

Rights Leaders Feel Progress Stalled Following King Slaying

"Once I saw the reaction to his death, I knew that what they had done in Memphis was to insure the immortality of the spirit of Martin Luther King and that what he stood for would go on. And in 10 years, I've seen continuous progress. I haven't seen us going back, as a lot of people have. I think there are some things we'd like to see that have not been done. But people who understand what Martin was about know that if we follow the blueprint that he left us we will continue to move forward."

— Coretta Scott King
April, 1978

By WILLIAM THOMAS

Ten years after the sniper-death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it is a rare expression of faith and optimism in what, compared to the marching '60s, seems like the sputtering '70s.

Although civil rights leaders agree that King's place in history is secure, few of

them believe that any significant progress has been made since he was shot down April 4, 1968 — nor do they see much evidence that things are getting any better for black Americans.

Benjamin L. Hooks, executive director of the NAACP, says it's a little like standing still on an escalator. "If we got on the first step in 1968, then we're wherever the escalator's gone. But we haven't been taking any new steps ourselves. We're on the same step while white folks are running past."

And to make matters more difficult, the movement that King left behind him — an enormous conglomerate of ordinary and extraordinary people who were able to transform the nation and bring it face-to-face with itself mainly by walking down the street and singing "We Shall Overcome" — is so scattered that even the experts wonder if it will ever come together again.

Typical is the split between King's old organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and his 51-year-old widow, who now heads up the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Social Change. Although both organizations are located within a few blocks of one another on Atlanta's Auburn Avenue, the distance between them is considerably more than a few minutes walk.

Some SCLC leaders have criticized Mrs. King for striking out on her own while she, in turn, has accused the SCLC of "harassment" and being in "complete conflict" with her husband's nonviolent philosophy.

Even more to the point is the fact that there hasn't been a truly massive civil rights demonstration since the "poor people" went to Washington in the grim, apocalyptic aftermath of King's assassination. Certainly, there has been nothing like the great marches of the '60s that provided King with a vast human stage from which to deliver some of the most moving oratory of our times.

The reason, many people believe, is that King was the one man who could successfully mount such demonstrations, and now that he is gone there is little possibility of returning to those kinds of events.

Odell Dotson, 71-year-old ex-laborer of 1089 Beach, who's been fighting civil rights battles since the 1950s, says he believes it would take a Moses to get things

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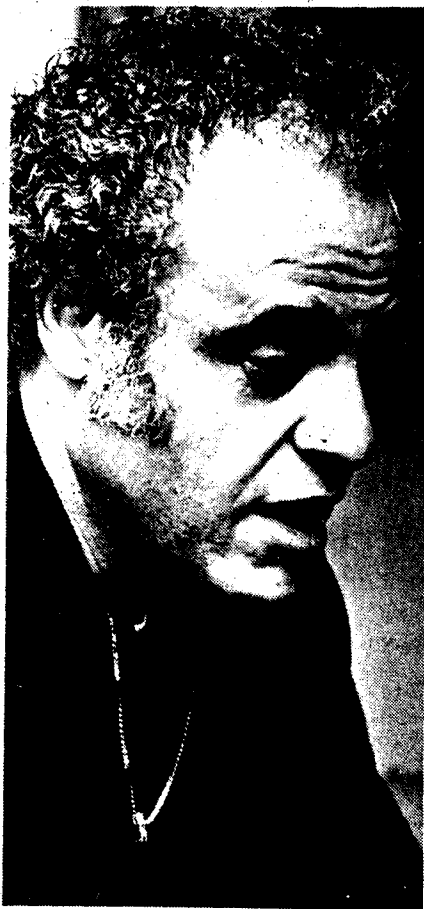
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moving again. And, he says, "I don't see many Moses comin' on."

Nevertheless, some civil rights leaders — including the NAACP's Hooks and the SCLC's Hosea Williams — are talking about going back into the streets and reviving the direct-action tactics of the '60s.

"We have people who say that the day of the mass demonstration is over, that the day of the boycott is over, that the day of direct action is over," says Hooks, 53, the former Memphis judge and clergyman who took over the NAACP a year ago from the aging Roy Wilkins.

