

# A Walk in the City

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Active love, love engaged in action is the greatest threat of all to city of man that lives by consuming itself; The man, whose love is all embracing, is the most dangerous of men to this city of man, for he neither makes nor recognizes distinctions upon which the political economy and the commercial economy has been developed.

The man of love who comes walking into the city is a constant, direct and distinctive symbol of the characteristic most admired in its absence and most feared in its presence.

The man of love sets forth in the public place the possibility of both redemption and of destruction. The redemption of humanity and the destruction of established and vested power systems, and the arrangements which support the systems in their establishment and power.

Gautama Buddha, whose birthday this is; Jesus of Nazareth whose walk into the city of Jerusalem is marked on this day, Martin Luther King, whose day of mourning this is, separated though they are by centuries of time and by the rise and fall of many great civilizations, provide us in this single moment, this brief capsule of time, an insight into the power of love for which they each were spokesmen across twenty-six centuries of human generations, of strife, struggle, achievement, decay, beauty, brutality, order and chaos.

Each of these men in his time walked in the cities of his land. Each became conscious of the joys and sorrows of human life; each saw the misery of poverty, the cruelty of oppression, the indescribable loneliness of the outcast; each saw the hidden promises of hope, the latent wonder in children; the underlying strata of love overlain by the granitic and grinding harshness of social structures designed to protect the privilege of order against change.

Love, I submit, is the one quality enabling men and women to see through the artificiality of outward structure to the inner reality of existence.

The man of love is therefore a symbol of hope and a symbol of danger, and indeed, he is often both at the same time.

Jesus, early in his ministry, advised his listeners that he had come not to destroy but to fulfill the law and the prophets. And in that statement his hearers could find both the hope and the danger. For the fulfillment of the law and the prophets was indeed the age long dream of the Hebrew nation; but the fulfillment of the law and the prophets would be the end and the destruction of the political and commercial economy of the then present establishment as controlled by Rome and accepted by the priests of the temple.

Martin Luther King, convinced and committed to the doctrine of love, gave it expression in a program of active non-violence. Emotionally and intellectually committed to the Judeo-Christian inheritance, he found and studied the examples of Gandhi to guide his program and provide the discipline for non-violent action.

To our peril of misunderstanding we ignore the influence of religious inheritance in the life process that gave us Dr. King. We hear it most obviously and clearly in his public addresses, in his language, the figures of speech, the cadence of his sentence structure, the striking metaphor. But we hear it even more certainly and positively in the passion and intensity of his manner in speaking. But we know it most certainly and most positively in the living practice of his years among us. He had succeeded where

most of us fail by removing fear and hate as superior to love in his soul. This is the rare and decisive achievement of those few leaders of men whose names and characters and teachings endure in human history; who, though human as we are human, filled with the passionate intensity of life as we are filled; torn by decisions to be made as we are torn; find in their humanity and out of their intensity, the way to decision that is for life and not against it.

I was at home on Thursday evening when the entertainment world stopped and the report of Dr. King's assassination was flashed across the country and around the world.

I cannot tell you how the electrical impulses of the mind respond to shock, but I know that my mind flashed back twenty-four hours to a meeting on Wednesday night with the people of this Southeast Loop neighborhood at the Slam office on Manhattan Street. I thought of the black and the white persons who sat and talked together in the shabby dreary room and made little plans for little reductions in the depressing poverty of the children and the families and the streets; I thought of the understanding that was there that night of how much Dr. Martin Luther King had done in his twelve years of public ministry to bring this to pass.

I thought of the plans for non-violent action that were laid to bring the attention of the city fathers to neglected public needs; to revive some sense of the importance of human beings as human beings. And then I came down to the church; I put on the lights; I opened the doors; I played recordings of Benjamin Britten's War Requiem on our high fidelity system. And I thought. I thought of three young men butchered on a Mississippi road at night and buried in an earthen dam. I thought of my fellow minister James Reed, struck down on a Selma street; I thought of Medger Evers slain in the dooryard of his home, I thought of another of my fellow ministers, Donald Thompson, shot from a passing car as he entered his apartment house in Jackson, Mississippi; and I thought of others who are the victims of this war. And I listened to the great music of Benjamin Britten and I heard the rolling tragic lines of Wilfred Owens parable of "The Old Man and the Young," lines that were sung here for our Union Thanksgiving service in 1966.

"So Abram rose and clave the wood, and went  
And took the fire with him, and a knife.  
And as they sojourned both of them together,  
Isaac the first born spake and said, My Father  
Behold the preparation, fire and iron,  
But where the lamb for this first born offering:  
Then Abram bound the youth with belt and straps,  
And building parapets and trenches there,  
And stretched forth his knife to slay his son.  
When lo! An angel called him out of heaven,  
Saying, lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
A ram caught in the thicket by its horns;  
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.  
But the old man would not so, but slew his son  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one."

