the street from our home. At the age of six we both entered school—separate schools, of course. I remember how our friendship began to break as soon as we entered school; this was not my desire but his. The climax came when he told me one day that his father had demanded that he would play with me no more. I never will forget what a great shock this was to me. I immediately asked my parents about the motive behind such a statement. We were at the dinner table when the situation was discussed, and here for the first time I was made aware of the existence of a race problem. I had never been conscious of it before. As my parents discussed some of the tragedies that had resulted from this problem and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it, I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person. As I grew older and older this feeling continued to grow. My parents would always tell me that I should not hate the white man, but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him.”

It is difficult to imagine Dr. King harboring those feelings of blind hatred and anger. It seems the antithesis to his character. But if anything, it goes to show the profound affect that the Christianity of his mother and father had on young Martin. Their faith spared him from carrying the hatred with him and allowed him to open himself up to agape love for all mankind.

Dr. King's philosophy really began to take form when he arrived at Crozer Seminary in 1948. According to the third chapter of his autobiography, King did not begin a "serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil" until his days at Crozer. While studying at the seminary, his Christianity liberalized, took on its own shape, and began to differ more from his father's beliefs. His reading material was broad, and included the likes of Rauschenbusch, Marx, Nietzsche, Locke, Rousseau, and Plato.

During this time in Dr. King's life, he was not yet committed to the principle of nonviolence. While Christian love was wonderful in individual person-to-person relationships, King could not see how it could be harnessed to create real social change. Armed insurrection seemed far more probable, however less desirable, to a young King. That changed on a spring day in 1950; King traveled to Philadelphia to hear a sermon from Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University. Dr. Johnson had recently returned from India, and the life and teachings of Gandhi were the subjects of the sermon. Dr. King described the sermon as "profound and electrifying". The concept of satyagraha and the success that Gandhi had while remaining entirely nonviolent were a powerful message to King. So profound, in fact, was the sermon, that upon the end of the lecture, King went out and bought a half dozen books on the life and works of Gandhi. It was in these seminary years that Dr. King's dedication to nonviolence was born, and his dedication to eradicating social evils. Essentially, like many of us, Dr. King got woke through his experience with higher education. Upon his graduation, Dr. King had intentions to stay up north and live a quiet life as the minister of a church. He was persuaded by his parents to come back south and take up a more prominent role in the fight for civil rights and other social issues. They thought his intelligence and oratory would make him effective in the fight against social evils. How effective he would become, they had no idea.

At the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom Rally, Dr. King gave one of the most public of his early speeches. King delivered a powerful speech on the steps in front of the Lincoln Memorial in front of more than 20,000 people. The speech is known as “Give Us the Ballot”. “Give Us the Ballot” is a speech on voting rights, specifically voting rights for African Americans that was delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on May 17, 1957. That date purposely fell on the third anniversary of the decision of *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka*, which resulted in the ruling that “separate but equal is inherently unequal”. The event had been organized for people to come out, pray, and voice their opinions in protest of segregation and discriminatory voting policies.

As I have previously mentioned, to Dr. King and the thousands of Christian activists who came after him, civil rights and all social issues are issues of dignity. He believed that Black Americans could not live up effectively to their holy calling if the foot of the white man and of the government was rested firmly on their neck. In the same way that it hurts to see a lion in a circus, it hurts to see any group of people being systematically disrespected and disenfranchised. There is a dignity to us, as there is to the lion, that makes us deserving of freedom and makes anything less an atrocity. Dr. King put it best, saying in “Give Us the Ballot”, “For all men of goodwill, this May 17th decision came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of human captivity.” It is clear in his speech that Dr. King’s passion about the right to vote is more than just good civics and governmental practice. In the next passage, Dr. King refers to the *Brown* decision as “noble and sublime”, which are not words that are just thrown around.

And later, in the zenith of the speech, Dr. King breaks into a crescendoing passage, declaring,

“Give us the ballot, and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights.