"Well, we may want to examine that. Personally, I think that day is far from over. We may have to escalate marching, demonstrating and boycotting to a new art



By Thomas Busler

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Unlike Hooks, Coretta King feels that mass demonstrations are passe and that there is little likelihood of a new leader emerging with the style and eloquence needed to bring them off.

"I think it was a misconception to feel that Martin's place could be filled by one person," she says. "First of all, men of his greatness and depth just don't come along more than once a century. Also, I think we had reached a stage in the struggle, even then, where it was difficult for one individual to speak for all the groups that were emerging. (Among these were the black power and black separatist groups that King was actively opposing at the time of his death.)

"So when people talk about a leader today," says Mrs. King, "my feeling is that there are many leaders who speak for their constituents, such as the Hispanics or the United Farm Workers. But there is no single leader who can speak for the great majority of disinherited, deprived people of this country.

"Only a coalition of leaders can do this now. I don't think it's anything against today's leadership. I just think it's not possible in terms of human progress for another person to emerge at this time. So Martin must remain a symbol until such time that we can produce another giant."

For millions of people, black and white alike, King does indeed continue to sym-

bolize the most profound struggle of human rights in our time — a movement that began on a city bus in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955, and ended, for him at least, on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in downtown Memphis 13 years later.

"I don't know anything in my lifetime that has been as significant in an on-going way," says Lucius E. Burch Jr., the Memphis attorney who was fighting an injunction against King's proposed march on the day he was slain.

"I fought the case and won it," says Burch, who keeps a photograph of King hanging on his office wall, along with the telegram that authorized him to represent the civil rights leader in court. "I got them the right to march and then by the time I got home that evening he was dead."

Although King never made the march that Burch worked to legalize in court, the attorney has no doubt as to the value of the contributions the civil rights leader made. "As long as men get together and talk about freedom," he said, "they will be reading Dr. King's Letter From the Birmingham Jail."

"In a legal sense," Burch goes on, "there is now total and complete civil equality. There is no legal right the white man has that the black man hasn't. And the black man may even have a bit of an edge. That might not sound like much today. But if you go back 25 years when Jesse Turner couldn't drink out of the public water fountain in the courtroom, then it is big, very big."

The problem now, according to black leaders, is that although King helped to win most of the basic, obvious human rights — the right to go to the public library, to drink from the water fountain, to eat in any restaurant, to stay in any motel and to sit anywhere on a bus — he was killed before he was able to complete the work that would have given minorities a base for economic equality as well.

This was to have been the next phase of the program of King, who in 1967 wrote that "a society that has done something special against the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something special for him in order to equip him to compete on a just and equal basis."

Thus, in the spring of '68, King already was focusing on the problem of economic rights. In addition to lending his stature to 1,300 striking sanitation workers — a stature backed up by the Nobel Prize in 1964 — he was working on a Poor People's march to Washington, where he hoped to lift the plight of the have-nots to the top of the list of national priorities.

Although the poor people went on to Washington without him, they are little better off today than they were 10 years ago. It is partly for this reason that many civil rights leaders say there has been almost no progress in the past decade.

"I don't know whether things are one bit better today than they were 10 years ago," says Hooks. "If anything, there probably has been a roll-back, especially in the mood of the presidency and the Congress. This mood does not seem conducive to a broad movement of blacks forward into the mainstream."

Hooks, who now leads the strongest civil rights organization in the country, one that he calls "the only surviving civil rights group, period," is not alone in his feeling that black Americans have had little to celebrate in recent years.

Mr. Williams of Atlanta, a former King lieutenant and now president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, says: "I guess blacks are probably more frustrated and disillusioned than ever. Many of them feel that they have been betrayed not only by white liberals but by their own color. The power structure has so manipulated us that now our opposition is often a black man rather than an overt white racist. Instead of having to confront a Bull Connor, we have to confront a sophisticated black mayor."

The frustration in Atlanta is little different than the frustration in Memphis. Mrs. Maxine Smith, executive secretary of the NAACP's Memphis chapter, says, "The gains have not been commensurate with the life that was given. In some ways, I think we are behind where we were 10 years ago. Racism still pervades our society, unemployment is higher for blacks than in any period I can remember, the disproportionate number of have-nots among black people is growing, and the

community still has not recognized the part in history it will always have in Dr. King's death, or, because of its racial makeup, it's potential to be a model community of integration."

