

To the Mountaintop

**Martin Luther King Jr.'s Mission
and Its Meaning for America
and the World**

New Revised and Expanded Edition, 2018

Stewart Burns

**Cover and Photo Design
Deborah Lee Schneer**

© 2018 by Stewart Burns

CreateSpace, Charleston, South Carolina

ISBN-13: 978-1985794450

ISBN-10: 1985794454

All Bob Fitch photos courtesy of Bob Fitch Photography Archive,
Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries,
reproduced with permission

Dedication

For my dear friend Dorothy F. Cotton (1930-2018), charismatic singer, courageous leader of citizenship education and nonviolent direct action

For Reverend Dr. James H. Cone (1936-2018), giant of American theology, architect of Black Liberation Theology, hero and mentor

To the memory of the seventeen high school students and staff slain in the Valentine Day massacre, February 2018, in Parkland, Florida, and to their families and friends. And to the memory of all other schoolchildren murdered by American social violence.

Also by Stewart Burns

Social Movements of the 1960s: Searching for Democracy

A People's Charter: The Pursuit of Rights in America (coauthor)

Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., vol 3: Birth of a New Age (lead editor)

Daybreak of Freedom: Montgomery Bus Boycott (editor)

To the Mountaintop: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Mission to Save America (1955-1968)

American Messiah (screenplay)

Cosmic Companionship: Spirit Stories by Martin Luther King Jr. (editor)

We Will Stand Here Till We Die

Contents

Moving Forward	9
Book I: Mighty Stream (1955-1959)	15
Book II: Middle Passage (1960-1966)	174
Photo Gallery: MLK and SCLC 1966-1968	376
Book III: Crossing to Jerusalem (1967-1968)	391
Afterword	559
Notes	565
Index	618
Acknowledgments	639
About the Author	642

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the preeminent Jewish theologian, introduced Martin Luther King Jr. to a national Jewish assembly in late March 1968:

“Dark is the world for me. If not for the few signs of God’s radiance, who could stand such agony, such darkness?”

“Where in America today do we hear a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us. His presence is the hope of America. His mission is sacred....”

“Martin Luther King is a voice, a vision and a way. I call upon every Jew to harken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow in his way. The whole future of America will depend upon the impact and influence of Dr. King.”

Moving Forward

In February 2018, fifth graders at Case Elementary School in Akron, Ohio wrote about the 1963 “children’s crusade,” over a thousand black kids leaving their schools in Birmingham, Alabama to protest racial segregation, going to jail. The ten and eleven year-olds in Akron were imagining how kids like themselves could protest the murder of seventeen high school students and teachers in Florida by a deranged ex-student with a heavy weapon. Their writing exercise inspired them to plan their own civil disobedience, walking out of their school and joining the nationwide student walkout to stop gun massacres. Younger than most marchers, but not younger than many of those brave Birmingham kids.

Learning their history propelled these fifth graders to make history themselves. Their example will hopefully inspire future kids to act.

Such moral learning forms the purpose of this book.

To the Mountaintop explores how on his climb toward freedom, a divided Martin Luther King Jr. battled for his soul, struggling to make peace between his “unreconciled strivings.” There was King the black man, the American, the global citizen; the fighter for black emancipation alongside the fighter for American renewal and redemption, for the redemption and salvation of humanity. There was King the lofty idealist at odds with King the rooted realist; the rock of faith beset by sands of doubt.

More consequential for his time, our time, and times to come, stood King the fiery warrior for justice and right striving to reconcile with the increasingly devout apostle of nonviolence or “soul force.” Like his spiritual mentor apostle Paul, he fought his way to the revelation that militant faith, however essential, would remain blind without the morning light of compassion.

“Though I have the gift of prophecy,” Paul confessed to the Corinthians in words King took to heart, “and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

“And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

Ten days before King was assassinated on April 4th, 1968, Abraham Joshua Heschel introduced him to a major national Jewish assembly to talk

about the upcoming Poor People's Campaign. A preeminent Jewish spiritual leader, Rabbi Heschel anointed King as the greatest prophet of the age, America's messiah.

"Dark is the world for me," Heschel began. "If not for the few signs of God's radiance, who could stand such agony, such darkness?"

"Where in America today," he asked the assembly of rabbis, "do we hear a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us. His presence is the hope of America. His mission is sacred, his leadership of supreme importance to every one of us.

"Martin Luther King is a voice, a vision and a way. I call upon every Jew to harken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow in his way. The whole future of America will depend upon the impact and influence of Dr. King."¹

A half century later *Time* magazine portrayed that year 1968 in apocalyptic terms. A knife blade that severed past from future. History cracked open. People all over longing for spiritual fulfillment and transfiguration.²

In the hullabaloo of the 50th anniversary of 1968, the pivot on which the world had turned, something vital was being overlooked. Knowing he had little time, the greatest spiritual leader of the age had reenacted the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem—not only "to leave a committed life behind" but to leave all of us a transcendent faith to help us free our bodies and souls from personal and social trauma, while seeking to free our nation and world from the storm of crises that imperil our future: political breakdown, economic hardship, resurgent racism, abuse of women and girls, epidemics of war and mass murder, refugees in peril, climate catastrophe, technology run amok—steady erosion of our humanity.

