



## The Significant Individual, Values and Social Evolution: How one man changed the world

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### Abstract

*Great achievements of the past hold invaluable lessons for the future. Often we deify the leader and celebrate the outcome, but overlook the underlying principles they reflect. The American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s is a testimony to the combined power of an idea, the catalytic role of dedicated individuals and the power of token actions in extreme circumstances. The idea of non-violence and civil disobedience propounded by Thoreau and successfully implemented by Mahatma Gandhi showed that it is possible for an unarmed, untrained and loosely organized group to take on a powerful, well armed, well trained force, with minimum casualties on either side and maximum chances of reconciliation in the future. An idea acquires power when it touches the emotions. Martin Luther King Jr. imparted those emotions and inspired them in other people. In rising to be the leader of the movement, he represented the peak of the mountain or the tip of the iceberg composed of millions of African Americans who aspired for a better life and the millions more around the world who supported his cause formed the base that held up the peak. It was their aspiration that gave power to his words and actions. King identified with the conscious, and often subconscious aspiration of African Americans and channelized their energy into a force, organized it as the Civil Rights Movement, and transformed it into an irresistible power. Insightfully, he realized that a violent solution to the problem of discrimination would only deepen the fissures in American society and lengthen the healing process. Every single act that was undertaken in the movement by individuals and groups—Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus, the Little Rock Nine courageously attending school though the Arkansas state National Guards blocked the entrance, everyone of the 250,000 people assembling in Washington DC to hear King's dream—exhausted whatever significant or insignificant resources were available and in that sense became a perfect token act. A strong individual inspired by a powerful idea led people in well planned and perfectly organized sit-ins, stand-ins, marches, speeches, prayers and protests. The movement generated such power as to alter the legislation of the land, and more significantly, the mindset that tolerated or approved of*

\* A lengthier version of this article will appear in the book *The Eternal Force of Love. Martin Luther King in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* to be published by The Foundation for a Culture of Peace and the Martin Luther King Institute of Research and Social Action, Polytechnic University of Nicaragua (UPOLI). This book coming fifty years after King's assassination aims to promote a collective discussion to assess the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. from the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*racism. Although many contributed to this remarkable achievement, King's actions testify to that fact that one man's commitment can change the world. But it equally reveals the power of a mass movement directed to advance social progress. This accomplishment continues to inspire activists all over the world and confirms the inevitability of the success of movements that strive for universal human rights. It illustrates the process and defines the strategy needed for the future evolution of global society and human unity.*

*A prayer, a master act, a king idea  
Can link man's strength to a transcendent Force.*

**– Savitri, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh**

## **1. The Prelude to the Dream**

It was a momentous day in the history of the Civil Rights Movement and American history itself when a quarter million people gathered in the symbolic shadow of Lincoln and passionately cheered for Martin Luther King Jr. as he shared his dream. King and his fellow speakers representing a broad spectrum of organizations sought the same goal—the social, economic and spiritual emancipation of the African Americans.

One hundred years earlier, the Civil War freed every slave in the United States of America. From physical emancipation to seeking desegregation had been a long path. The road to physical emancipation itself had been still tortuous. Slavery is as old as human civilization, and eradicating it involved changing the law, culture, social and individual behaviour, and most importantly, the mindset of every human being.

Slavery was known to exist in the earliest civilizations. Starting from Sumer as far back as 3500 BC, in every civilization throughout the world, those in power made slaves of the weak, the defeated and the captured. But the movement to end the inhumanity is also just as old. The Republic of Dubrovnik on the Adriatic, in modern day Croatia, was the first European country to ban slave trade in 1416. Within a century, slavery was outlawed throughout Western Europe though it continued to exist in European colonies elsewhere in the world. In North America, German Quakers protested against slavery in 1688, though the abolitionist movement took another century to come to life. The 1688 Petition presented in a Quaker meeting in Germantown was the first American public document to protest slavery and define universal human rights. The current that swept King and placed him on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial at the end of the March on Washington in 1963 can be traced to a Quaker meeting close to three centuries earlier.

The slow advance of abolitionism in the United States is dotted with marches, protests, violent demonstrations, peaceful dialogue, assassinations, legislation and a war. The Republic of Vermont banned slavery in its constitution in 1777. The Congress of the Confederation prohibited slavery north-west of the Ohio River in 1787, and slavery was legally ended in every northern state in 1804. International slave trade was criminalized in 1807. The American Civil War unified the United States of America and the Emancipation Proclamation liberated every African American in 1863. The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution legally abolished slavery in the country in 1865.

The iron chains had gone. But in their place came economic and social shackles. Discriminatory laws and segregation ensured that the former slaves remained “*on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.*”<sup>\*</sup> The Niagara Movement and the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) at the beginning of the twentieth century were in response to the desperate condition of a vast majority of the African American community. World War I impacted the community variously. War opened up new manufacturing opportunities in the north, reduced immigration of labourers from Europe and took away young white men to the front. This resulted in the Great Migration that saw 500,000 southerners move north in search of a better life.

