

What Would Martin Do?

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I was 17 years old the evening of April 4, 1968 when I heard the news that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been shot and killed. Television news broadcast a brief report and then the networks went back to regular programming. In 1968, to most white people Dr. King was simply not as important as he was to African Americans.

The next day at my high school there was no mention of the killing of Dr. King until my last class of the day with Fred Handy. Fred was a white man born in Mississippi who had studied to be a Methodist minister. He had spent a summer living in Harlem, had been arrested once in a civil rights demonstration and had been in Washington for the 1963 civil rights march. He spent the class talking to us about the importance of Dr. King. He said that Dr. King's preaching was so powerful that day in Washington five years before that the hundreds of thousands in the crowd would have followed him anywhere, would have done anything he asked.

In the days that followed the death of Dr. King our nation experienced terrible race riots, including the burning of parts of Washington, D.C. In 2004 our nation's capital has still not recovered from the riots of April 1968.

It took 15 years to create the federal Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. Congress passed the holiday legislation in 1983, which was then signed into law by President Ronald Reagan. As President Reagan reluctantly signed the law, he said that he guessed we would never know for sure if King had been a Communist.

Of course Dr. King was never a communist. Still, he was an imperfect person. As Dr. King's faults have been made more public, the demystification of the great civil rights leader has made him more human to me. Knowing his faults has helped me to accept my own imperfections. This time of year I look again at some of the speeches and writings of Dr. King. For me it is a religious discipline. I use the best of his life as a guide for my own life.

Fifty years ago King's trial sermon at Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama was called "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." The then twenty five year-old King had been preaching this sermon during his student days at Boston University School of Theology. In a reference to the 1954 craze for 3-D movies, he changed the title to 3-D in religion. The sermon was a great success and King was elected the new minister by acclamation. Dr. King continued to use this sermon throughout his ministry. This week I read a version that he delivered at the New Covenant Baptist Church in Chicago April 9, 1967. He said the three Dimensions of a Complete Life were:

- First, know, love and respect yourself.
- Second, live for something outside yourself.
- Third, trust in the existence of God.

First, know, love and respect yourself. King said loving yourself means that you need to accept yourself. Do not be ashamed of who you are. Rise up and say from the bottom of your soul,

"I am somebody. I have a rich, noble, and proud heritage." This is what King told his congregations. We need to

accept ourselves. We must pray, “God help me to accept myself everyday.”

Dr. King told a story about when he was in college. He was majoring in sociology, and all sociology majors had to take a course that was required, called statistics. Statistics can be very complicated. To pass statistics you need to know how to find the mean, the mode, and the median. Dr. King took this required course. He had a fellow classmate who did all his homework for the statistic class in about an hour. Young Martin tried to do what his friend was doing. He tried to do his statistics in an hour. And the more he tried to do his work in an hour, the more he was flunking out of the course. He had to come to a hard conclusion. He had to sit down and say to himself: “Now Martin Luther King, that young man has a better mind than you.” Sometimes you have to acknowledge that. He had to say to himself: “He may be able to do the work in an hour, but it takes you two or three hours to do it.” This is what it means to accept ourselves, to love and respect ourselves with our limitations.

King compared it to a Ford and Cadillac. A Ford car trying to be a Cadillac is absurd, but if a Ford will accept itself as a Ford, it can do many things. It can do things that a Cadillac could never do, like get into smaller parking spaces. In life some of us are Fords and some of us are Cadillacs. Accepting who we are, respecting who we are, loving who we are is a basic principle in life.

Then King told his congregation that some people never get beyond this first dimension of life. They love themselves and work hard to achieve their goals and their ambitions.

But many people add a **second dimension** to their life. The second dimension of life is an outward concern for the welfare of others. We do not begin to fully live until we can rise above the narrow confines of our individual concerns to also think about the broader concerns of all humanity.

Dr. King told the story of the Samaritan who came upon a man who had been robbed on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. The Samaritan reached out and helped after others had passed. Dr. King asked, “Why did others pass the man who needed help? Why didn't they stop?” He suggested possible answers. Some say they were going to a religious service and were running a little late and couldn't be late for the service, so they kept going because they had to get to the synagogue. Others say that they were involved in the priesthood. A priestly law said that if you were going to lead a service, you couldn't touch another human body for 24 hours before worship. Thirdly King suggested it was possible they were going down to Jericho to organize the Jericho Road Improvement Association. They may have passed by because they felt it was better to deal with the overall problem of danger on the road, rather than helping one individual victim. Fourthly, Dr. King suggested that these men passed on the other side because they were afraid.