Martin Luther King Jr. was at once messiah, prophet, and social healer. His sacred words and deeds speak to our time more urgently than they spoke to his own.

This new edition of *To the Mountaintop*—reimagined, fully revised and expanded—tells King's monumental story drawing on fourteen years of further research and interpretation growing from the original edition published by HarperCollins in 2004, winner of the Wilbur Award for communicating religious ideas and values to secular readers.

Unlike most other King biographies, this work insists that his spiritual, moral, and political leadership cannot be sliced and diced. His multifaceted leadership made up a coherent whole. Just as his spiritual shepherding made little sense apart from the black church culture and social

gospel that animated it, so we cannot understand his moral and political leadership apart from the driving force of students, ex-students, pastors, seasoned activists, formidable black women, and “ordinary” citizens who inspired and energized him, kept his feet to the fire, pushed him to push his spirit to help him carry out divine will as he saw it, whatever it might take to make freedom ring.

King’s story melds with the stories of Ella Baker, Claudette Colvin, Rosa Parks, Jo Ann Robinson, Mary Fair Burks, Johnnie Carr, Fred Gray, E. D. Nixon, Rufus Lewis, Virginia Durr, Autherine Lucy, Bob Moses, Amzie Moore, Herbert Lee, E. W. Steptoe, Vernon Dahmer, Medgar and Myrlie Evers, Connie Curry, Julian Bond, Diane Nash, John Lewis, Jim Forman, Bob Zellner, Dorothy Zellner, Charles McDew, Lawrence Guyot, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Anell Ponder, June Johnson, Fannie Lou Hamer, James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner, Andy Goodman, Curtis Hayes, Hollis Watkins, Willie Peacock, Charles Sherrod, Cordell Reagon, Charles Jones, Jerome Smith, David Dennis, Bernard Lafayette, Bernard Lee, James Bevel, Andy Young, Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson, Septima Clark, Esau Jenkins, Bernice Robinson, Myles and Zilphia Horton, Dorothy Cotton, Jimmie Lee Travis, James Reeb, Viola Liuzzo, Jonathan Daniels, James Meredith, George Wiley, Johnnie Tillmon, and many other courageous souls, black and white, younger and older, poor, working class and middle class—some who sacrificed their lives—all striving to make freedom and justice the real deal.

Dr. King and his associates, the black freedom struggle, all the grassroots movements of the era brought about profound political and cultural change, even if robust reforms like the 1965 Voting Rights Act were eventually weakened; even if American wars, inhibited for fifteen years, multiplied; even if gun killings metastasized. Profound, but not much structural change and little *systemic* change.

What notable changes came about?

A third founding of the American polity between 1955 and 1965 that historians may ultimately judge as more momentous than the second founding of Civil War and Reconstruction. An enduring culture of protest and resistance. A new understanding of systemic causes, structural constraints, and interlocks among power centers. In the digital age on both left and right, emergence of grassroots democracy not only as countervailing influence on government but as new forms of participatory governance. An unprecedented rise of citizen activism, of young people aspiring to be lifelong change makers for the common good. Identity politics less of tribalism or nationalism, more of honest communication and national and global citizenship.

More and more, the vocation of committed *citizen* valued as the highest calling, encouraging each person to grow their individuality and find their own integrity while fostering the wholeness of their community, country, and planet.

As always, many forces block the rocky road to the beloved community. But the indomitable force of freedom has shown how it can thrust aside the boulders of determinism, cynicism, and despair. In lingo of King's "trans-physics," we *can* because we must. We *must* because we can.³

As a seasoned activist, I see a daunting obstacle coming not only from American-style dictatorship, globalization, technology, corporate domination, and militarization, but from within our own movement. King mastered the task of reconciling moral passion with principled realism, emotional and ethical intelligence, openness and moral sensitivity. Nowadays, marginalized groups and young activists are often dizzied and thrown off balance by their righteous moral passion. With unsettling irony, new generations who have learned how social ills are intertwined, how "single issue-ism" is self-defeating, how what MLK called "true alliances" are the only way to real lasting reform, find themselves locked in a new moralism that not only privileges their important cause but pillories alternative perspectives. Compassionate listening, one of MLK's virtues, appears in short supply.

What was and would still be King's mission and its meaning for America? No better crystallized than by one of his favorite poets, Langston Hughes:

*O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again....
O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!⁴*

BOOK III: Crossing to Jerusalem

SEVENTEEN

After flying home to Atlanta with Abernathy, King got his usual workout at the Butler Street YMCA. Not wanting to be seen publicly, he joined Coretta to spend the night at the Abernathy's. His head pounded from a bad migraine headache. The two men, wiped out, fell asleep scrunched up on matching loveseats.