It was a watershed moment for other reasons as well. When President Woodrow Wilson declared that “*the world must be made safe for democracy*”<sup>†</sup>, the community asked, “*why not make America safe for democracy?*” The hypocrisy of waging a world war in order to free peoples in Europe while suppressing a tenth of its own people at home was too glaring. It was accentuated by people from the community enlisting in large numbers to fight for the country, regardless of discrimination. Within a week of Wilson’s declaration of war, the war office was forced to stop recruiting African Americans, their quota in the army had been filled. A million of them had volunteered, but less than 400,000 were allowed to enlist. Though most of them were assigned to non-combat duty, they all worked commendably. The 93<sup>rd</sup> division comprising African Americans had been assigned to the French army. Desperate to prove their loyalty, patriotism and worth, the men distinguished themselves in war. Their valour, success, even their culture and jazz music popularized by the division’s band won them much respect and acclaim in France. King says in his autobiography that his mother told him what almost every African American child hears before he or she can understand why it is told to him or her<sup>‡</sup>, “*You are as good as anyone.*” What they had thus far heard as a comforting statement from their mothers became real to them by their experience in France. The French believed they were as good as anyone, and the African Americans could never again see themselves as second class people. The *New Negro* was born.

The *New Negro* saw himself differently from before. He belonged to the US army. He was trained and armed. He received remedial education and healthcare. He travelled far. He saw the world and his place in it differently. He sacrificed for his country and the world. He liberated Europe. *He was as good as anyone.*

However, others back home did not think so. The soldiers returned home to greater violence and discrimination. Seeing the descendants of slaves educated, armed, organized and confident disturbed and alarmed the descendants of many former slave-owning families. There was a drastic escalation in lynching, brutality and suppression. However, the *New Negro* had been born, and there was no going back. Civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois summed it up when he wrote in the NAACP journal *The Crisis*<sup>‡</sup> in 1919, “*We return. We return from*

\* Martin Luther King, “I Have a Dream”, Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC., August 28, 1963. National Archives <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>

† Woodrow Wilson. “Wilson’s war message”; Washington, D.C., April 2, 1917 [http://www.ushistoryatlas.com/era7/USHAc.com\\_PS\\_U07\\_warmessage\\_R2.pdf](http://www.ushistoryatlas.com/era7/USHAc.com_PS_U07_warmessage_R2.pdf)

‡ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Returning Soldiers,” *The Crisis* XVIII (May 1919), p. 13. <https://www.thecrisismagazine.com/>

*fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why."*

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*"Leadership does not sprout on barren soil. The roots of leadership are nurtured deep in the psyche of society."*

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If World War I created this determination in the African American community, World War II strengthened it and so set off in earnest the Civil Rights Movement in the United States whose origin coincided with the end of World War II and lasted for the rest of King's life.

## **2. One Man's Perfection Can Still Save the World**

Altering the course of history, Mahatma Gandhi wrote in 1939, is possible even for "a small group of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission." Henry David Thoreau argued further that a moral revolution can be inspired by even "one honest man." The words of these two men who inspired King were proved right over and over again by him. Over the course of his work, King realized this truth and said himself, "Almost always the creative, dedicated minority has made the world better."

Society is made up of people, organizations and the relationships between them. An individual who conforms to the rules and values of society becomes part of it, and receives social support and security in return for the conformity. But society only caters to the average of its members. There are some people who are not satisfied with the average. Society's pace of progress is too slow for them. They find its values outdated. Its rules curtail their creativity. They see the future before it arrives. They are well developed, strong individuals. They do not need the support that society has to offer. They do not depend on society to lead them. They lead society instead.

Leadership does not sprout on barren soil. The roots of leadership are nurtured deep in the psyche of society. The vast changes in the African American community all over the land can be seen in miniature in the King family. On the maternal side, King's great grandfather and grandfather had been a preacher and a Baptist minister respectively. His father's family had moved from slavery to sharecropping three generations earlier. His paternal grandfather had struggled with seasonal labor, poverty and injustice at the hands of white landlords. His father received an education and became a pastor. King grew up in a middle class home, and received as good a life as an African American could have growing up in the South in the 1930s and 40s. But he was not satisfied with his lot. The newly freed slave rejoiced in the freedom. His children worked for survival. The grandchildren received an education and prospered as much as they were allowed to. The fourth generation free African American, King sought equality and respect. He worked hard in school and was allowed to skip the ninth and twelfth grades of school on account of being outstanding in his studies.

World War II took away many youngsters to the front, leaving those who remained with greater openings, for study and work. King was accepted in college early at fifteen years of

age and graduated with a degree in Sociology. He read widely in college and was fortunate to be influenced by powerful thinkers and guided by good teachers. His constant, deep rooted “*inner urge to serve humanity*”<sup>3</sup> helped him overcome his doubts about the church and its teachings, and join a seminary. He believed he could deliver religious sermons with a social message and improve the conditions of his fellow human beings.

