



The Man Who Died

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Of all the memories of so many brief encounters with Martin Luther King, the best is of an afternoon sitting on a porch in Montgomery seven years ago in May.

The Freedom Ride to integrate the interstate buses had come to its crash there. The riders had been bombed in Anniston and set upon and beaten in Montgomery; and now they had stopped and wondered whether they should go on to Jackson, Miss., and jail if they were lucky.

Martin King had not been on the ride; he had come there after the trouble, as he always did in any trouble, to draw fire. He and his friend, Ralph Abernathy, talked a long while about whether their children should go on to Jackson. There was the assumption then that to go meant to be killed. His friend, the Attorney General of the United States, was exceedingly anxious that the riders stop where they were with their wounds; the majesty of the United States of America could not protect them in Jackson; the reputation of the U. S. might suffer if the worst happened. But Martin King did not talk about that.

He turned to Wyatt Walker, his executive assistant.

"Wyatt," he said, "go back and tell those young people that I don't want them to go. I will go, and Ralph will go. But I was not put here to send children to get hurt."

They had fooled him, of course, going down one by one to buy their bus tickets in the night. And when he and the adults got up the next morning to go to the terminal, these children were there waiting for him, and off into the unknown they went together, as they always did, since, in those days, they would do anything he asked except turn back from sharing the risks he wanted to take all by himself.

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After that, I do not need the Nobel Prize Committee or the flag at half mast over the Capitol to remember that Martin Luther King was a great man. A great man is one who knows that he was not put on earth to be part of a process through which a child can be hurt.

Martin King was an ambassador, a reproach indeed, from the older America of country churches and poor people so imbedded in our history that they could enter and leave its great

stages entirely unselfconscious and always saying just the right thing.

He belonged to the maids and the porters, the people who worked in kitchens to send their sons to college and then saw them come out porters too, and then began to dream for their grandchildren. He came to them after all those years at Boston reading Hegel, different from them in every way except the essential one.

I saw him first in one of those churches, when he was only 26, and I was surprised at how much he looked like the young Charlie Parker, the least appropriate of presences. But if he seemed in any way unusual to them, I suppose, it was as a sudden embodiment of all they had dreamed their children might become, the son who went off to study, who had the whole world before him and who came back home to be with them. Those nights, he never talked to us but only to them; and he worked in the ancient ritual of his affirmation and their responses; he did not speak for them but with them; if we wanted to listen to him, we had to listen to them too; they accompanied him into history.

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He died asserting the dignity of garbage collectors. And he died at a moment when his ideas had never seemed quite so unfashionable. We have been very sick; a country is sick when the second thought in everyone's mind with the news that a Nobel Peace laureate has been murdered can be the fear that his death is the signal for violence and arson and that his first memorial must be children fleeing from a burning tenement.

And yet at the very moment when the irony of his failure was being marked in smoke and fire, you understood that he had won. He had proved the uselessness, the malignity of violence, the emptiness of riot. Men do not weep, nor do they make revolutions breaking into liquor stores. Never before so much as in these spectacles had quiet people been so recognizable as the only people who count.

He lived to teach us; in death he had taught us too. He died for us. We were sick, and alive he could not heal us. Suddenly, in the shock of what we have lost, there is the sense that we commence to heal. Pray God that today he is being buried with the coming of spring.