"Ralph," King joked as he drifted off, "I wish you'd had enough money to buy a whole sofa instead of just a half sofa."⁵

King was late for the executive staff meeting he had called the next morning at Ebenezer. When he walked into the conference room, Jackson, Bevel, and others were one more time marshalling arguments against the Poor People's Campaign. And they criticized him for going into Memphis at such a precarious moment. They were playing offense, pushing to let go of the garbage workers' strike.

Sitting in back in a wooden classroom seat, he listened agitatedly. Finally he strode to the front. He blasted them for not supporting him. "He just jumped on everybody," Young recalled. "He said we'd let him down. That we all had our own agendas. Never before had I seen him so aggressive in dealing with us."⁶ He demanded that everyone drop what they were doing and go back with him to Memphis. He mentioned the fast he might undertake, that they might have to call off the Poor People's Campaign if the staff would not rally around him.

"I can't take all this on by myself," he said. "I need you to take your share of the load. Everyone here wants to drag me into your particular projects. Now that there is a movement that originated basically from Mississippi-born folk, not from SCLC leadership, you don't want to get involved.

"Now that I want you to come back to Memphis to help *me*," he charged, "everyone is too busy."⁷ Previously he had instructed them to concentrate on the Poor People's Campaign. Most had followed orders reluctantly.

"Succumbing to their own egomania," Young wrote later, some staff leaders "had begun to feel that they were more important to the movement than Martin. When they were really feeling their oats, Hosea, Bevel, and Jesse acted as if Martin was just a symbol under which they operated. Bevel

was so arrogant as to think he was smarter than Martin.” Bevel was still eager to send a peace delegation to the Mekong Delta led by MLK to stand between American and North Vietnamese forces. Williams wanted SCLC to focus on running black candidates in the South. Meanwhile, “Jesse was busy building his own empire in Chicago,” Operation Breadbasket going full tilt.⁸

Eyes aflame, fury no longer hidden, King declared that each of them had to decide whether they would be part of the SCLC team, or if they were just using him and SCLC to glorify themselves.

“I’m getting out of here.” He marched out of the room.

The dozen senior staff, plus Levison who had flown down from New York, were stunned. They had never seen him explode like that. They hoped he had just gone off to pray, like so many times before. He didn’t look like he was in a praying mood. Abernathy rushed after him, catching him on the stairs.

“Martin, what is wrong with you? Tell me.”

“I’m going to the country. I need to go to the farm.” If not metaphorical he may have meant the biracial Koinonia Farm community in southern Georgia run by his friend, Rev. Clarence Jordan.

“Tell me what is bugging you.”

“All I’ll say is, Ralph, I’ll snap out of it. Didn’t I snap out of it yesterday? I’ll pull through it.”⁹

Jackson stood at the top of the stairs. “Doc,” he called out. “Don’t worry, everything’s going to be all right.”

King swung around and glared at him with an icy stare, stabbing his finger at him.

“Jesse, everything’s not going to be all right! If things keep going the way they’re going now, it’s not SCLC but the whole country that’s in trouble. If you’re so interested in doing your own thing, that you can’t do what this organization is structured to do, go ahead. If you want to carve out your own niche in society, go ahead. But for God’s sake, don’t bother me!”¹⁰ He strode down the stairs.

Jackson was visibly wounded by the tirade. He felt like Peter rebuked by Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane.

Shaken, the staff under Abernathy’s and Young’s direction managed to collect itself and get down to business. By his impulsive direct action of leaving the meeting, King had closed the door on dissent. There was no longer any question of defying the boss’s will. They had to pull together behind their leader, no matter how badly they felt, no matter how wrong they thought the course. Back to Memphis, then on to D.C.

Hours later, after they had finalized plans, Joe Lowery from Mobile said to the group: “The Lord has been in this room this afternoon. I know he’s been here because we could not have deliberated the way we did without the holy spirit being here. And the holy spirit is going to be with us in Memphis and Washington.”¹¹

He gave an Indian war whoop. Young did a little dance. All stood up and shook hands, like passing the peace of Christ.

“The holy spirit has come,” another staff leader announced. “We want him to know it.”¹²

Abernathy managed to reach King and urged him to come back. A few more hours passed. After taking 12 year-old Yoki to her ballet lesson, he had found refuge with Dorothy Cotton, down with flu (why she missed the meeting), who listened and comforted her best friend. She was one of few staff leaders he still trusted. Then he had a long talk with his father back at Ebenezer, before returning to the meeting.

He was gratified to hear what the staff had decided, that they would back him all the way. The meeting had lasted ten hours. Staff leaders were giddy with relief.