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*“One real idea—  
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A decade earlier in 1934, while on a visit to Germany, King Sr., inspired by Martin Luther, changed his name from Michael to Martin Luther, and his five year old son became Martin Luther King Jr. Interestingly, the Protestant reformer’s namesake would also join the church and spark a revolution from within, mostly peaceful, completely idealistic, and thereby alter the course of history.

### **3. A Real Idea**

Federico Mayor, former Director-General of UNESCO, in his preface to Mary King’s book “*Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.: The Power of Nonviolent Action*,”<sup>4</sup> describes the force of ideas against the idea of force. The Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century vindicated the force of ideas. That King was inspired by the nonviolent methods adopted by India’s Mahatma Gandhi is well documented. Nonviolence and civil disobedience defeated physical, economic and institutional might. Before studying the influence of Gandhi on King and its impact on the movement, the very fact that an idea from a completely different culture from twelve thousand miles away, at a time before fast air travel and instant mass communication, struck a deep chord with African Americans in the US deserves study.

Gandhi became the face of the Indian national freedom movement, but even before he associated with his country’s freedom movement, he was fighting for the rights of Africans. After completing his studies in England, he worked in South Africa as a lawyer for twenty one years, and fought apartheid and the unjust racist laws that discriminated against native Africans and Asian immigrants. His politics and ethics were shaped during his stay there. The *Satyagraha* and civil disobedience movements of the Indian freedom struggle that King emulated in America were not originally from India. They dated further back to Africa. But Indian independence that politically liberated one fifth of the human race in 1947 was achieved through mostly nonviolent action under the leadership of Gandhi, and so non-violence came to be associated indelibly with Gandhi and the Indian freedom movement.

King’s association with Gandhi was preceded by the interest many African Americans in the US showed in the South African and Indian movements for justice and freedom. Even before King was born, African Americans saw Gandhi’s strategy of resistance to oppression could be employed in the US. Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, Channing Tobias, James Farmer and James Lawson were among African American students of Gandhi<sup>5</sup>. They had travelled to India and studied the Indian methods to employ in the US. In 1942, when King was still in school, a Northern organization called the Congress of Racial Equality had come into being to fight segregation, specifically employing techniques used by Gandhi.

Benjamin E. Mays, one of the early American followers of Gandhi and who had travelled to India in 1936, was the president of Morehouse College where King was a graduate student. He steered King towards the Civil Rights Movement and showed him how the church pulpit could be the launch pad. King's earliest encounter of Gandhi's methods was from Mays, and he decided that the Baptist ministry was the place for him.

In college, King received an assignment to read *On Civil Disobedience*<sup>6</sup> by Henry David Thoreau. It was his '*first intellectual contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance,*' and King was '*fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system.*'<sup>7</sup> In the Crozer Theological Seminary he enrolled in next, King read texts on religion, philosophy, ethics and sociology. He was struck by theologian Walter Rauschenbusch who addressed the social ethics of Christianity and wanted Christians to act for an equitable society. King found a theological basis he had been seeking to tackle social ills. He also studied *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto* and found certain dimensions of Marxism stimulating. He was dubious about A. J. Muste, a radical Christian pacifist who insisted that all wars must be resisted. He studied Nietzsche who spoke against Christian patience and love. He wanted to find an intellectual solution to social evil. Then, one day in Philadelphia, King heard a sermon by the president of Howard University, Mordecai Johnson, on the life and thinking of Gandhi. King was so inspired by what he heard that he left the meeting and bought half a dozen books on Gandhi. Gandhi was not a new subject, and his methods were not unknown. But King studied Gandhi in detail for the first time. He was fascinated by the 1930 Salt March—a simple act of ordinary men and women walking to the seashore and making salt—that mobilized the entire nation through civil disobedience. The more he read about the Indian freedom movement, the more he was convinced that love, peace and civil disobedience could bring about social reform. The idea was compatible with all his thoughts, feelings, beliefs and aspirations. "*It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking for so many months. I came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom,*"<sup>8</sup> King said.

An idea acquires power when it touches the emotions. Over time and through each sit-in, demonstration and march, as he saw the power of love and nonviolence, King's commitment to the cause would receive his spiritual support and wholehearted conviction. He travelled to India in 1965 to personally study and understand the Mahatma (epithet commonly used for famous people like Gandhi, meaning 'Great Soul' in Sanskrit) and his work better.

One real idea—powerful and true—can change the world. It spreads and gains momentum from its success. It has the power of conscious force behind it. It is creative and manifests the truth it represents. Mahatma Gandhi read Thoreau and embarked on a nonviolent struggle in South Africa and India. King followed Gandhi and spearheaded the Civil Rights Movement. Nelson Mandela referenced King during his fight against Apartheid. A social movement to advance workers' rights in Poland in the 1980s used a documentary on King's life as a training guide for its resistance. Protestors in Czechoslovakia and Romania sang "*We shall overcome*", a key anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. Protestors in China's Tiananmen

Square held up signs that read “*We shall overcome.*” During the 2011 protests in Egypt, an Arabic version of a fifty year old American comic book, *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*\* was distributed by activists.

