

## Caude Lewis: Like It Is

# We Lost So Much When King Died



It is hard to believe that five years have passed since a man with a gun big enough to kill a charging buffalo pointed it at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and blew the civil rights movement apart.

James Earl Ray stuck his rifle out of the bathroom window of a grimy flophouse in Memphis and murdered the man who carried



Martin Luther King

King had.

There is Jesse Jackson out of Chicago. There is the Black Congressional Caucus in Washington. There is Dr. Leon Sullivan. And there is past NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins, who is still in there swinging. But the whole ball game is different without Dr. King who, for a time, captured the conscience of a nation, who for a dozen years urged America to approach its promise.

When Dr. King was alive you had the feeling that things would work out for all of us; that people would be unable to resist his country-style charisma, his consistent call for a nation to come home, his lavish love of humanity.

King gave us all a reason to hope when logic pointed in another direction. He refused to give up, he refused to give in to petty hatreds and to visions of violence held by other men. Dr. King was a genuinely non-violent man who delivered his heroic dream for humanity with a unique eloquence and a prideful passion.

## If Ray Had Known Him

"Too bad James Earl Ray never got to shake his hand. Too bad James Earl Ray didn't ever get to sit down with him. Too bad James Earl Ray never had a chance to feel Dr. King's warmth, to have Dr. King smile on him. Ray would never have become a murderer.

But Dr. King was the kind of man who would have forgiven Ray for his heinous act, because Martin Luther King didn't know how

to hate. Somehow, despite all the tragedies that touched him during his 39 years, he never stopped believing in the basic goodness of each of us.

He was a minister who had religion and a man who had courage. He was a rarity. He stood up to Presidents and dictators, Republicans and Democrats, black people and white people. He sought no favors, only truth, integrity and honor, from men who had little of it to give.

## After the Candles

Five years ago, when the news came that he had been slain by an assassin's bullet, the nation was numbed. But not for long. We recovered quickly and went back to our hatreds and horrors which Dr. King had counseled against. We trampled on his ideals and dirtied his deeds. Then, to assuage our guilt, we began naming monuments and highways in his name, and burned candles to his memory.

But what did we do after the candles flickered and died? What did we do after the marches were over?

"When I pass away," Dr. King used to say to his massive audiences, "don't build monuments to me. When I pass away, don't name holidays after me. When I pass away, don't tell stories about me. Just say I was a drum major for justice. Just say that I tried to love somebody. Just say that I tried to do the best I could and to urge others to do the best they could.

"When I leave this world, don't tell people that I was a super human being. Don't say that I was perfect or that I was always right. But say that I always tried to do what I thought was right and I tried to live a decent life.

"When my life on earth ends, just say that my purpose was to make a beginning for somebody else. Don't say I had all the answers. Don't tell people I had a college degree. Don't say that Martin was good. Just say for me that Martin Luther King tried to help somebody. Just say that Martin Luther King Jr. loved the human family and tried to help all men and all women to find the right course to happiness, brotherhood and love."

It is a cruel irony that he should only be remembered on the anniversary of his death, when he spent his every moment trying to teach us about life.

Only five years have passed since he walked with us but it almost seems like a lifetime.