The Ram of Pride is always the alternative to the sacrificial slaughter of the living. The Ram of Pride that drives us to the way of violence; that blinds us to the anguish of the disinherited; that deafens us to the plea for justice or for mercy; that seals our lives against the rising storm, the portents and signs of which have been seen as summer lightning in the darkness of the night, before the breaking rain.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was steeped in the tradition of Biblical lore and prophecy. His roots were set firmly in religious culture and the ring of ancient as well as modern prophecy was in his voice. He was aware of the danger that pursues the prophetic spirit. His life was, by deliberate decision, set into the eye of this danger and he walked in city after city and from city to city with the danger surrounding him. There is no defense against this danger for the prophet. He must convince and persuade himself that the danger is less to be feared than the cause for which he lives and speaks. Dr. King was persuaded of this, persuaded by thirty centuries of human history; persuaded by men in those centuries by whom he was informed and by whom his life was lighted. They are a select company, not by their own judgement but by the judgement of mankind. They chose to sacrifice the Ram of Pride rather than their own first born sons.

Dr. King saw vividly and clearly and said bluntly and plainly that the sons of this nation were being sacrificed in place of the Ram of Pride, in Vietnam. He saw, well ahead of many of us, that by making this choice, our nation would suffer grievous loss in the battles against poverty and the war for equality of persons. He was this very early. It is a coincidence of monstrous tragedy that in the same week that the President of the United States acted to end the false notion that national honor depends on military victory in Vietnam, Martin Luther King's life should end with an assassin's bullet in Memphis.

Dr. King was an enigma to many persons. He was a vexing problem to many of his own race as well as to many in the white community. A man whose principles are unyielding, whose essential conviction is set in the bedrock of religious faith often is a source of irritation. The fundamental position of non-violence from which he refused to budge set him apart from those who had no such philosophy or faith. He was an enigma to many others who could not conceive or even allow the possibility that he was sincere and committed to this doctrine. Non-violence is so contrary to the pattern of our civil and social life in America that only a tiny percentage of our two hundred million Americans recognize and realize the validity and final effectiveness of its discipline. In very great part I expect this is because we have little understanding of the discipline required for its use; discipline of the whole person, mind and heart and spirit; discipline of the body and the soul. There are those who did not understand Dr. King who thought that non-violence was a trick, a device, a political tactic. It was not. It was the philosophy and faith of the man's own search and discovery and affirmation. At Boston University studying for his doctoral degree, it was Gandhi and the non-violent philosophy that was his chosen field of special study for his thesis. It was to India that he went for his field research among those followers of Gandhi who knew most about the twentieth century master of this discipline. Behind this chose of dissertation subject lie deeper explanations of the direction of his life, for its course was given direction by event and choice and decision for which one must know his home and childhood and the influences within them.

With the twitch of a finger in a third rate rooming house's bathroom, this man's life was cut off with the suddenness of a rifle shot.

The crack of that gun set in motion forces that began moving before midnight of that day and will move on in the weeks, months and years that are ahead. As a great stone dropped into a quiet pond makes a great splash, with an explosion of water in all directions faster than the eye can follow, so has been the effect of this death in the first hours and days. We have all been touched by this water, some drenched and some only lightly spattered. As the waters of the first effect settle we will know the great waves that move out from the center to touch and affect every life and to produce change in the public life of the nation. The intensity of the effect is first seen in the enormity of its meaning for President Johnson. Suddenly the war in Vietnam was reduced to second place and the new focus was on the domestic disease which flared to a temperature of fire in city after city. Suddenly the warnings of the President's own commission on civil disorders ceased to be warnings and had become the actuality.

The intensity of the effect is next seen in the sudden urgency of appointed minister, clergymen and

rabbis to urge massive recommendations for sharply increased backing to programs often talked about but hardly begun.

The action here in Rochester is but one instance of many that have or will be taken in the coming days. Here in Rochester the ground was already broken for quick consideration and decision by events and circumstances of the last four years. Ten percent of each church's income from all sources is the amount the clergy of this city voted to ask each of its own governing body. I have seen no projection of what such a tithing would produce from the churches represented by the assembled body last Friday afternoon, but it is reasonable to estimate a half million dollars would represent ten percent of the budgets, benevolences, trust income of the many churches, and temples of this extraordinarily wealthy city and county.

As for myself, I find this a significant gesture, but not an answer, nor indeed an adequate response. I will come back to this again in a few moments.