#### **4. The Power of Peace**

It is noteworthy that Western civilization tends to define peace only in negative terms as the absence of war. We lack the conception of peace as a positive spiritual presence and power as connoted by the Sanskrit word *shanti*. Various thinkers tried to explain the nature and outcome of violence and nonviolence. Gandhi described one meeting the other as a man violently striking water with his sword. The man hurts his arm, nothing else. Violence and its various expressions are a dissipation of energy. American social philosopher Richard Gregg explains that “*prolonged anger is very exhausting...It consumes energy very rapidly... The energy of the assailant is reverted and used up against himself. The steadfast appeals of the individual nonviolent resister work in the personality of the violent attacker... The attacker’s personality is divided... If there are onlookers, the assailant soon loses still more poise... The disadvantage of the attacker increases by reason of a further loss of inner assurance... He dimly realizes the courage of the nonviolent opponent is higher than mere physical bravery or recklessness.*”<sup>9</sup> Often the aggressor’s energy is transmitted to the peaceful protagonist, and goes on to strengthen the cause of nonviolence. Gregg explains superior poise and power of the nonviolence practitioner as stemming from his or her self-control, “*he has taken the moral initiative... he knows how to control the process... his self-control and lack of anger conserve his energy.*” The conserved energy is channelized to accomplish the goal.

Mary King, in her book, draws many comparisons between Gandhi and King, and shows that nonviolent behaviour was for both a means of transforming relationships and creating peaceful transitions of power, of minimizing anything negative and maximizing the chances of success. Both were up against a more powerful opponent, both had the support of large numbers of unarmed, untrained people. They clearly saw that nonviolent struggle was almost the only practical option.

Violence hurts the enemy, but at a cost. War may vanquish the opposition, but also create resentment if not a permanent rift. King wanted harmony. He was as much against Black Power as he was against White Power. Hate destroys the hater, he believed, and harmonious coexistence was possible at the end of a struggle only if the struggle was nonviolent. Hundred years earlier, Lincoln had integrated freedom and unity. He saw clearly that one could not exist without the other, and had to forcibly integrate the states and liberate all citizens. King too wanted unity, not only within the African American community but within the entire country. As he famously said, he wished “*little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.*” One generation cannot riot and kill, and then expect the next generation to play together. In order to achieve this, peaceful methods were imperative. As Mayor says in *Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.*, “*...the Culture of Peace has a history and, most importantly, a future.*”

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\* Alfred Hassler and Benton Resnik, “Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story, Fellowship of Reconciliation,” 1957

King appealed to people's religious feelings to strengthen the cause of love and nonviolence. He combined the African American gospel with activism. His sermons in church had political and social messages, his public speeches had heavy religious symbolism. He extolled all to "*rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force,*"\* soul force being one way in which Mahatma Gandhi described his *Satyagraha*, the nonviolent civil resistance.

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*"A single token act, perfectly planned and executed, indicates the success of the whole project of which the act is a part."*

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Nonviolence was not simply a noble, saintly ideal. It was purely practical. It was most effective when the focus was on one specific issue. When tens of thousands of passionate young and old men and women marched demanding something specific—integration in the classroom, desegregation of lunch counters, open housing, no discrimination in hiring—it was possible to channel all their energy and bring about one permanent, progressive change in the law.

Moreover, nonviolence, especially in the face of violent opposition, when publicized, won international public support for the cause. When photos of peaceful protestors praying on the road with armed guards facing them, young children braving water jets and police dogs being unleashed on activists were splashed on front pages of newspapers and television screens all over the world, the uproar they caused created immense pressure. There was pressure on the federal government to illegalize segregation throughout the country and on the racists to accept the federal law.

The US Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, 1954. Montgomery buses were desegregated in 1956. The Civil Rights Act of 1960 established federal inspection of local voter registration. The 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1964 abolished the poll tax, making it easier for African Americans to vote. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination in employment practices and public accommodations. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 suspended literacy tests and other subjective voter registration tests. The Fair Housing Act dealt a blow to housing segregation in 1968. Nonviolence defeated segregation, act by act.