Dr. King told of a time when he and Mrs. King were in Jerusalem. They rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho, a distance of about 16 miles. Dr. King could see why Jesus used this road for his parable. When you start out in Jerusalem you are 2200 feet above sea level. When you get down to Jericho 16 miles later, you are 1200 feet below sea level. The Jericho road is a winding, curving, meandering road very conducive for robbery. So when Dr. King thought about those who passed by on the other side, he thought that they must have been afraid.

The first question they ask was “if I stopped to help this man what will happen to me?” Out of fear they did not stop. But the Samaritan came by and reversed the question. He did not ask “What will happen to me if I stop to help this man?” He asked, “What will happen to this man if I do not stop to help him?”

This is the second dimension to a complete life. To live fully we need to ask “What will happen to humanity if I do not stop and help? What will happen, if I do not become involved?”

Today we can only guess about the causes Dr King would urge us to support if he was here today. We know from history that he required every member of his congregation to be a dues paying member of the NAACP and to be registered to vote. If they were not, he removed their name from membership in the church. We know of his work serving as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association.

I think he would approve of this congregations membership in Action in Montgomery County or AIM. As part of AIM, this past week several of you this congregation join 800 people at a Baltimore church to urge the federal government to do more to redevelop blighted neighborhoods. The event's organizers, the Industrial Areas Foundation-East and Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, said cleaning up low-income neighborhoods was not a matter of aesthetics but a health care emergency.

At that gathering speakers explained that the percentage of children with asthma has more than doubled since 1980, that deaths from asthma have increased by more than 75 percent, and that 25 percent of all children in central Harlem have asthma? These numbers come from an Industrial Areas Foundation paper and were reported in the *Post* this past week. "The explosion of asthma and other respiratory problems has been triggered by the overwhelming presence of roach droppings and rat urine in the projects and tenements that house these children." When these hazards are "combined with the harsh pesticides and cleaning agents often used to remove pests . . . you have the opposite of an oxygen tent in a sanitized hospital room." What would Martin do? I think he would join with those in this congregation who are active in AIM, active in addressing such issues.

And what would Dr. King say about our foreign policy? I felt strange watching pictures this week of President Bush placing a wreath at Dr. King's grave. In 1967 King spoke of our nation's "refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments." He said, we must "shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered." He said:

A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, this way of settling differences is not just. This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, . . . of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

I suspect that Dr King he could have jumped out of his grave last week just as President Bush was putting a wreath on his grave, Dr. King might have questioned our nation's maintaining a massive arsenal of weapons of mass destruction while lecturing the rest of the world about the evils of weapons of mass destruction. Dr. King might question the logic of using the terror of war as the way to end terrorism. He might say war increases fear and legitimizes violence while it leaves untouched the roots of terrorism: poverty, joblessness, disease and illiteracy.

At the end of his 1967 sermon, Dr. King describe a third dimension to a complete life. He told the congregation that if life is to be complete, we must recognize that we are part of something larger than ourselves. He said:

There are those who become so involved in looking at the manmade lights of the city that they unconsciously forget to rise up and look at that great cosmic light and think about it—that gets up in the eastern horizon every morning and moves across the sky with a kind of symphony of motion and paints its technicolor across the blue—a light that man can never make. They become

so involved in looking at the skyscraping buildings . . . that they unconsciously forget to think about the gigantic mountains that kiss the skies as if to bathe their peaks in the lofty blue—something that man could never make. They become so busy thinking about . . . their television that they unconsciously forget to think about the stars that bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity, those stars that appear to be shiny, silvery pins sticking in a magnificent blue pincushion.

He preached that modern people may know a great deal, but our knowledge does not eliminate God. This was his third dimension of a complete life, a trust, a faith in God. By 1967 Dr. King had been in jail 18 times, locked away because he called for freedom, equality and justice. His faith in God got him through these times in American jails.

These are the three dimensions of a complete life:

- first loving yourself.
- second love your neighbor as yourself.
- third love the Lord thy God with all your heart.

What would Martin do?

He would say that when you get all three of these dimensions of the complete life together “you will do unto others as you’d have them do unto you.”

He would say to us “When you get all three of these together you look up and every valley will be exalted, every hill and mountain will be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places straight, and the glory of God shall be revealed. . .”

He would say that “When you get all of these working together in your life, judgment will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”