

A Dreamer: Eloquence, Conviction—

Heroes are hard to have around. It's much easier—and safer—to wait until they're gone, put them on pedestals, deck them with wreathes and praise them inordinately in round after round of memorial speeches. Over the years the living figures become increasingly lost in myths. They are inhumanly encased in marble and assigned qualities they probably never possessed.

Something of this sort seems to have happened with Martin Luther King. In the 10 years since King was killed the portrayals of him are almost unrecognizable. That was inevitable, for the circumstances of his death and his age—he was just 38—elevated him instantly into a form of sainthood.

King was no saint, and he had his share of frustration and failure, particularly in the years leading toward his death.

The process of King's deification began instantly with his murder; one of the strongest memories from that traumatic period is of watching the way men, women and children plucked the flowers from the slope where he lay literally only minutes after his body had been placed inside its marble crypt in Atlanta. They carried those flowers off, proud heirlooms, to be preserved for posterity. Within hours of his death a decade ago, Martin Luther King already had assumed the air of a legend. He was, it was said everywhere then, one of the line of great martyrs of history.

There was, in fact, a kind of mysticism about King. He had taken for his model Mohandas Gandhi, India's apostle of nonviolence. In the end, both were victims of assassins and King's

death in particular touched off a spasm of violence throughout the United States.

Death never seemed to hold any terror for King. In a sense, he almost welcomed it; it was part of his ministry, and his mysticism. Ten years before he was shot and killed in Memphis he had been stabbed in the back and nearly died. In the years that followed he was constantly threatened and cursed and reviled. If you traveled with King you walked with bodyguards and plainclothes policemen and rode in unmarked official cars. King always made light of them; they were merely an inconvenience. Like Robert Kennedy, he often discussed the prospect of his assassination and always shrugged it off with a fatalistic air.

The very retelling of these personal characteristics, real though they were, of course contributes to the legend. What isn't told as often are other aspects about him.

King had, for instance, a delightful sense of humor. He was a great tease, and relished employing the light touch. When he had taken his civil rights movement north into Chicago, in 1966, King typically charged into his work with astonishing energy. But he never seemed to let fatigue impede his sense of fun.

One night, after a particularly strenuous day, he wound up at a private dinner party given by a group of wealthy blacks who had contributed \$12,000 to his organization during the days of strife in Selma. It was a lavish party, in luxurious surroundings. The hostess served vintage champagne and 25-year-old brandy. King drank tomato juice. At the table, King presided over what he called a dinner of "soul food"—chitter-

ings, pig's feet, ham and turnip greens. When his key aide, Andrew Young, passed up the chitterlings, King's voice boomed out: "Andy, you've been away too long."

Young dutifully took a helping. When seconds were called for, King noticed the one white person at the table had passed up the chitterlings. With a mischievous twinkle, and an expansive gesture, that resonant voice boomed out again dramatically: "Pass Brother Johnson here the chitterlings. He's too shy to let you know how much he loves

Haynes Johnson

KING

them." Brother Johnson took a second helping, to his obvious discomfort and King's puckish delight.

After the dinner and more pleasantries King moved out again into the night to keep still another appointment, this one a speech before a large black audience at a church in the Chicago slums. As the car threaded through the traffic, King rubbed his forehead slightly and said:

"Andy, I haven't even begun to think about what I'm going to say."

"That means you'll preach the walls off, Doctor," Young replied.

-and Frustration

And, naturally, he did. Even during his glory days in the South, when tension and the threat of violence were everpresent, King often retreated into a sort of bemused wonder. He was wont to gaze at the spectacle of some civil rights march stretching behind him and muse, half aloud, "Well, well, well."

But another side of King was less enthralling. It was his fate to achieve success early, and then enter a period of prolonged frustration. At least, that was the impression here.

In his last few years of life, Martin Luther King drove himself restlessly — from the South, to the northern big cities, to Europe, and, gloomily, toward the worsening war in Southeast Asia. Few of his efforts—from Chicago to Saigon—had been successful. Worse, from his personal viewpoint, he knew he was losing his following among many blacks in America.

King, although still in his 30s, was regarded by many as a figure from the past. To the militants, he was a contemptible compromiser; to the white racists, he was an anarchist; to the black masses, his words were being drowned out by the voices of anger. His preaching and promises did not result in dramatic change.

In the process, King seemed to change. If you saw him after an absence of a year, you were struck by the tired look and even more by the diffident manner. It was not the buoyant, energetic King one had known—the King who thrived on three hours of sleep night after night, the King who joked

lightly with a handful of those who stayed with him to the end, the King who never doubted the final outcome.

King had not lost faith, but he did appear less assured. He continued to speak out, but his words were lost in the sound of riots and reaction.

He was killed at a time of increasing violence in American life. His death removed the one dominant figure who bridged the races, the one who spoke a language both sides understood and, for a while, respected. No one has filled that position since, and America remains the poorer for it.

Seen in retrospect, the most surprising thing about Martin Luther King today is how conservative he was—and how implausible that such an essentially conventional figure could stir such controversy and fear. King's message was basically old-fashioned. He spoke as a Southern Baptist minister. And although he called for mass movements and civil disobedience to remedy the past, his approach always was conciliatory. He sought change through an appeal to the principles of democracy—and to the tenets of his religion.

What distinguished him the most, though, was something else. He was a man of dreams and visions, and no American expressed them with more eloquence and conviction.

It is that quality, the gift of eloquence and compassion, that seems so lacking in this leaderless and flat present.

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