## 5. A Token Act

*"If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way,"* King said. *"If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well'"*†. Clearly, King believed in the power of an act. Not the legal acts

\* Martin Luther King, "I Have a Dream", Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC., August 28, 1963. National Archives <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>

† Martin Luther King, "What Is Your Life's Blueprint?" Barratt Junior High School, Philadelphia, October 26 1967. *The Seattle Times* <http://old.seattletimes.com/special/mlk/king/words/blueprint.html>



passed by the courts. Not action in its collective sense. But a perfectly executed individual act. Such as a sweeper cleaning a street. A common man registering to vote. A minister delivering a sermon. A student braving all opposition and entering a newly desegregated classroom. The aspiration of every African American and the essence of the entire Civil Rights Movement is captured in each such act. The universe is represented in every act, just as the macrocosm of the sea is present in essence in every drop of sea water. Regardless of the odds and the outcome, when one exhausts their resources completely in performing an act to the utmost human perfection possible, the individual act is seen to have miraculous results. A single token act, perfectly planned and executed, indicates the success of the whole project of which the act is a part. The Civil Rights Movement was filled with such perfect token acts. One of the most prominent of them is the arrest of Rosa Parks.

If Harriet Beecher Stowe through her book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*<sup>10</sup> was said to be the lady who started the Civil War, Rosa Parks was called "the first lady of civil rights". She had seen hardship early in life in Alabama, and suffered the same humiliating discrimination as any other Southerner. She was a civil rights activist and secretary to the president of the Montgomery chapter of NAACP, becoming secretary due to the fact that she was the only lady present, a secretary's role was traditionally considered a woman's job, and she was too timid to say no! And she had a deep conviction that the cause of the Civil Rights Movement was right. She was active in the movement in Montgomery.

On December 1, 1955, on her way back from work, this forty two year old lady was asked to give up her seat on the bus. She refused to get up. She was not tired, not physically tired anyway. But the image of Emmett Till was in her mind.

Till, an African American teenager, had been brutally lynched because of a story of a white woman alleging his misbehaviour. Later it turned out to be just that, a story, but the boy had been cruelly made a victim of racism. Images of the boy's ravaged face and his mother's insistence on an open casket so the world could see the nature of segregation had shaken the entire country. Parks was tired of giving in. Four African Americans had been seated, when one white man who entered the bus required a seat. African Americans could not sit in the same row as a white, not even across the aisle from him. So all four had to rise so this one man could sit. The other three seated got up and moved to the back of the bus. Parks thought of Emmett Till and just could not go back. She felt a determination cover her body "*like a quilt on a winter night*". This small, simple act of one individual refusing to get up and give in was a spark that the movement had been waiting for. Others before her had rebelled. They had resisted segregation, refused to give up their seats, undergone arrest. But there comes a point in history, a tipping point, when one simple act changes the course of history. That was Parks saying "*I don't think I should have to stand up.*"

"*If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward,*"\* said King. This small, perfect, significant act was a step in the right direction.

\* Martin Luther King, "Keep Moving from This Mountain"; Spelman College, Atlanta, GA, April 10, 1960. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/Vol05Scans/10Apr1960\\_KeepMovingfromThisMountain\\_AddressatSpelmanCollege.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol05Scans/10Apr1960_KeepMovingfromThisMountain_AddressatSpelmanCollege.pdf)

## 6. The Ever-present Human Choice

Many things happened after Parks' refusal to give up her seat. She was arrested, fined and charged with breaking the law. Parks later recalled, "*I only knew that, as I was being arrested, that it was the very last time that I would ever ride in humiliation of this kind.*" She took the decision. As if a war had not been fought for the sake of liberating the slave. As if hundreds of people had not given up their lives demanding equality. As if an entire movement was not raging over the land with millions of African Americans seeking a better life. As if millions of others were not trying to suppress the movement with the backing of powerful politicians and law enforcement agencies. Whatever made Rosa Parks think that she had any power to decide? But decide she did! Later events seem to indicate that life bowed to the strength of her determination.

People realized that they had a choice. They did not have to get up and give up their seats. They could say no. They were not bound to obey an inhuman, even unconstitutional rule. They could remain sitting. They could demand what was due to them. As King said, "*Whenever men and women straighten their backs up, they are going somewhere, because a man can't ride your back unless it is bent.*"\*

When a police officer arrested Parks, she asked him, "*Why do you push us around?*" to which he replied, "*I don't know, but the law's the law.*" The seemingly insignificant "*I don't know*" points to the presence of those who were not affected unfairly by the law, but who did not approve of it, and at the same time, did not think of questioning it. This episode awoke not only the African Americans, but the white population that had till then remained dormant.

The Women's Political Council of Montgomery, an organization founded to address racial issues, called for a boycott of public buses. 35,000 handbills were mimeographed overnight and distributed to Montgomery citizens the next day, announcing the boycott. A group of fifty leaders of the community came together to discuss the next steps. The group agreed that a new organization would have to be founded to handle the bus boycott effort. The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was founded, and its members elected Martin Luther King Jr., all of twenty six years, newly ordained minister and a newcomer to the city, as the president of MIA.

## 7. The Source of the Leader's Power

All human accomplishment is based on energy. Technological advancement, natural resources, growth of science, discoveries and inventions have aided the accomplishment, but the origin is always human energy. Energy is generated by aspiration. But energy by itself does not accomplish.