Rev. H. Ralph Jackson, one of the leaders of the Memphis sanitation strike in 1968, puts it this way: "Basically, the same problem exists today that existed when Martin lived. If you only look at the condition of a few blacks, you see that they're livin' better and makin' more money.

"But the big problem that the black masses face is the same as it's always been — housing, food and jobs. So you have a situation where the rich is gettin' richer and the poor is gettin' poorer and the restless is gettin' restless."

Rev. James M. Lawson, who 10 years ago was one of the architects of the sanitation strike and the man whom King called the best nonviolent tactician in the country, says it's the same story wherever one goes in America today:

"There's a lot of dissatisfaction in the black community, a lot of feeling that things are not moving as strongly as they should, that some of the leadership is more concerned with the establishment than with black advancement, and a sense that progress has slowed down if not halted altogether. But there is also a feeling that some major changes must be ahead because nothing has happened for a long time."

Lawson, now pastor of the Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, has kept in touch with the mood of the country by moving around as an increasingly popular lecturer. But then so has Stokely Carmichael, the "Black Power" revolutionary, who agrees with Lawson that there is growing discontent, but disagrees as to what it means.

Although militancy apparently ran its course in the '60s, Carmichael told The Commercial Appeal recently that he believes "people are moving inevitably toward revolution. All that is lacking is organization." Presumably, that is why Carmichael now directs the All-African Peoples' Revolutionary Party, and goes from place to place drumming up support.

"Reform parties have produced no tangible results in the '70s," he said, "and now the mood is right for a real revolution. The movement of the '60s was spontaneous. Now that is no longer possible. A revolu-

tion is not spontaneous; it is planned, controlled activity. My only disagreement with Dr. King was that he confused tactics with principle. He believed nonviolence was a principle, but I see it as just a tactic."

Although Carmichael still talks as militantly now as he did in the '60s — "We're going to destroy the FBI just as we did the draft," he says — fewer people are listening. When he spoke at Memphis State University last year, only 300 turned out to hear him. At his peak of popularity in the mid '60s, he could have packed an auditorium. Indeed, most people now seem to feel that the day of the militant is over and that we shall not see him again.

"As far as I'm concerned, the militants hurt the movement more than anything," says Jackson. "They went to jail in Memphis and all that stuff, but I can't see one thing that they accomplished."

Jackson, who is still active in civil rights here, believes that the day of the "single voice leader" is gone. "A voice such as Martin Luther King has not developed, and probably never will. Probably, it never will be needed. What must be done now is to move into the economic and political front,

many leaders begin to identify with the establishment rather than the people.

"My whole position is that a society is judged by what it does with the people at the bottom, not those at the top. If you are concerned about education of children in America, then you have to be concerned with the education of black and Indian children. If you improve them, the ripple effect will improve everything. But if you improve things at the top, it's not going to get to the bottom."

Another effect of the election of blacks to public office, Lawson says, is the loss of influence by black ministers. "In the '60s, the black minister was identified as the leader simply because there was almost no other authority figure around. Now, the minister must share leadership with others, who might feel differently about the issues than he does."

Williams, who stepped in as chief of SCLC when Rev. Ralph Abernathy became president emeritus, is even more outspoken on the problem of black officialdom:

"When people say blacks have made political gains, I can't define that as just electing black people to public office. If the black official's major commitment is

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Actually, reflects Jackson, it might not be as effective, either. "Take politics, for example. I never felt that entering the political arena was going to solve any of our problems. It's going to take more than that.

"One of my favorite expressions from Martin King goes like this: 'The oppressor never released the oppressed voluntarily. Rather, the oppressed must rise up and throw off the yoke of the oppressor. I think that's true today. I think that's why there is a good chance the movement could go back to direct action tactics in order to get relief of these situations.'"

There is ample evidence that civil rights leaders are sending up test balloons to determine if public demonstrations can still work. Recently there have been a few local demonstrations around the Mid-South, but the best example of a major test, perhaps, was the NAACP march in Nashville March 18 to protest apartheid in South Africa.

The protest, aimed at the Davis Cup tennis matches between the South African team and the U.S. team on the campus of Vanderbilt University, was initiated by Hooks.

