

# Roy Meachum

## Dr. King today



Martin Luther King Jr. would understand.

Prejudice exists when a people are reduced to "they," lumped together in a faceless clump. Most of all, it demands the absence of eyes: those "windows of the soul," as the Poet called them, reveal human beings to each other.

In the South of my youth, when handshakes between the races were taboo, blacks and whites frequently went to great lengths to avoid looking directly at each other. Much of the miracle wrought by Dr. King derived from his power to force the two sides to lift up their eyes and regard each other as human beings.

Winning the war for legal Civil Rights in this country was a major achievement for whites, as well as blacks. Victory came only after a majority of the majority accepted the persecuted minorities as human beings, capable of sorrow and joy, who shared the same hopes but an unequal burden of frustrations.

The American existential sense of fairness won out over the primeval fear that underlies all bigotry.

With his great personal dignity and steadfast public courage, Martin Luther King Jr. denied all the bases for white fear of his people.

Despite the personal vilification, which continues after his martyr's death, Dr. King remains one of the very few genuine heroes produced by this country in the 20th century. Today was his birthday, although most official celebrating takes place on Monday. Therefore, my thoughts are on that remarkable man, while my heart continues to reach out to the dead and dying in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank.

Were Martin Luther King Jr. alive today and living in the occupied territories, I have no doubt he would be in jail, held in "preventative detention," and awaiting exile. In any case, if his life had not been cut short by a bigot's bullet, from his pulpit now would come that thundering appeal to this nation's conscience, so missing in our churches and synagogues. Yet there is hope, despite Dr. King's death.

Frozen forevermore in my mind are the faces of the occupying power's victims, as printed in newspapers. Foremost are the eyes of a mother in East Jerusalem, looking on at her son held in the grip of two soldiers. From the baby

fat in his cheeks, the boy could be no more than 14.

Most of the pictures show agony and grief; in some I could almost hear the women's screams of pain. But that one mother was not like the rest. She stood apart from the arresting officers. Her hands did not reach out for her child, who was accused of throwing stones. Her face mirrored concern, but it also contained pride.

Dr. King would have approved of the woman's dignity, although he had to counsel against violence, even the petty act by a half-grown child hurling rocks. In today's occupied Palestine, he could not have failed to understand the frustration.

In his time, Martin Luther King Jr. saw the inside of jail; the threat was always there. He lived his last years under the threat of assassination. Yet he won the Nobel Prize precisely because he advocated solely peaceful means for dealing with oppression. Palestinians who have tried to follow the same path lose their liberty, and sometimes their lives. For calling for a selective boycott, an editor was arrested yesterday, along with a score of others, labeled "moderates," even by occupa-

tion security forces, which links them with the P.L.O. — a charge as specious as those attempts to declare Dr. King "a tool of Soviet imperialism."

In the same breath they confine and attempt to castrate anyone who seeks to speak out for the people in Gaza and on the West Bank, the occupying authorities publicly bemoan the lack of leaders with whom they can discuss the territories' future. They count on foreign help, from nations who have in common only the same language and religion as the oppressed. Amazingly, much of the world approves.

Could Washington resolve any difficulties with Brazil by dealing with Portugal? Both are Portugese-speaking, Roman Catholic countries. Jordan and Egypt are no more responsible for the people of Gaza and the West Bank than are Mexico and Argentina for Nicaragua. Certainly, Dr. King never sought to bring justice to Alabama by sitting down with the governor of New York.

Where American blacks were aided in

their struggle for equality by the federal government, the Palestinians have been denied even access to the present international equivalent, the United Nations. The occupying power's claim to "a reverence for the law," as stated by its ambassador at his embassy party honoring Dr. King this week, is daily rendered mockery by refusal to deal with the U.N. motions, even when they are supported by the United States.

As a man who relied upon the law, even when faced with local injustice, Dr. King could not but be saddened by the lawless path chartered by the people holding power over the Palestinians. Due process does not exist. Torture is permitted, although torturers have been remanded by their high court to use restraint, without the justices defining how far torturers may go. Post-midnight raids to arrest "suspects" are commonplace, as are assaults on people in their homes. A 35-year-old expectant mother died from tear gas shot into her home Sunday night.

What would Martin Luther King Jr. say?

Without confirming his enemies' worst allegations, he could not remain silent. On his public record, the Nobel laureate would have presented himself on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, maybe to mark his birthday today among a people suffering more than blacks, except in the worst days of their slavery.

And the Palestinians have greater need for Dr. King's presence now than in the first weeks of their protests against all their oppressions. Already, their story is beginning to fade, to recede into the back pages of the U.S. media. Why? There is no longer news in more dead Palestinians, even when children are the victims.

Yesterday the *Washington Post* reported a 10-year-old boy had been shot to death by security forces. The tragedy made no headlines, even in the Post.

As a man who admired, respected and defended Martin Luther King Jr. while he was alive, to the best of my capability, I reluctantly must concede he is probably better off dead in these bitter times. I would not want to see that great heart broken, as my lesser one is every day, by the string of fresh violations of the human spirit coming out of the land revered by Moses and by Jesus.

Most of all, I am glad Dr. King has been spared the pain of looking into eyes in those faces that have stared back at me in the daily papers.