King’s blistering rebuke was an emotional scourging that Jackson never let go of. Thirteen years older, King was more his father than anyone had ever been. He was born out of wedlock to a teenage mother in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1941 two months before Pearl Harbor. He had barely known his biological father, an older married man with a family of his own who had abandoned him. Under King’s wing for only three years, he was now rebelling against his celebrated adopted father; in an oddly Oedipal sense trying to wrest the movement from him. King had lifted him from obscurity, had trusted him to run the Chicago Breadbasket enterprise, had raised this nobody into a somebody. Now this holy man he revered had shamed him in front of his movement older siblings.

“I had never seen him under such a spiritual cloud before,” Jackson understated later.¹³ The experience confirmed for him what a lot of King’s staff and confidants were feeling. De Lawd was deliberately retreading the steps of Jesus as he arrived in Jerusalem with his languid disciples and struggled through his last days, especially the night of pathos in the garden of Gethsemane below Mt. Calvary.

Like Jesus, King confronted the disloyalty of his disciples while trying to mold them into worthy successors. He had already anointed Abernathy as next SCLC president but expected that all these leaders he had

cultivated would spread his gospel of soul force far and wide. This was why he was so angered when Rutherford, Williams, and other close colleagues appeared to be questioning nonviolent principles. If his own senior staff were not committed to building the temple of soul force, what hope could there be that others would pick up his mantle?

It would be hard to overstate the pain that MLK had been suffering for over a year, inflaming his depression, from his rejection by close friends, Morehouse brothers, friends he never thought would turn against him, because of his opposition to the war, criticisms of capitalism, and calls for a radical redistribution of wealth and power.

Interviewed by this writer twenty-four years later, a somber soft-spoken Jackson conveyed his sense that MLK was more than merely imitating or symbolically re-inhabiting Jesus in his final months and final days, but struggling like Jesus to retain the allegiance and trust of his disciples, some who seemed to be abandoning him in his time of greatest vulnerability and peril.¹⁴

Nonetheless, Abernathy, Bevel, Jackson, and other preachers on staff made no secret of their perception of MLK as a true messiah, perhaps even the messiah long awaited by Jews. This seemed the implication of Rabbi Abraham Heschel's anointing of MLK as the greatest prophet of the age.

Moreover as Baptists they believed like Catholics that holy communion manifested Christ's actual body and blood. If the living Christ could manifest when conjured by a preacher on Communion Sunday, why not actually manifest Jesus in their leader's body or soul? Surely the holy spirit could do so—in King's mind the source of Jesus' powers from the moment John the Baptist anointed him.

We only have hints of what MLK himself meant by reenacting Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, his self-mythologizing that may have emerged out of his prayer or subconscious. Evidently he put on the persona of Jesus to crown his Christian faith. Also to keep his staff in line, girding up his disciples and himself for treacherous days ahead. Knowing his days were numbered, he wanted to mold his legacy, to define how his martyrdom would be viewed by posterity.

If no matter what he did he was going to be seen and treated as a demigod (especially by African Americans), if he increasingly felt himself to be not only an agent of divinity but *actually* divine in some way (hubris run wild), perhaps it made sense to act *as if* he were divine like most Christians saw Jesus.

More than ever, "I am conscious of two Martin Luther Kings," he confided to a friend. "I am a wonder to myself," feeling trapped within and

alienated from the god-like persona he believed God had imposed upon him. He felt tortured by what this Hegelian thinker called “a kind of dualism in my life,” that MLK the demigod was a “stranger” to him.¹⁵ He would never be able to reconcile these two selves.

The cost of this discipleship: He was living a lie, knowing that he was not truly divine, a spiritual imposter no matter how his followers and future generations might divinize him. The more he felt compelled to appear as a living Christ, the more guilt he must have felt for pulling the wool over his followers, his inner circle, and himself. He felt divinely commanded to act the part, feel the part, fire burning in his bones, knowing he was actually a flawed sinful mortal. He played this exalted role, his ends compromising his means, because he believed that God was telling him this was how he must stand up for truth, righteousness, and justice.

As we explored in Book I, black preachers along with many white and Latino ones (especially Pentecostals) have believed as faith that they dwelled simultaneously in secular and spiritual realities, spilling over into each other with porous, sometimes “thin” boundaries; that they spoke and acted within a divine force field without being divine themselves.

So given this context, what King was trying to fight off was not that he like other Christians and Jews breathed the Spirit in and out, energized by his indwelling spirit flowing through him. That came with the territory. Rather he battled the insufferable conviction that he himself *embodied* the Spirit, that he not only harbored, carried, and conveyed divine energy as its agent, as the mortal messiah, but essentially as somebody appearing like a second Christ, even the second coming—fully human while fully divine, the ultimate Christian paradox.

At the Saturday staff meeting and other crucial moments during that floodtide spring, King like Jesus was beseeching God, if possible, to lift the cup of destiny from his lips. Should he continue moving forward on his perilous path, or should he leave the movement in order to save his life, save himself for the family he had so neglected? Should he stay in command—or hand over the reins? Was it too late to change course? Which ones could he trust? Could he get Peter to keep faith with him? James and John and doubting Thomas? No doubt a Judas was in his midst.

