

Introduction

Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. lived a prophetic and compassionate life. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, he stared directly at injustice, named it plainly, then worked to change it. His writings and nonviolent protests find their source in the actions of prophets like Jeremiah. His strong hope mirrors the prophet Isaiah. At the root of his writing and activism lives a deep well of compassion. He knew the indignities suffered by African Americans as he felt them in his own skin. Further, he knew racism disfigured the white people who used it. Thus, he focused his life in such a way, built on compassion, that his work might free both those who suffer from racism and those who inflict the suffering. Dr. King also understood the massive damage of militarism and materialism. He saw American culture infected with these enormous challenges and thus tried to communicate the danger and heal it at the same time.

His prophetic and compassionate life, I am convinced, can help build a more peaceful and just world, if more people studied it and imitated it. I have believed this for many years. How might this be? How might our world be more peaceful and just if more people understood his life and work? Imagine an America whose political and spiritual leaders help build a “person-centered” society rather than a “thing-centered” society. Imagine an America in which individuals seek to heal differences rather than defeat others? Imagine a world where adults teach children to avoid the damage that racism does both to the oppressed and the oppressors? Imagine a world where we understand that militarism destroys everything and does not protect anything.

I began teaching Dr. King’s life in a Freshman Seminar course at the University of Notre Dame in 1988. I later taught a composition course on his life at American University in Washington, D.C. While many people know his “I Have a Dream” speech, his “Beloved Community” and “World House” are not understood. These ideas challenge us, they call for deeper transformation.

Three of Dr. King’s books are sometimes called his political autobiographies. *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958) shows us Dr. King

in his late twenties. This book recalls the Montgomery, Alabama bus protest. *Why We Can't Wait* (1963) explores the violent events of 1963 and includes his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." He is more aware of the cost of nonviolence. *Where Do We Go from Here?* (1968) written in the final year of his life, reveals an urgent man hoping to heal our interconnected but wounded world.

This collection of poems uses these three books to explore Dr. King's life in poems. The poems speak in varied voices: sometimes Dr. King's voice, sometimes a voice connected to a specific event, sometimes my own. Each poem carries an epigraph of Dr. King's words about a specific event or idea. Each section closes with a poem in the voice of Coretta Scott King, whose sacrifices made Dr. King's work possible. I hope these poems honor Dr. King by remembering his vision and his deep love for our often-broken world.

Joseph Ross

Martin Luther King, Jr.—Prologue

1

In the beginning
was a boat, swollen

with humans, history
would call slaves.

The men who loved
these boats thought

they knew Jesus.
They prayed Jesus,

they ate Jesus. Their
boat cut the waters

like a whip, leaving
a weeping scent

in its churning wake.
The moon lit

the water around
the boat, but the moon

did not light the boat.
The boat worked

through the waters
in the dark.

Now the boat is dust.
The whip
survives.

2

A man came
who was not a slave.

He was not the moon,
its light, or the water.

Like the boats before him,
he too cut the water.

But he was not
the whip. He had

bones the whip
could not reach.

But he was not
the bones. He had

light to cut
the darkness. But he

was not the light. He
met the darkness

when the whip became
a bullet.

The man stood
and the bullet came.

His bones are dust
but the man

survives.

We

“The religious tradition of the Negro had shown him that the nonviolent resistance of early Christians had constituted a moral offensive of such overriding power that it shook the Roman Empire.”

Why We Can't Wait, p. 30

When one piece of the machine
slows and stops

the whole machine might
slow and stop.

This truth lies buried
in the love affair

between part and whole.
If I, if you, then eventually

we. If he and she,
then over time we.

It has always been
this way.

Gandhi knew when one
man walked to the sea

he would attract another
and when two walked

to the sea, the salt would
eventually be free.

When one decided
to march, eventually

one thousand decided
to march and they became

the salt.

Eye to Eye

“The striking thing about the nonviolent crusade of 1963 was that so few felt the sting of bullets...Looking back, it becomes obvious that the oppressors were restrained not only because the world was looking but also because, standing before them, were hundreds, sometimes thousands, of Negroes who for the first time dared to look back at a white man, eye to eye.”

Why We Can't Wait, p. 34

This is the glance
I never dared. These

are the words
the glance spoke:

I am a man. I will not
look at my shoes

anymore. I will
square my shoulders.

The bones within are
the same as yours.

The same but for
one difference:

my bones know how
to carry your dying

privilege.