"I believe Nashville was a sign that demonstrations, marches and vigorous protests are to be a part of the weaponry of the '70s and '80s," says Rev. James Lawson, who, ironically, was expelled from Vanderbilt divinity school in 1960 because of civil rights activities.

"I think there are other signs that the re-structuring of the movement has already begun," Lawson added. "You have a strong man at the NAACP in Ben Hooks, a strong new director at SCLC in Joe Lowery, and you have Jesse Jackson at PUSH. These people have been in vigorous consultation with each other about direction and unity. This is happening after a long period of dispersal of power, which was good in some ways and bad in others." Although most people would argue that the election of an increasing number of black people to public office is a clear sign of progress, Lawson points out that it has a negative effect on the movement.

"On one hand, full participation of black people at every level of life is necessary and so in that sense it is good in the long-run. But the negative side is that far too

to downtown or to the super-rich power structure, then I don't consider that as political gains.

"In Atlanta, we have a black mayor who once led garbage men on a 14-day strike against the city. But after he got himself elected, he turned right around and broke a garbage strike that had been going on for only four days. He crushed the right of poor people to dissent, and that's what I'm talking about.

"Take Andrew Young as another example. He had truly become the most powerful black politician this country had ever produced. But he gave it all away to Jimmy Carter. He doesn't wield any real political power, now. But he did, once."

(Young could not be reached for comment.)

Williams is one civil rights leader who sees little difference between the '60s and the '70s in terms of progress:

"The quality of life for the masses that we fought for in the '60s is still in a detrimental state. You got a few house niggers — I call 'em house niggers because they had 'em back in slavery when they had house niggers and field niggers — who were given those little token jobs in banks and insurance companies and the corporate structure. You also have a few handkerchief head Negroes who are able to move into the suburbs and get into the chamber of commerce.

"But the overall desired results that we went after in the '60s have been far missed. We missed helpin' the ones that was lowest on the totem pole. All we did was make life easier for those, who, basically, were livin' easy, anyway."

Consequently, says Williams, who, incidentally, is a state representative, there is greater need for a movement now than there was in the '60s.

"I think if the present leaders do not lead the people back into the street," says Williams, "they're going to get run over and crushed and a new leadership will emerge."

"We need marches that disrupt things, marches that refuse to cooperate with evil, marches that end up in jailings and beatings. 'Cause that's what's going to happen when you refuse to cooperate with evil."

Maxine Smith, who started waging civil rights battles in Memphis more than 20 years ago, has little doubt but what Hooks could well become the new rallying point for blacks.

"We are an emotional people and we like charisma," she says, "and Bennie has that magic touch. At the national convention last year, people unrolled their napkins and stood up and twirled them around for 15 minutes when he finished talkin'. Martin Luther King was a real honey-dripper if there ever was one. But it is my opinion that he couldn't touch Bennie for speaking."

Despite Hooks' eloquence, many observers felt that the only thing the march last month in Nashville proved was that the day of the massive civil rights demonstration is, in fact, gone for good. United Press International pointed out afterwards that the crowd of 2,000 to 3,000 was far smaller than those of the big marches in the '60s. Thus, by simple arithmetic, it was considered a failure.

It is a verdict Hooks refuses to accept.

"The thing that nostalgia tends to obscure," he says, "is that at the very height of the so-called revolution, there were a lot of people who were uninvolved. A minority carried the ball. That march in Nashville would have been a large march in the civil rights days. But some newspaper reporter says, 'Well, it doesn't look like they're going to be able to have big marches like they had in the '60s.'"

"I ask, what big marches? Except for

three or four demonstrations, there were never more than 3,000 to 5,000 people on hand. We figured we had a successful march in most cities if we got 700 or 1,000 people. Most of the time, it was not that many. You can count the gigantic marches (25,000 people or more) on the fingers of one hand. Yet, this is the kind of misinformation that has a great deal to do with where we are.

"The genius of King," Hooks goes on, "was that he was able to galvanize a larger public than the crowd that heard him physically. He was able to generate a kind of spirit that had been lacking up to that time.