If up to him, he wanted to release his suffering. But he felt it was no longer up to him, whoever he was or had become—rather, up to the divine will that was driving him. He realized he had lost control of his own life. With diminished free will, lesser capacity or autonomy, he may no longer have seen himself as partnering or co-acting with the divine, the mission he had always urged on his followers.

He had always been a glutton for guilt, ever since he jumped out the upstairs window of his boyhood home, blaming himself for his grandmother's death. By his fortieth year the guilt he had accumulated was monumental.

In one compartment of his conscience was guilt about the extravagant praise and honors lavished upon him he felt he didn't deserve, that others unsung, unknown, crippled, or dead, deserved far more than he. In another compartment was remorse about neglecting his wife and children. In another was searing guilt about his extramarital relationships. And in another whole edifice of contrition was the guilt he felt for all the failures of the freedom movement, the peace movement, the budding human rights movement, all those mostly unknown he had let down. He felt responsible for the endless war, for the burned babies of Vietnam, for staying silent so long. He felt responsible for the emaciated kids of Marks, Mississippi, running around barefoot, living on trapped rabbits and apple slices.

He had found it more and more difficult to pull away his own failures of leadership from the collective failures of the movements he led or personified. He would then pile on more guilt for treating these movements like he owned them, as aspects of his cosmic self.

He may have smothered his personal guilt with his political—overlying guilt about his family with guilt about America and the world—sometimes the other way around. However these multiple layers of guilt wrestled uneasily in his overblown conscience, his mansion of guilt inflicted torturous anguish at the same time it offered hope of relief and release. Perhaps the enmeshed spiked-up tension of pain and promise enabled him to keep going against overwhelming odds.

The more guilt he endured, the more anger he turned against himself, the more self-destructive his binges of alcohol and sex, and the more debased he felt—the more then he felt he was humbling himself in the eyes of God, ignoble as that may seem.

His hoped for silver lining in all his sinning, personal and public, was that he was pulling himself down from his exalted status, reducing himself to the least of these, or to somewhat less than what he had been, or could have been.

If as he truly believed, the first would be last and the last would be first, he wanted to be last in order to *earn* being first, to make himself small enough to squeeze through the eye of a needle to the promised land, or at least to see it without splinters in his eyes. He came to believe that the path to his personal redemption passed through the deepest depths of personal sin, the deepest darkness of his own evil.

He dealt with his prodigious guilt by extreme self-punishment. The more he suffered, the more he sacrificed, the more he felt he could transform this punishing perdition into a way out of no way, a releasing of the devil inside of him. On a primal level he knew he could never be reborn until he hit rock bottom, that only in the deepest darkness would he be able to see the stars. So he kept sinking, his drowning the way of deliverance.

No wonder he fixated on his own death. Nothing redeemed like martyrdom. By sacrificing his life he believed he might wash away his own sins, and much more.

As if he were following the road map of a fellow Christian martyr, 16th century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, he seemed to believe that his soul could find union with the divine only if it were fully purged of all impurities and temptations. But in order to cleanse his sins he must embrace them.

For years he had tried to humble himself, to decrease himself, through acts of will. Yet it seemed that the more he humbled himself, the higher he was exalted. The more he strove to transcend his self or minimize it, the more it was magnified by others and by himself. As he had preached, one could merge with God only if one stripped oneself naked, lying in a lowly state (kenosis). The lower one fell into the deep well of darkness, the more completely could one be reborn and exalted. To rise up was to fall down; to fall was to rise.

The darkness was the abode of sin, but also where sin could be faced and exposed and transfigured. Only in the dark night of the soul could one empty oneself of wickedness, subdue one's ego, in order to be filled by divine light, light that could be blinding as it was to Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of Christians.

“When the spirit of good yields to the spirit of evil,” wrote St. John of the Cross, “the soul is purified and prepared for the feast to come.”¹⁶ The darkness was a place of torment for the soul but the forcing house of re-creation. It was in the deepest darkness of the soul that divine fire forged life out of death. Out of the darkness of this womb new life, new worlds, could be born. The most vexing Christian paradox or dialectic.

Dedicated to the faith that personal and social rebirth were interwoven, King believed that his nation should follow the same course of naked exposure and moral cleansing. Not that a person, people, or nation must slide into evil in order to be purified and exalted. It was that each person and every nation, but especially his own, were already overwrought with evil while also blessed with portions of goodness and goodwill and grace.

King's self-destructive actions were not to make him worse than he was already; only to force him to face and reckon with the evil in his being, to illuminate and expose it, like he had done with racial and imperial brutality, so that he could transform it. He was not urging America to fall from grace, to seal its doom. He was not preaching like millennialist doomsayers that the nation had to be destroyed in order to be saved. He was doing his utmost to meliorate the society short-term and perfect it long-term.

