

The First Struggle: The Young Adult Journey of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Rev. Thomas R. Schade

First Unitarian Church Of Worcester, Massachusetts

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The road for Martin Luther King, Jr. was stretched to the horizon. It had been laid out, measured and paved for him by his father and his family. All he had to do is walk down that road into what would be a safe and comfortable life; a life filled with good things.

But he chose another road instead and lived another life, one filled with adventure, commitment and meaning. This is the story of how he chose that other life.

Where to begin? The story begins with the Rev. A. D. Williams. Rev. Williams was the son of a slave preacher, and had become one of the first three graduates from Morehouse College in 1897 in Atlanta. Rev. Williams took over the mortgage of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. It had 13 members and faced foreclosure. Through his energy, he built up that church. He was successful enough that he bought a larger five bedroom house near the church, 1906.

A. D. Williams had married one of the first graduates of Spellman College, Jennie Parks, and they had one daughter: Alberta Williams. Alberta was courted by a Mike King, a self-ordained country Baptist preacher.. A.D Williams would not allow them to marry until Michael King had graduated from college. Mike King restarted his education in the 5th grade and eventually graduated from Morehouse. He married Alberta Williams in 1926 and became an assistant minister at Ebenezer. He moved into his bride's home, living with her mother and father, who was also his employer.

When A. D. Williams died in 1931, his widow urged the church to call the Rev. Michael King, her son-in-law, as their minister. Among other reasons, it would mean that no one would have to move.

The Rev. Michael King was an energetic and dynamic minister. Theologically, he was in the mainstream of African American Christian fundamentalism. Strongly biblically centered, moralistic about drinking and dancing and gambling. It was a religion that promoted and confirmed the values of an aspiring middle class. Its response to segregation and Jim Crow was to build up the African American community. It believed that those who suffer here on Earth would be rewarded in heaven after death.

While his theology was typical of his time and place, the Rev. Mike King was a church builder. If a member had a barbershop, the men of the church should get their hair cut there. Atlanta had a thriving Negro Insurance business, selling small policies that just covered burial expenses. The insurance agents would go throughout the community and collected the very small weekly premiums at people's homes. Rev. King persuaded insurance agents who were Ebenezer members to also collect Ebenezer's members contributions to the church. He took the offering plate to them.

He started 12 clubs in the church. There was the January club; everyone who had a birthday in January was in the January club. And so on through the months. The clubs competed in everything: which club had the cutest baby; which club's kids got the best grades in school; which club's ladies made the best pies, and which club raised the most money for the church.

The church grew and grew. In 1934, the church sent Rev. Michael King on a summer sabbatical to Europe, Egypt and the Holy Land, for study and research and renewal. On his return, Michael King changed his name to Martin Luther King, after the hero of the Protestant Reformation. He also changed the name of his 5-year-old son, Michael King, Jr. to Martin Luther King, Jr. His son was given a preacher's name at the age of five.

Martin Luther King, Jr. felt pressured by his name, and did not use it through much of his young adulthood. He said after the bus boycott in Montgomery that perhaps now, he had finally earned his name.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was raised, programmed, to be a preacher. What was normal in that family was the pulpit of a church was inheritable. Ebenezer Baptist was like a family business, and Martin Luther King, Jr. was the designated heir.

In 1939, Jennie Williams, the widow of A. D. Williams and young Martin's maternal grandmother died of a heart attack. This was a traumatic event, and had the effect of shaking King's acceptance of Christian fundamentalism. From that point on, Martin Junior undertook his first great struggle, to somehow satisfy his father's determination that he become a preacher and succeed him at Ebenezer Baptist, while resisting it at every opportunity. He was torn.

Martin Luther King, Jr. went to Morehouse College. His first major was pre-law, and then he switched to sociology. He was angry about segregation with which he had daily experience and had often been on the receiving end of racist and bigoted white behavior (he had once been slapped in a department store by a white lady he had bumped in the

aisle.) King, Jr. had come to reject the standard admonition to respond with Christian love to those who persecute you.