A second local response came from the political head of the city, the Mayor's recommendation of a suitable memorial to Martin Luther King to be achieved by a city wide contribution effort, from the pennies of children to the nickels of the aged, and including one must assume the dollars of those in middle life.

This I find to be a gesture, but not very significant, and as a response it is almost maudlin. It is almost as though he pulled it out of the file marked "memorials" drawn up in some olden time, and I wouldn't be too terribly surprised if the filing page were turned over it would say on the reverse side "Build a Non-Violence Pole to match the Liberty Pole."

It is difficult for me to conceive of a suitable and adequate response to the death of Dr. King, except in some manner that will demonstrably carry forward the great central conviction and force of his life. The conviction was the oneness of humankind and the force was non-violent.

Take these and consider them together and see if there is not a greater and more significant memorial for Martin Luther King. Had the Mayor said for example: Beginning tomorrow we will inaugurate a training program for the police of this city in the philosophy and practice of non-violence, gradually reducing to zero the lethal and non-lethal weapons of their armory, I would have applauded. Had he added, as of tomorrow the sale of guns in this city will come to an end, I would have applauded. Not that anything of this nature was expected, but because it would have been in accord with the significance of the person he wished to honor.

No, the Mayor did not suggest these things, but this leaves us with the responsibility for saying so. We have lived in a century of violence, increasing violence until the intensity of it and the generality of violence, the prevalence of violence quite overshadows our lives. The reconstruction of social life toward a non-violent society must begin. It begins with the deliberate determination that it must be done; a determination that has its starting point with ourselves. Its starting point within ourselves is with the realization that violence is self-destroying and social destructive; that violence of man against man is in the end a kind of geno-suicide. It begins with the realization that the death of President Kennedy and Dr. King have forced upon us; the realization of irredeemable loss. Perhaps this is most poignant for us in these single instances. But there is massive documentation behind this in the violent death of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children in Vietnam, each of whom is equally irredeemable, equally a loss, equally the victim of the savage insanity of violence.

Sometimes the sensitivities of men are blunted and dulled by the massive violence, but are sharpened and quickened by the single isolated instance. It was the memory of Jesus on the cross, not of the thousands more who died by crucifixion that gave to Christianity its impetus. It may be that Dr. King or President Kennedy at the end of an assassin's bullet will set us in motion, where thousands killed in

wars have not.

This morning, this Palm Sunday of 1968, this April morning of crocuses and mourning, we have a question before us, a question that lies unanswered in each of us, uneasy until an answer is given. It is the question of life and of death, of love and of hate, of non-violence and violence, I say it is our question, because it cannot be otherwise. Each man and woman in each generation of life has this question and must make an answer. These things are not inherited or transmitted in the genetic pattern; they are socially and culturally developed and nurtured in each lifetime. We face the question and we give our answer and are in this respect responsible for it and for the effects that follow.

This is a Universalist church. It came to be so because there were those who believed that the love of God was universal. The founders believed this had great significance for the eternal life of the soul. It has been asked, "How can man love God whom he has not seen unless he first loves his fellow man who he has seen?" It is a valid question.

It is also rhetorical for the answer is itself implied in the question. But this church has little right to its name unless the people of its membership will handle the hard question of Universality and find an answer translatable into the human needs of the generation in which we love.

Now back to the matter I left some moments ago; the recommendations of the Rochester clergy to the churches of Rochester; the tithing of the church budgets and income being first on the list. I do urge this to your most serious consideration and for your affirmative action. I further urge that you combine the tithing of the church to the tithing of your own incomes whether through the church or some other channels in addition to the church.

I further recommend that we give increasing time and energy from our own lives for the lives of persons who are in the general pattern of our living most distant from us; that as it were, we take a walk in the city, the city of man, that we rediscover and give strength to the greatest qualities of men and women, for these qualities are found in persons of every walk and station of life.

The death of great men takes away a body and leaves behind a spirit in the life. It cannot die for it has entered into the enduring life of mankind. I think of this with respect to Martin Luther King much as W. H. Auden thought of it with the death of the great Irish poet, William Butler Yeats. In Memoriam to Yeats, Auden spoke these lines:

Earth, receive an honoured guest  
William Yeats is laid to rest.  
Let the Irish vessel lie  
Emptied of its poetry.

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark.  
And the living nations wait  
each sequestered in its hate.

Intellectual disgrace  
Stares from every human face,  
And the seas of pity lie  
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow Poet, follow right  
To the bottom of the night,  
With your unconstraining voice

Still persuade us to rejoice.

With the farming of a verse  
Make a vineyard of the curse,  
Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

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