Give us the ballot (Yes) and we will no longer plead to the federal government for passage of an anti-lynching law; we will by the power of our vote write the law on the statute books of the South (All right) and bring an end to the dastardly acts of the hooded perpetrators of violence.”

King is simply asking here for the right to govern his own destiny; a right that has never been denied to the white man. What is so powerful here is that Dr. King is not even asking the government to pass laws to protect Black Americans; he isn't demanding action. All he is asking for is that the government stop actively impeding his people from asserting their constitutional right to vote, guaranteed by the 15th amendment. All he asks is that his country take her foot off the neck of the people on whose back she was built.

The treatment Black people had received was little better than the treatment received by animals. That went in direct violation of Dr. King's notion of personalism, which asserts that God must be a human since humankind had been born in His image. Further, personalist theologians believe that God is a deeply personal god and that He is familiar with and sympathetic to the struggles of His people. To a personalist, treating any other human being with less than the utmost respect is a violation of the Spirit of God that resides within them. Since all mankind was made in His image, His spirit and dignity dwell within each and every person. To withhold the right to self-determination was amongst the highest offenses to the dignity of a group of people. If one does not have the power to change their own circumstances, how can they ever be considered free? To Christian personalists such as Dr. King, limiting the freedom of a group of people was limiting God's spirit on Earth. And by allowing the Black population to vote, they would be granted the right of self-determination and God's love would flourish in their freedom from oppression.

This, however, was a tall order. It would take an immense amount of dedication, discipline, and patience, and success was far from a guarantee. Participants in this fight for civil liberty would have to be prepared to face threats, insults, physical violence, and even death. They would at times be outnumbered and scared, their enemy the faceless tyrants of the law, with their only comfort coming from the love for their neighbor and their God. And possibly the most difficult demand leveled against these freedom fighters was that they had to take all this torment in stride, without allowing anger, violence, or revenge to cloud their minds. This task would be nearly impossible without the aid of a higher power, a great unifier who could reassure the masses that their sacrifices were worth it and that their suffering was not in vain.

While not an entirely Christian movement, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s was very much guided by religious principle. While Dr. King was peacefully leading from a place of Christian faith, Malcolm X was leading many Black Muslims in charges of direct action against the injustices their community was facing. While history has largely sided with Dr. King's strategy, both men were doing as their faith compelled them, and both men sought to end the injustices to Black America.

I assert that without the aid of their faith, and the steadfast belief that what they were doing was willed by above that came with it, Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement would not have been as successful. By following God's calling as he heard it, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was able to change the world in a massive way.

Through his writing, speaking, preaching, and teaching, he amassed a following that was willing to walk to the ends of the Earth—or at least to and from their workplaces in Montgomery, Alabama—for him and his message of hope and unity. Leaders and movements based in fear and hatred have their moments in the sun, but in the end the tide always turns on

them. Dr. King's leadership, and the movement to which he was entrusted were never based on small minded fear or clouded by hatred and a desire to inflict pain. Rather, through the influence of the Lord on his life, Dr. King was able to temper, in himself and in his supporters, the natural inclination towards revenge and violence that we would all feel after facing such oppression, and focus the energy into nonviolent, powerful satyagraha—the soul force of the disciplined protestor.

If it was not for his Christian faith, Dr. King would never have been the leader he was or done the things he was able to accomplish. By following God's calling as he heard it, everything fell in line just right for King. By hanging on to his Christian principles, King was able to lead in an effective and captivating manner. By playing to his natural gifts, King gave some of the greatest speeches in human history. And by respecting the dignity of all mankind and fighting hard to protect it, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was able change the law and better the lives of millions of people across America.

He was not a perfect man—no man can be—but he was willing to trust that there was a plan for him and follow it where it took him. Despite threats on him and his family, very real, palpable physical violence, and direct danger to his life, Dr. King stayed on the path that he believed led towards a better future. Always allowing himself to be guided by his faith and by those around him, Dr. King became one of the most powerful men in American history. Through his dedication to his principles, his religion, his family, and by understanding the nature of his Christian faith, Martin Luther King Jr. became much more than just a preacher, and mankind owes him a great deal of gratitude for that.

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