What he was saying was that in order to be reborn, to be redeemed, the nation had to humble itself, eschew its arrogance. It had to burrow into the depths of its collective soul to face the evil at its core—the evil of which a quarter millennium of slavery was both searing metaphor and ghastly reality, as Lincoln prophesied in his Second Inaugural Address.

By cleansing itself of its triple evils of racism, human exploitation, and warmaking, the United States of America could return to the divine mission of enlightenment promised in the sacred covenant of the Declaration of Independence.

During the winter of 1968 King's complex emotions and downward spiral caused a facial twitch when he spoke. As he got involved in the Memphis strike his tic disappeared. Andy Young asked him what happened.

"I've made my peace with death," he replied.

Was he finally able to hold the cup in his hands and drink from it, to let go of his ego, his need for control (especially self-control), no longer having to be the captain of his soul, the master of his fate? Could he now finally face up to the limits of his power and turn his life and his destiny and his legacy over to his higher spirit dwelling within? Having fulfilled his covenant with the divine, with the inner voice that had saved him many years before, and having made a "fearless moral inventory" to right his soul, was he now ready to be released from the confining armor of his cosmic self?

Afterword

Feeling determined, or obligated, to carry out their slain leader's will, King's SCLC disciples pushed the Poor People's Campaign forward. The mule train army of the poor from Mississippi along with caravans from seven other regions descended upon the National Mall in mid-May 1968. Welfare rights organizers, who had joined the broadening coalition with their specific demands embraced, kicked off the delayed campaign with a protest on Mother's Day. Several thousand many-hued souls constructed a 15-acre shantytown of canvas and plywood, with medical and dental clinics and other services, on the south side of the reflecting pool between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. Near where Dr. King's majestic statue stands today, the heart of his faith engraved into its granite: "Out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope."

Grieving SCLC leaders christened their new community Resurrection City, auguring MLK's resurrection symbolic or actual, as well as that of the whole black movement. A few staff leaders who never got serious about the campaign were now all in to honor their fallen martyr. Multiracial activists aggressively lobbied congressmen and Cabinet departments to implement planks of their Economic and Social Bill of Rights, often joined by protests. In one symbolic action Jesse Jackson led a group of poor folks to fill their trays at the Agriculture Department cafeteria, then refused to pay (paid up later).

Foot soldiers didn't block streets or bridges, as they had once threatened (to get attention). Occasional civil disobedience was carefully controlled. Some were arrested but no violence. Despite efforts to resolve interracial discord with the nation's first diversity trainings and to share decision-making authority with non-blacks, racial tensions flared at times in Resurrection City, compounded by inadequate provisions.

Bayard Rustin agreed to take charge of organizing the big march on June 19th, hoping for an encore of his August 1963 masterpiece. But he quit in a tiff with the tense new SCLC hierarchy over the demands (he deemed unrealistic) and his own control; the march proved underwhelming. As if they were fated to fail, punishing rains day after day aggravated human foibles and disorganization to make the flooded encampment inhospitable, beleaguered residents soaked with mud. Police forcibly evicted holdouts in early July. The poor, who always seemed to lose, were routed once again.

The Poor People's Campaign might have made a real impact had Dr. King survived to lead it. Not that it would have pushed Congress to enact planks of the Economic and Social Bill of Rights, but it might have put poverty on the nation's radar screen, making it a compelling issue in the presidential campaign, countering the G.O.P.'s coded call for "law and order."

But MLK left SCLC essentially leaderless. How could it have been otherwise? He had been not only the leader—he *was* SCLC, personifying it all the way, despite eleventh hour machinations by Jackson and Bevel to steal the throne. His passing meant the passing of SCLC as a formidable national player. Like Gandhi before him, no one could stand in King's feet of fired clay.

More likely the Poor People's Campaign would not have been much more successful had King lived on. As we know, the PPC was his most earnest effort to organize local communities while also mobilizing them, the scope wider than ever before. But by that time his star had plummeted. From May 1963 through 1965 he was the most admired and popular American worldwide besides the two presidents he pushed, prodded, and bargained with.

But his full-frontal thrashing of the war changed all that, aided by the Chicago failure and aggressive posturing of the Poor People's Campaign. By 1967 and 1968 he was no longer supported by a majority of African Americans. By a lopsided margin Americans as a whole disapproved of him during these final years, whites overwhelmingly. The white majority South and North now thought him dangerous, those that didn't before.

Few doubted his sincere commitment to nonviolent protest, but even liberal politicians and media feared violence when thousands of the least of these would invade the nation's capital and take over the National Mall. The March 28th Memphis fiasco clinched it for such skeptics.

The leader who had been so prescient about timing seemed to get it wrong this time.

