



King's Dream and America's Future

Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I have a dream!"¹ How did he maintain that optimism? Maybe we all shared it in those halcyon early 1960s, but how naïve we were. We thought we could make it all work, change the world, remove the barriers. As a graduate student in Heidelberg, I joined with other Americans in the summer of 1964 in a talent and variety show put on by the International Students Office of the university, called: "Studenten aus aller Welt singen und tanzen für Heidelberg" (Students from all over the world sing and dance for Heidelberg). It was joyous, raucous, colorful, and hopeful. We Americans, in tune with the times, sang "This Land Is Your Land" and "If I Had a Hammer." We won the competition! The prize was a dozen or more bottles of wine, which made the post-show party all the more memorable.

True, we had mourned the death of John F. Kennedy the previous November, but that was an anomaly, we thought—though a terrible one—and it made us all the more committed, holding up for us Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage* (1957) as new role models. Having attended a segregated high school in Virginia, I had seen firsthand the damage done to both blacks and whites by racial segregation. The first thing I wrote in college was an essay for Freshman English on the necessity but also the very serious challenges of desegregation. It would not be easy, I knew, but we were on the way, and Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks were our heroes.

But the optimism wouldn't hold. The Vietnam War entered our living rooms, with all the ugliness of previous wars but little or none of the pride of supporting a "just cause." America lost the war, and with that America lost its innocence. Vietnam was to the United States what World War I was to Europe: the end of the liberal optimism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the beginning of a downward slide of history that disillusioned first Europe and later the United States. As disaster approached in the 1920s, the flappers and their boy-friends danced, soaking up the music while being unable to face it. In the dark days of Vietnam and beyond, hard rock and headphones shielded us from reality.

The student movement produced by Vietnam became less and less in touch with reality. Street rioters created chaos for its own sake. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and so was Bobby Kennedy. Protesters at the 1968 Democratic Convention torpedoed the candidacy of Hubert Humphrey because he was not pure enough for them—so they gave us Richard Nixon and eventually Watergate. It was all going downhill.

An insurmountable loss was King's insistence on nonviolence. Without that model, the streets grew uglier still. That was confirmed for me on August 24, 1970,

¹The full text of the speech is available at http://www.speeches-usa.com/Transcripts/martin_luther_king-Dream.html (accessed May 7, 2013).

when my gentle and funny college roommate Bob Fastnacht, by then a physics postdoctoral researcher, was killed by the bombing of Sterling Hall on the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus. The target was the Army Mathematics Research Center, said the perpetrators, and nobody was supposed to be in the building. What I learned was that there was no such thing as violence “only” against property and that no cause was worth the innocent death of my friend. I could understand, if not completely embrace, a call to Christian pacifism.

The history of the church paralleled that of society in those decades. Theological liberalism had hoped to make the twentieth century the “Christian Century,” as though—yes!—we could usher in the kingdom of God on earth. That notion, too, died with World War I and the subsequent disasters of mid-twentieth century. Books by social liberal theologians were moved to the back shelves, and Karl Menninger’s *Whatever Became of Sin* (1975) became a best seller.

One result of the church’s disenchantment with optimistic social activism was the turn inward brought by the neo-Pentecostal and spirituality movements. We discovered we couldn’t fix the world, so some sought release in religious enthusiasm and personal spiritual experience. As a young parish pastor during those days, I was appalled, and I became cynical. Had everybody forgotten the prophets and the Sermon on the Mount? Was not ecstatic experience just a retreat from reality of the same kind as “Ecstasy” and other mind-altering drugs? Did the entire post-Vietnam generation—both inside and outside the church—have to end up wasted, tuned out, and turned on? Subsequently, I have come to see that social justice and spiritual experience are not necessarily mutually exclusive, certainly not for many stalwarts of the faith—especially several Roman Catholic sisters in South Dakota who taught me otherwise—but I can’t altogether shake my suspicion of a retreat into “religion,” of whatever kind.

But back to Martin Luther King Jr. He retained his hope and his rejection of violence up until the end, a needed (if imperfect) role model for those of my generation. The night before his death, he delivered his “mountaintop” speech in which he continued to insist, “We don’t need any bricks and bottles. We don’t need any Molotov cocktails.” Economic boycotts could still work, he said. As for himself, he could face death with equanimity, “Because I’ve been to the mountaintop....[God has] allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. 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. So I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”²

King’s hope and rejection of violence, his Christian faith and charismatic leadership still suggest that “Prophets and Politicians” might not be an oxymoronic combination. We can at least hope.

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²The full text of King’s speech is available at http://www.speeches-usa.com/Transcripts/023_king.html (accessed May 7, 2013)