But his father kept pushing him toward the ministry. At one point, in his junior year at Morehouse, he did tell his father that he was considering preaching career. His father seized the opening and set up a trial sermon in a basement meeting room at the church. A large crowd was turned out and King delivered a sermon, most of which was closely based on a sermon by Harry Emerson Fosdick, the New York liberal Presbyterian. The crowd, of course, loved the sermon and Martin Luther King, Sr. ordained his son on the spot, and appointed him the assistant pastor of Ebenezer Baptist church. It appeared that the die was cast.

When Martin Jr. graduated, his father wanted him to work full time at the church. Martin, instead, wanted to go Crozier Seminary in Chester, PA for a Masters in Divinity. Father King reluctantly agreed to pay for his post-graduate education.

Crozier was a white seminary, and very liberal. In deep financial trouble, they had dramatically increased their student body, and had done so by admitting a stunningly large number of Negro students. One third of the incoming students were Negroes when Martin arrived. King reveled in the integrated student body and the chance to study theologi-

ans like Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich and Harry Emerson Fosdick. He also enjoyed the fact that beneath the chapel was a recreation room with pool tables and beer, and when his father came to visit, King took his father there, where the King played pool and drank beer much to the shock of his father.

Upon graduation, King the Father, of course, wanted his son to come back to Ebenezer. But King the Son, instead, decided to get a Ph. D. in Religious Studies at Boston University. Reluctantly, King, Sr. agreed to pay for that.

King had become a religious liberal. He subscribed to the historical criticism of the Bible, which argued that the Bible was not the inerrant Word of God, but a historical document that reflected its time and place. He adopted the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch which argued that the work of the Christian was not convert the world to Jesus, but to build the Kingdom of God by working for economic and racial justice. He no longer believed in the innate and utter depravity of a sinful humanity, but had come to believe that in a more optimistic view of human nature, one that meant that working for a better world was possible, because people could change.

King ultimately moderated his liberalism, because it did not account for the persistence of the sins of segregation and racism. But he did move back toward to the theological conservative. Instead, he moved toward Gandhian non-violence as the religious response to the human sins of injustice.

These ideas, the foundations of liberal theology, were dramatically at odds with the theology of his father.

One other thing, when King was in Boston, he met and proposed to Coretta Scott, a music student studying in Boston. When he took her home to meet his parents, his father was furious. He had hoped that his son would marry into one of the elite Negro families of Atlanta, a marriage that would be advantageous to Ebenezer.

When he graduated, the decision could no longer be put off. His father wanted him to come home to Ebenezer Baptist. But Martin Luther King, Junior accepted a call from the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Dexter Avenue was a prestige church, across the street from the State Capitol. It was said that Plato and Socrates were mentioned more often in the sermons there than Jesus. Their sanctuary was as quiet during the service as this one.

Martin Luther King, Jr. first struggle had been won. Instead of entering the ministry as a copy of his father, he had found his spot, independent of his father. He had broken with the theology of his father and his father's generation; he had followed the workings of his own mind and claimed it for his own. In the language of William Ellery Channing (from "I call that Mind Free, #592 in our hymnal); "I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself with passive or hereditary faith."

It is the faith of liberal religion, in all its forms, that world-changing energy is released when men and women free their minds, and claim them as their own.

Martin Luther King, Jr. settled in Montgomery, started doing all the things that a respected Negro minister would do in a new town. Of course, he joined the NAACP, and as the minister of prominent church, took a position on the Board of that organization.

Within a few months, the secretary of the board called to tell him that he had elected by the members of the NAACP Executive Committee to be the President of the Board.

The name of that NAACP secretary? It was a Mrs. Rosa Parks, a seamstress, who had volunteered to be the test case to challenge the segregation of the buses in Montgomery. And as the Board President, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would preside over the nightly mass meetings held to keep up the spirits of the community.

And, as they say, the rest is history.

I believe that our last hymn today was sung at those Mass meetings.

Let us sing, "Oh Freedom" # 156 in our Hymnal.

(This sermon is based on the information in Taylor Branch's "Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63", published by Simon and Schuster in 1988.)