A small child is full of energy. He or she is full of movement, noise, curiosity, and activity. But all of this energy does not get anything done. All the energy of a raging river is converted into hydroelectric energy only when the water is channelized through turbines. Similarly, human energy that is released by aspiration needs a direction in order to become a force. When

\* Martin Luther King, "I've Been To The Mountaintop"; Memphis, TN, Mason Temple, April 3 1968. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>

the force is organized around a pursuit, it is transformed into power. One who can identify with the collective aspiration, channelize the energy in a specific direction and organize it around tasks rises to be a leader. The transformational leader wields the power effectively and uses it to accomplish for the collective. He or she is a well-developed individual—strong, courageous, open minded, intelligent, wise, responsible, farseeing, creative.

The relationship between the individual and the collective is complementary. The individual is like the emerging tip of an iceberg. He or she represents the awakening and emerging consciousness of the collective and gives conscious expression to it. As the individual derives power from the collective, he gives back to the collective his conscious attainment and disseminates it far and wide.

The leader forms the mountain peak. So his or her position rests on all that lies beneath. This does not take away any credit from the peak, nevertheless the peak exists only because of all that holds it up. Society and its movements create the leader. When King became the leader of the MIA and gradually of the Civil Rights Movement in the country, his power came from the millions of African Americans who aspired for equality, dignity, and a better life. It came from the emancipated slaves who wanted to see their grandchildren become their own masters. From the war veterans who believed that for their contribution to the nation and the world, their children deserved respect and equality. From the sharecropper who struggled with crippling poverty. From the rural Southerner who craved for an end to humiliation and hardship. From the ghetto dweller in the North who wanted to escape the miserable living conditions. From the pain of those who lost their friends and family to racist violence. From the people from other communities who saw that segregation was unjust. From the peaceful marchers who faced police brutality. From every child who participated in the Birmingham Children's Crusade. From the stoicism of Emmett Till's mother. From Rosa Parks' decision. From the passionate crowd at Lincoln Memorial that inspired King to throw away the speech manuscript and speak from the heart.

The bus boycott movement was everything that King believed in. It was a nonviolent, mass movement that mobilized the entire society. It did not break any law. It unified the African American community and its supporters. It sent a powerful message to the segregationists. King appeared on the national stage of the Civil Rights Movement with his leadership role in the boycott. He gave impassioned sermons and speeches. He organized sit-ins, stand-ins, meetings and marches. Every member of the community participated in the boycott, with some members from other communities too supporting it. People walked, rode bicycles, even used carts drawn by animals, and carpooled. Some white car owners ferried African Americans to work. When local insurance companies were forced by the city administration to stop insuring cars used in carpools, the boycott leaders arranged policies at Lloyd's of London. African American taxi drivers charged the equivalent of a bus ticket. Churches across the nation raised money to support the boycott and collected shoes to replace the tattered footwear of Montgomery's citizens.

With 75% of the commuters being African American, it hurt the bus company economically. King was arrested and ordered to pay a \$500 fine or serve 386 days in jail. He

spent two weeks in jail, but the arrest backfired. It brought national and world attention to the arrest. International press reported on the boycott which received worldwide support. When King visited India later in 1959, he found that the Indian press seemed to have covered the movement more than the American press did! The boycott was organized and implemented for more than a year till the federal Supreme Court ruled against segregation on buses.

The MIA worked with NAACP, Women's Political Council and other organizations and individuals, and coordinated every activity. As King said, one of their most powerful and demanding nonviolent weapons was organization. He wielded the power society entrusted him with, organized the protest movement, and achieved victory. As a great leader, he took consciousness responsibility, or responsibility for something far greater than himself and the authority he possessed. He raised the consciousness of individuals and society, helped them realize more of their potential, gave expression to the social aspiration and served as a catalyst for its realization.

Following the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott Movement, King invited sixty African American ministers and leaders to Atlanta and founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC was to look beyond buses to end segregation of all forms everywhere. It believed that churches should be involved in political activism against social ills, a belief close to the heart of its president, King.

## **8. A Call from Above and an Aspiration from Below**

King's Bus Boycott Movement and others that followed, such as SCLC's Birmingham Campaign to end segregation of downtown merchants in 1963, were great successes for the Civil Rights Movement. But King had many detractors within his own community. People who did not believe in nonviolence, who did not see the role of religion and the church in the movement, who felt the movement was too slow and mild, who did not see why they needed to integrate harmoniously with the other races, who did not have faith in mobilizing the common man, woman and child.