In the golden year of 1965 he probably could have mounted such a campaign, building on the Selma glory and Voting Rights Act. But three wrenching years later his oratorical genius no longer worked its magic—which the PPC would have depended on. Despite the belated but solid organizing around the country, it was the messiah, still adored by poor folk, who drew them to Washington. His speechifying would not have moved the rightward leaning Congress or the war addicted president.

Had his oratorical and mobilizing power met its limit?

For sure its national and global impact never reached the height he had aimed at ever since the Montgomery bus boycott.

He was widely seen as the American Gandhi, but he never led the black world (nor certainly the nation) like Gandhi had led Indian Hindus, who saw him as virtually divine, and many Muslims. When MLK died followers more authentically acclaimed him as the American Moses and the American Christ—their fusion making him truly JudeoChristian—the stature he was never able to reach during his lifetime, but which lives on with us and will endure.

King identified with apostle Paul, gave a famous sermon impersonating him and offered him as a model outside agitator in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”¹⁷ While MLK and other Christians have taken what they liked from the founder of Christianity, it was the apostle’s mission, the *form* of it, more than the content of his message that inspired King. Yet his synthesis of Judaism and Christianity, his breathtaking pursuit of something both new and old, was no less profound than Paul’s evolving vision.

Just as Paul rejected much of his Jewish faith to fashion a new one that challenged Hebrew laws and committed to evangelizing beyond the Jewish world, just as he was persecuted and finally executed for doing so, King seems to have aspired to a global evangelist role as a new kind of missionary, though his message fundamentally different. Like Paul he would not be constrained by worldly institutions, not even nation-states, nor be limited in his outreach. He would be a “transformed nonconformist” and a creative maladjuster. Injustice anywhere threatened justice everywhere, he wrote from his claustrophobic Birmingham cell. In his incendiary Vietnam sermon he called for a worldwide fellowship “that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class, and nation,” requiring “an all-embracing and unconditional love for mankind.” He strove to embody that fellowship.

Adopting tenets of Judaism tutored by Buber and Heschel, he would not leave Christianity or his black Baptist faith behind while seeking not only a rejuvenated faith but a transformed one.

What he envisioned as a new theology but never had time or calm to jot down or organize his thoughts around, must be the subject of other books. I take liberty to conjecture that his radically reformed faith would be powered by the universally shared Spirit within (disregarding the Trinity and divinity of Jesus), driven by soul force, alleviating suffering by reconciling love and justice, and sacralizing hope as the only way to overcome evil, internal and external. The light of hope overwhelming the darkness of despair.

A new renewed JudeoChristian faith, *enlightened* faith, “evidence of things unseen,” synthesizing scientifically informed spirituality and spiritually informed science grounded in the fundamental reality of one’s spirit within, facing out and facing in, at once personal and universal, that one expresses in spiritual or secular terms.¹⁸ A faith of action attuned to self-searching, practiced as much on the street, in meeting halls, and at home as in churches and temples.

In his last testament King was in no way suggesting that “we as a people will get to the promised land” without continuing struggle and discord, without our own committed *agency* to navigate troubled waters.

No home free pass from Dr. King.

Getting to the promised land, now promised by MLK echoing Moses and Yahweh, was conditional and contingent on people fulfilling the principles that he laid out in the rest of his address and from his twelve years of Movement shepherding. *Fulfilling MLK’s new covenant*—not between people and God, but between people and other people, among all Americans and all world citizens. But also between people and divinity, divine power within each as a carrier of divinity, sweet chariot swinging low into each one’s soul with each one’s indwelling spirit, whatever they might call it or not, whether they felt it or not.

One constant trope King used was of the American nation’s sickness, and its need for both social and personal recovery. We might think of America’s moral sickness as severe back then, but terminal now. Unless ...

All citizens must commit to social healing—no longer a choice. All of us, not just a small minority, must leave committed lives behind. Too much at stake—human dignity and survival—to do less. We must because we can. We can because we must.

We have a choice, yet we do not. As Bob Moses said firmly but caringly to the Freedom Summer volunteers facing grave risk in Mississippi, he wanted them to go home if they wished, but the poor black people of Mississippi needed them. All he could say was that he would be there with them. So had young MLK faced such a choice in his Montgomery kitchen. If he would commit to truth and right, he could trust that his inner spirit would never leave him.¹⁹

Now more than ever we are engaged in a war—total war, global war: against racism, poverty, militarism, climate change, and accelerating depersonalization, all enmeshed.

We who aspire to be world citizens must embrace a bracing truth: This time of great challenge and great peril—*because of* its perilous nature—is equally a time of immense promise. This may be the most

exhilarating time ever to be alive, to be active; the most meaning-rich time. Our best chance to live life fully as renewed persons, tested by our times.

Dr. King was never more of a moral warrior, and never more deeply committed to nonviolence, than when he was approaching the end of his life. He did not see these moral stances as inconsistent but rather preconditions for each other.