"From 1865 to the 1950s, black people had been yearning and expressing themselves for freedom. It just wasn't heard by a majority of white America. It was King's genius to come along and do that, largely with the help of the electronic media. Now, the media didn't care about what he was doing. I have a feeling that they covered the marches because they felt they couldn't afford not to be there, in case something happened.

"But the point is, King was the right man at the right time with the right program. And it didn't necessarily have anything to do with great number of people being at all the marches."

The movement today, Hooks says, is shifting its emphasis to economics. "That's where the action is, now. A poll in August, 1977, revealed that the primary concern among black people was joblessness. So any group — SCLC, Urban League, Martin Luther King Center, NAACP — that is not leading black folks on the question of jobs ain't leading them where they're concerned. It's no accident that Coretta King is the co-chairman (of a coalition) for the full-employment bill. This is the burning issue in the black community."

Although Hooks says a major concern of the NAACP is still the elimination of discrimination, racism and sexism, the battle-

field has definitely shifted. "Obviously, we can't mount big boycotts against a bus company that not only lets you ride in any seat now, but even hires a pretty good ratio of black drivers."

The most serious problem for blacks, themselves, Hooks believes, "is a rollback in the quality of optimism that we once had." This is due, he says, to a rollback in the progress of civil rights.

"Specifically, last year we documented 2,000 cases (in court) by whites on reverse discrimination. Specifically, zoning ordinances have been used to keep blacks from moving into exclusive neighborhoods. Specifically, in May, 1977, Congress passed the 10 per cent set-aside for minority contracts. But in October or November, it was ruled unconstitutional. Specifically, a decent welfare program has yet to be enacted. So, because of heightened expectations that have not been met, there has been a rollback in the quality of our optimism."

Hooks is planning a "summit conference" in May in Chicago so that organizations of all kinds can come together for a study of problems, tactics and directions. Unquestionably, one of the primary concerns will be the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots, which, ironically, was the same focal-point of attention a decade back.

Comedian Dick Gregory probably sums it up best:

After all this time, he says, a lot of people still don't understand the difference between the words "sammich" and "sandwich." When white folks say "sandwich" they mean a little snack between meals, Gregory says. But when black folks say "sammich" they mean that's all they're having for supper.

Like Hooks says, civil rights today is economics.

Activities

Activities in Memphis for the 10th anniversary of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. will begin at 10 p.m. tomorrow at Mason Temple Church of God in Christ at 938 Mason. The meeting, which was organized by the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. & Lorraine Bailey Fund, will be followed by a 24-hour vigil at the Lorraine Motel at 406 Mulberry.

Tuesday's activities will be:

10 a.m.: Student rally sponsored by Operation PUSH (People United to Save and Serve Humanity), WHBQ radio and First Tennessee National Bank, at the Cook Convention Center.

11 a.m.: Education and job market exhibition set up by local businesses, organizations, government divisions and colleges, at the Cook Convention Center.

Noon: Rev. Jesse Jackson, director of Operation PUSH, speaking to local business and community leaders at the Holiday Inn-Central. Memphis State University's "A Tribute to Martin Luther King Jr." presented at MSU Ballroom. A march, sponsored by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 1733, from Clayborn Temple AME Church at 280 Hernando through downtown.

7 p.m.: "Civil Rights — Rights for Whom?" program at MSU Ballroom presented by Citizen's Education Counsel, Inc.

7:30 p.m.: Operation PUSH program at Olivet Baptist Church at 3084 Southern.

Midnight: Vigil at Lorraine Motel ends.

'Strange Occurrences' Hold Meaning

By A Staff Reporter

ATLANTA — Coretta King still talks about the artificial flowers after all this time.

"It happened in March," she says, just a short while before he went to Memphis. "The doctor had ordered him to get some rest and so he was going away on a little weekend vacation trip. Before he left, he went out to buy a few clothes and that's when he sent the flowers. He called from the store and asked if I'd gotten them yet. I said, no, I hadn't.

"By the time he came home to get ready to go to the airport, the flowers had arrived. They were artificial red carnations. They were the ugliest flowers I had ever seen.

"He said, 'Oh, the flowers came.'

"I said, 'Yes, they're beautiful. But they're artificial.' He knew I don't like artificial flowers.

"He said, 'I wanted to give you something you could keep.'"