One of the detractors was the NAACP. King believed in directly appealing to the people, and mobilizing them in large numbers in order to press for change. On the other hand, the NAACP sought to bring about change through changes in legislation. When a local court punished an activist, it appealed to higher and higher courts till it reached the federal Supreme Court. In fact, it had been waiting for a local court in Montgomery to arrest someone for breaking the segregation rule. Nine months before Parks' act, fifteen year old Claudette Colvin did something similar and was arrested. But the teenager was unwed and pregnant, a fact that might have prejudiced the jury against the case. So they waited for a better opportunity. Parks was a respectable, educated, law-abiding citizen. She had been active in the movement, was secretary to the president of the NAACP, and her behaviour throughout the arrest and subsequent court proceedings had been exemplary. The NAACP president Edgar Nixon considered Parks an ideal plaintiff for a test case against city and state segregation laws. But as the case was impeded as it moved through the district and state courts on its way to the federal Supreme Court, the Supreme Court ruled in another

case filed by the NAACP, *Browder v. Gayle*, that segregation was unconstitutional.

In favoring different strategies, perhaps neither the SCLC nor the NAACP realized that they needed each other in order for the movement to make progress. Neither would have been fully effective without the other. The SCLC's mobilization of people from below complemented the NAACP's legal approach from above. Law represents a codification of the public conscience. In the absence of public support, laws remain just words on a page. Without legal backing, people might go on marching and protesting without result. A law cannot come into force without being accepted by the people. The NAACP provided the law, while the SCLC generated the public support for its adoption and implementation.

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King became the acknowledged voice of the American Civil Rights Movement, but the achievements of the movement were the result of a multitude of forces and social currents active at the time. While he roused the masses to non-violent protest and the NAACP pressed for legal measures, a third flank emerged advocating force and resorting to violence. The second generation of free African Americans wanted more than just emancipation. The World Wars led to a shortage of young men, and made available educational resources and employment opportunities that would have otherwise been out of reach for many African Americans. Those from the community who went to war returned with a changed outlook and affected change in society. The end of colonialism after World War II inspired people even in sovereign countries to seek greater freedom. The press coverage and the spread of television brought images of injustice and police brutality into every home around the world and resulted in public outcry. With such international coverage, the state governments could not continue supporting racism, the US government could not afford to be seen allowing it. The pressure had its effect. As did the simmering discontent among the African Americans with each new incident of injustice. Riots increased in number and intensity. Malcolm X and many others called for radical measures and gained public support. In contrast to the menacing threats and growing strength of the Black Power movement, King's Civil Disobedience Movement appealed to most Americans as a lesser evil and better alternative. Local and state administrations and the federal government agreed to negotiate with King. They listened and gradually acceded to his demands. The victory was won in the name of non-violence, but the threat of violence played a significant role. After all, a century earlier a divided nation had fought the bloodiest war in its history over much the same issue. Old ways die hard.

## **9. An Integral View**

King was clearly aware of the warp and weft of the social fabric. Much ahead of his time, he could see the links of mutual interdependence between religion, economy, education, politics, poverty, housing, and every aspect of personal and public life of all communities and countries. *“It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in*

*an escapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one destiny, affects all indirectly,”* he said. Even today this integral perspective has yet to fully permeate the siloed fortresses of academia, public administration and national self-interest. Even today governments ignore the evidence linking poverty, unemployment, crime, drug use, violence and terrorism.

King wanted to learn the truth behind the constant violence and rioting in some localities. He visited the riot-torn slums of Watts in downtown Los Angeles, met the people and studied the conditions there. Violence was not in the nature of the community, it was an outcome of the frustration of poverty and the anger at police brutality. He saw that *“the violence of poverty and humiliation hurts as intensely as the violence of the club.”*<sup>11</sup> He marched to seek a level playing field for all, so the lowest sections could escape poverty. *“True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring,”*<sup>†</sup> he said. He did not restrict himself to his community alone. Poverty among all classes needed eradication. Be they American of any color, Asian, or Latino, he was clear, *“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”*<sup>‡</sup>

King realized that a permanent comprehensive solution needed a paradigm shift in thinking. When he was invited to Chicago to establish quality integrated education there, he moved with his family to the city to experience the life of common African American in a ghetto there. He found the place *“too hot, too crowded, too devoid of creative forms of recreation”*<sup>12</sup>. Life was like an emotional pressure cooker. So he founded the Chicago Freedom Movement to seek open housing for African Americans. And instead of just waiting for legal changes to be made and put into effect, he focused on improving existing neighborhoods. Before returning to Alabama, he handed over activism in the city to Jesse Jackson, who successfully led the movement by tackling businesses that sold their products to African Americans but would not hire them. Such businesses were encouraged to use banks owned by African American for their finances and to stock products made by businesses of African Americans.

