

Living with Martin Luther King, Jr.

In November 1982 I began researching the language of Martin Luther King, Jr. I finished a dissertation on King, several articles, and, in July 1991, a book. During these years, I spent much time living in what I call my "Martin Luther King tunnel."

For example, I often traveled to Atlanta, interviewing people who knew King well—some throughout his entire life. They included his father, who pastored Ebenezer Baptist Church, and several older stalwarts of the Ebenezer congregation.

A tiny number of these churchgoers recalled King, Jr.'s grandfather, Rev. A.D. Williams, who moaned and whooped his roof-lifting sermons until his death in 1931. All of them vividly remembered Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., who pounded the pulpit and rattled the stained-glass windows with his thunderous folk sermons. And, between 1960 and 1968, they arrived early whenever King, Jr., preached and then joyously punctuated his most beautiful lines with a hearty "Preach it!" or "Amen."

These older Ebenezer loyalists lived with King, Jr., during his childhood and adolescence and during the last eight years of his life, when he co-pastored the church with his father.

The person who helped me the most was Rev. J.H. Edwards, a retired postal worker and occasional preacher. Edwards taught King, Jr.'s third-grade Sunday School class and still shows visitors his class rollbook from 1938, which lists the name of M.L. King, Jr. Edwards also served on the committee that ordained the younger King for the ministry. He knew King's parents before they married.

Once Edwards calmly criticized journalists and scholars, who wrote brief articles and detailed tomes about King and rarely credited the pillars of the Ebenezer congregation. Holding up his rollbook, he declared, "They never said anything about his early years . . . but this [rollbook] is really history here; and whatever they say, they can't outtalk history."

Edwards insisted on ferrying me around Atlanta to meet his church friends. Riding in his ancient, battered Chevrolet, I noticed that his odometer had long since passed 100,000 miles. I reflected on Edwards's life as he whisked me along a freeway named after the best pupil in his 1938 Sunday School class. While I merely existed in my "King tunnel," he and others of the Ebenezer flock had actually lived with King. They molded him.

But, in one sense, Edwards and his friends are not alone. Today everyone lives with Martin Luther King, Jr.

Take college students, for example. In the last twenty-five years, universities—including African American universities—have dramatically increased their offerings in the literature, art, music, history, and sociology of American minority groups. Today students in English departments investigate not only Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Faulkner, but also such outstanding minority writers as Zora Neale Hurston and Maxine Hong Kingston. Music students hear not only the improvisations of Bach's trumpet solos, but also those of Louis Armstrong. Art students

scan not only Michelangelo's dramatic frescos, but also the vivid hues of Native American painter Fritz Scholder. Students gaze not only at the dark browns of Rembrandt's chiaroscuros, but also at the earth-colored ceramic perfections of Maria Martinez.

Consider an example close to home. Last year an Arizona State undergraduate wrote a fascinating honors thesis on a little-known turn-of-the-century Mexican woman whose mystical, healing powers attracted thousands of pilgrims. Waving signs and banners emblazoned with her picture, rebels in northern Mexico fired the first shots that heralded the Mexican Revolution. Like classes featuring Hurston, Armstrong, and Scholder, such an honors thesis is an effect of the Civil Rights Movement, which was led in the streets by King and in the academy by his followers.

Contrary to opinions often appearing in the popular press, such curricular changes usually enrich university life. Instead of undermining the intellectual function of the university, these new courses enhance that function. Such curricula help schools fulfill their responsibilities to students, who will live inescapably in a multi-ethnic America and a multi-cultural globe.

However far-reaching and significant this change is, it pales in comparison to dramatic alterations in the texture of everyday American life, especially in the South. Because King and his movement tore down the walls of legalized segregation, life in the South is no longer plagued by official racism. For this reason, the South has overcome its status as an economic backwater. And—given ugly, recent racial incidents in New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere in the North—many parts of the South (Louisiana excepted) now help lead the nation in achieving racial harmony. Without the Civil Rights Movement, these changes would have been inconceivable. Had the South lacked such nonviolent leaders as King, James Farmer, and Fannie Lou Hamer, Atlanta could easily have become another Beirut and the South another Northern Ireland.

But Americans are not the only ones who live with King. Liberators around the world cite his example and repeat his tactics. South Africa's Nobel Prize winner, Desmond Tutu, often explains his debt to King and the salience of King's strategies in the struggle against apartheid. In his recent trip to the United States, Nelson Mandela, father of the new South Africa, talked to King's widow. Paying a special visit to King's tomb, which lies a few feet from Ebenezer Church, Mandela testified to the inspiration that King offered him during the long years he suffered in jail for the "crime" of working for racial equality.

On another continent, Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero quoted King, urging the necessity of nonviolence in ending war and torture in Central America. Romero stood his ground until the end, when he was fatally machine-gunned while celebrating Mass. Like his hero King, Romero was martyred for leading a nonviolent struggle against entrenched injustice.

King never supported Communism—as his witch-hunting enemies still charge. Instead, his example helped not only Tutu, Mandela, and Romero, but also anti-Communists who overthrew Communism in Europe. Citing King, Lech Walesa successfully applied King's nonviolent strategies in the Gdansk shipyards and throughout Poland. When the Berlin Wall crumbled, jubilant, nonviolent Germans sang "We Shall Overcome," the anthem of King and his movement. Anti-Communist Russians also evoked King as they demonstrated before the striped, onion domes of the Kremlin. And, when protestors occupied Tiananmen Square in Peking, the cover of *Time* magazine displayed a photograph of a student's T-shirt boldly scrawled

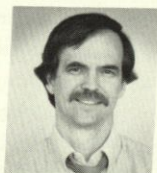
with the words "We Shall Overcome."

But am I helping turn King into a plaster saint, a walking marble statue, a black Santa Claus, and a myth? I don't think so. Those who study King grow aware of his flaws. He understood them himself. Like every other Christian, he often affirmed that he was a sinner in need of God's grace.

But from this flawed human being and his movement have grown monumental changes—in universities, in the South, and in far-flung parts of the globe. Rev. Edwards and others nurtured a boy, a teenager, and a man whose enormous positive influence we will continue to feel for decades to come.

These people deserve great credit. Inside the small unassuming red-brick walls of Ebenezer Church they met many children, including the pastor's son—an extremely inquisitive little boy in a black coat and tie, white shirt, black shorts above his knees, and well-polished Sunday shoes.

When the Ebenezer faithful met these children, they saw a job to do. And, in the case of M.L. King, Jr., as sure as the hell their preacher thundered about, they did their job and they did it right.



Keith Miller teaches English at Arizona State University and is the author of Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources which was published by the Free Press, a division of Macmillan, in November of 1991. He has spent the last nine years researching and writing this book.