For Coretta King, it was one of a series of strange occurrences that, looking back, now seem to be fraught with meaning.

Within a span of eight weeks, King preached his own eulogy, told his parents that he might be murdered, and, on the eve of his death, delivered his "mountaintop speech" in Memphis in which he all but predicted his own end.

Mrs. King talked about all those things when she met with the press a few days before the 10th anniversary of her husband's death.

"Martin didn't say directly to me that it's going to happen in Memphis," she said, "but I think he felt that time was running out. I guess he began feeling strongly about the possibility of death in the early '60s. He'd say things like, 'I don't expect to survive the revolution; society's too sick.' I was aware that any campaign was a dan-

gerous one. But there was something a little different about Memphis."

"Somehow you could sense that there was almost a desperation from those people who would really have liked to have gotten him out of the way. But there were other things. Feb. 4 was the Sunday he gave his own eulogy. I wasn't in church that day because the doctor had told me to take it easy. But Martin came home and told me about the sermon. He said, 'I told them what I wanted said at my funeral this morning.'

"You did?" I said.

'He gave his life and the reason I can't mourn for Martin is because I think he was ultimately fulfilled.'

"Yes," he said, "I called it The Drum Major Instinct." Then, he re-preached the sermon. Preachers are like that."

The other thing that happened, she says, is that he had a talk with his parents about the possibility of his death. King's father, whose biography is excerpted this month in McCall's, says his son told them:

"There is a very good chance that... I might be murdered. Any day this could happen... You must be prepared, for I am not afraid. The reports are that they are out to get me."

Although all of the questions surrounding Martin Luther King's death have never been satisfactorily answered, Mrs. King is convinced that, eventually, everything will be known.

"This is just a feeling, sort of an intuition, that, in time, we will know," she says. "I have no idea when or how it will come. But I just have the feeling that my husband's cause was so just, that what he

stood for was so important... that we will know. I just hope I will live to see it."

At present, Mrs. King heads up the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Social Change in Atlanta. Her primary interest right now is working for the passage of the Humphrey-Hawkins full employment bill. As co-chairman of a coalition to push the bill through, she is convinced that this will do more than any other single thing to solve the economic plight of the nation's blacks.

In fact, 10 years after her husband's death, she believes that the goal is jobs and that the way to get them is by lobbying. "That's where it's at, now," she says.

As for progress since '68, Mrs. King puts a lot of faith in political gains. "We had so few elected officials, then," she says. "Now, we have more than 4,000 blacks and other minority peoples in this administration. To me, that's progress. Also, we were able to elect a president in '76, and we've acquired political leverage through use of the ballot. I think that's progress. Finally, we have a full-employment bill. It's taken 10 years to reach this point, but, realistically, I think that's progress."

In other areas, however, she is not so sure that the country has advanced much since 1968.

When asked who, of all the black people in the field, might emerge as the first nationally elected public official, such as president or vice president, Mrs. King frowned:

"It isn't that I don't know the answer," she said, "it's that I have a problem saying

what I feel because I don't want it held against the person. I feel the forces of reaction in this country are so strong that any leader that seems to be gaining significant ground and moving ahead is in danger."

Asked what kind of danger, she said, "There's assassination of people's character's first, then, if that doesn't work, there's assassination of the person physically. We haven't had any assassinations, lately. But don't ever forget we had three major ones in this country and I think the seeds are still here."

Mrs. King told The Commercial Appeal that she will not come to Memphis April 4 to mark the anniversary of her husband's death. She said she will lay a wreath on her late husband's tomb as she does, officially, about four times a year — and that will be it.

"The beauty of the whole experience of Martin Luther King," she said, "seemed to be that his work was completed, and that he sort of rounded off his life in such a way that he had done what he could do. Now, you can say there was much more he could do. But the fact is, he had written those five books and if you read them it's all there, a blueprint, which, in many ways we have not caught up to him.

"He gave his life and the reason I can't mourn for Martin is because I think he was ultimately fulfilled. If you die in a struggle, that's a righteous cause and that death can become a redemptive force in a society. So if you start crying, you cry for yourself. You're not crying for him because he did his work, he lived well, and I think he was satisfied. I think if he had to choose the way to go he would have chosen the way he did. Because he wasn't trying to save himself."