King saw the value of reconciling dualities and establishing harmony without and within, *“We proclaim our devotion to democracy, but we sadly practice the very opposite of the democratic creed. We talk passionately about peace, and at the same time we assiduously prepare for war. We make our fervent pleas for the high road of justice, and then we tread unflinchingly the low road of injustice. This strange dichotomy, this agonizing gulf between the ought and the is, represents the tragic theme of man’s earthly pilgrimage.”*<sup>13</sup>

He opposed the American military involvement in Vietnam because of its harmful effect on the poor in America as well as in Vietnam. It was a cruel irony, he felt, to send young African American men eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast

\* Martin Luther King, “A Christmas Sermon on Peace - 1967” Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, GA, December 25 1967. The King Center <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/christmas-sermon#>

† Martin Luther King, “A Time to Break Silence”, Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967. *American Rhetoric* <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>

‡ Martin Luther King, Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Birmingham, AL, April 16, 1963, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf)

Asia which they had not found in Georgia and Harlem, to see young men of both colours killing and dying together for a nation where they had been unable to sit together in the same classrooms. He was saddened when he was told that civil rights and peace do not mix. SCLC's motto had been "*to save the soul of America*". He was convinced that he could not limit his vision to certain rights for the African Americans. America's soul could never be saved, he believed, as long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over. He saw the war as but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and warned that "*we will find ourselves organizing 'clergy and laymen concerned' committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy.*"

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*"King Jr.'s work may not be complete, but the magnitude of his accomplishment entirely through peaceful and persistent efforts continues to inspire activists all over the world, while his success against repressive powers steeped in centuries of prejudice indicates the inevitability of the success of socially progressive movements that ensure universal human rights."*

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He was clear about the alternative in front of America in 1967, which is still true of the whole world in 2018, "*nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation*"\*.

## 10. The Sunlit Path

In his last speech that eerily foreshadowed his death, King said, "*...I've been to the mountaintop... And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.*"† The biblical reference King makes is about Moses, the leader of the people of Israel, who led them out of slavery to the Promised Land. But he was given to see the distant Land from a mountain top, he could not reach it himself. Moses died within sight of the Land and his successor Joshua led people to the Promised Land.

The first part of the prophecy, of the leader taking the people towards freedom but leaving them before reaching the Promised Land, sadly came true. The second part, of the African American community as a people getting there, has been gradually and surely coming true. King fell victim to racists who could not tolerate African Americans in their classrooms,

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\* Martin Luther King, "Beyond Vietnam"; New York, N.Y., April 4 1967. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam>

† Martin Luther King, "I've Been To The Mountaintop"; Memphis, TN, Mason Temple, April 3 1968. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>

buses, restaurants and stores. Forty years later, the same country elected and then reelected an African American as President. Parks had fought for a seat on a bus. Barack Obama was voted into the White House.

Obama, who was six when King was assassinated, credited King with helping to pave his way to the White House. In 2011, during the dedication of the Martin Luther King monument in Washington D.C. on the forty-eighth anniversary of the March on Washington, Obama said, “*Our work is not done*”\*. Two hundred years after a group of church goers declared that slavery should be abolished, a war was needed to accomplish it. Hundred years after the war, the Civil Rights Movement was needed to enforce in practice what was stated in law. Fifty years after King was assassinated, there are alarming signs of secessionism that threaten to undo centuries of painstaking efforts. Seventy year old Carolyn Bledsoe, an attendee at the dedication of the monument, felt racism had simply changed form since '63. She had participated in the March on Washington, growing up in the Jim Crow south where her father was a sharecropper. A retired teacher, she feels race still blinds her young students though in subtler ways. “*Some days I feel like we’re at the beginning,*” she said. “*Some days I feel like we’re in the middle. But I never feel like we’re at the end.*”<sup>14</sup> Even today, a Black Lives Matter movement is required.

As the saying goes, it is darkest before dawn. After the lower classes of the French society had been harassed to the limits of their tolerance, the French Revolution raged and eliminated the aristocracy. When the pro-slavery feeling intensified so much that the American South broke away from the Union, a fierce Civil War had to be waged to firmly unite the country and abolish slavery. World War II that ravaged Western Europe put an end to centuries of internecine conflicts in the region. The same war that caused around 60 million deaths also ended colonialism in the world. Environmental degradation, climate change and the resultant natural calamities are forcing us to give up unsustainable practices and unite in our efforts to save our future on earth. The problems that continue to challenge us, problems of religious fundamentalism, refugee crises, economic warfare, military rule, oligarchy and erosion of human values, seem to reverse centuries of evolution and leave people helpless. Peaceful demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience seem to crumble in the face of repressive regimes and their brutal suppression of dissent. But that is the relevance of Martin Luther King Jr.’s life story today. His work may not be complete, but the magnitude of his accomplishment entirely through peaceful and persistent efforts continues to inspire activists all over the world, while his success against repressive powers steeped in centuries of prejudice indicates the inevitability of the success of socially progressive movements that ensure universal human rights.

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\* Barack Obama, “Dedication of the Martin Luther King Jr Memorial”, Tidal Basin, Washington, D.C., October 16, 2011 *The Washington Post* [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/full-text-president-obamas-speech-at-mlk-memorial/2011/10/16/gIQAkbl3oL\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/full-text-president-obamas-speech-at-mlk-memorial/2011/10/16/gIQAkbl3oL_story.html)



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