Some claimed that nonviolence died with Dr. King. Quite the contrary. In the United States and around the world, from Eastern Europe to South Africa to Burma to Argentina to Ukraine, nonviolent direct action flexed its muscle like never before during the last third of the past century and the first score years of the 21st. It didn't always prevail, as in the "Arab Spring" of 2011.

King was convinced that assertive nonviolent action, which like Gandhi he preferred to call soul force, was not only more ethical than violence but more effective, especially long-term. He did not think violent methods had ever been truly effective, whether in the Civil War, which left its legacy of wretched white supremacy, in global warfare, or in ghetto riots. In just six decades since its "invention" by Gandhi in 1906, mass nonviolent action in King's view had proven more successful than six millennia of human violence. This was partly because soul force did not leave bitterness behind to poison future generations. It stymied the law of the multiplication of evil. He aspired to create not merely the moral equivalent of war but a force more powerful, whose outcome in just reconciliation would not belie Lincoln's malice toward none, charity for all.

King believed that soul force—synthesis of justice and compassion, of faith and understanding, of social and personal rebirth—was rooted in ancient wisdom but geared to the future of human evolution. Soul force required the fire of faith and moral passion not only to break down walls of inhumanity, but to forge the new person: a free person whose emotional capacity would be as mature as her intellect, whose mental and emotional being would form a more enlightened creature more truly reflecting the divine image. Soul force would deliver as well the beloved community, knit together by compassionate understanding, heartfelt communication, bonds of human intimacy.

However strong his ultimate faith in empowered persons and peoples, King had grave concerns about what was to come. He believed that his final crusade, the ill-fated Poor People's Campaign, would demonstrate whether creative nonviolent action could prove to be the preferred tool of social

change for the future. Or, would it be thrust aside by armed struggle on one side, and people's anomie on the other?

Let us transplant King's anguish onto the uncertain terrain of our century. Will we suffer a future brokered by self-righteous terrorism, official or unofficial, and by masses of disempowered consumers alienated from the world and their own souls, terrified to their bones?

We who claim the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. must cling to the life raft of nonviolence, in word and deed, in passion and compassion, as determinedly as he did during the last years of his life.

The alternative is unspeakable.

¹ “Conversation with Martin Luther King,” in James M. Washington, *A Testament of Hope* (N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1991), 657-658.

² Lance Morrow, introduction, *1968: The Year That Shaped a Generation*, *Time* special edition, 2017, 4.

³ This interdependence of “can” and “must” is an example of what MLK called the spiritual force of trans-physics, a fifth force in the universe; more examples dispersed throughout the book.

⁴ Langston Hughes (1902-1967), “Let America Be America Again,” in Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, eds., *Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1994), 189-192; composed in 1935, originally published in *Esquire* magazine (July 1936).

⁵ Quoted in Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1989), 424.

⁶ Quoted in Marshall Frady, *Jesse* (N.Y.: Random House, 1996), 224-225; quoted in Young, *An Easy Burden*, 457.

⁷ Quoted in Frady, *Jesse*, 224-225; quoted in Young, *An Easy Burden*, 458.

⁸ Quoted in Young, *An Easy Burden*, 458.

⁹ Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 467.

¹⁰ Quoted in Frady, *Jesse*, 225.

¹¹ Levison telephone conversation, March 31, 1968, quoted in Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 379.

¹² Quoted in Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 426.

¹³ Quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 616.

¹⁴ Jackson conversation with author, May 12, 1992, King Papers Project, Stanford University, author’s archive.

¹⁵ MLK quoted in David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (N.Y.: Norton, 1981), 215-216.

¹⁶ St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. Mirabai Starr (N.Y.: Riverhead Books, 2003), 178.

¹⁷ MLK sermon, “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” first delivered Sept. 1956, National Baptist Convention,

¹⁸ The spiritual philosophy that MLK called “trans-physics,” which he suggested could help manifest unusual human actions and interactions beyond the realm of everyday rules and common sense, resonated with quantum physics—being illogical or inexplicable and having a dubious “reality.” Werner Heisenberg wrote that quantum particles are not real in the usual sense: “they form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than one of things or facts.” See Adam Becker, *What Is Real? The Unfinished Quest for the Meaning of Quantum Physics* (Basic Books, 2018). MLK saw nonviolent direct action or soul force as

susceptible to the workings of trans-physics in occupying a space of possibility or potential rather than normal cause and effect.

¹⁹ In this context, one's choice expresses simultaneously one's freedom *and* responsibility. It is the choice of substantive if not procedural freedom: the freedom to attain one's highest being or highest self. The choice of a truly free (and thus responsible) person *to be* a free and responsible person. One is free because one is responsible, responsible because one is free. Intriguingly, both King and Bob Moses were deeply influenced by such Hegelian thinking, though Moses saw himself shaped more by the existential thought of Albert Camus.

I've Been to the Mountaintop. delivered 3 April 1968, Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ Headquarters), Memphis, Tennessee.
Plug-in required for flash audio.Â Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world. And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?"