

PART 1

Roots of Protest and Nonviolence in the King Family

Coretta Scott King once recalled the story that Martin Luther King Sr. (Daddy King) told her about his mother's physical retaliation against the white mill owner who beat him one day when she sent him on an errand. When he returned home in bloodied condition, Delia King commanded her son to tell her what happened. Afterward, he was instructed to not tell his father about the incident. Mrs. King knew that her husband would go after the man with his gun.

Delia King made a dangerous and potentially life-threatening decision, especially in a place like Stockbridge, Georgia during the first two decades of the twentieth century. She took her son and confronted the white man who beat him. A scuffle ensued, and according to Daddy King's account she physically took the man down to the ground, and commenced pounding him in the facial area with her fists, all the while lecturing him on what would happen if he ever put his hands on one of her children again. During the scuffle, she gave no thought to the possible consequences of her actions for she and/or members of her family. For during that period in the Deep South it was not uncommon for whites who believed they were in one way or another insulted by a black person—whether intended or not—to retaliate not only against the perceived offender, but against family members as well, including children. Delia King

was not by nature a violent person. She, pure and simple, was a mother who loved her children and would go to great lengths to protect them, even if it meant risking her life and that of other family members. In such cases Delia King was not disposed to nonviolence.

As it turned out, James King did hear about the incident, and as Delia King predicted, he went after the white man with his gun. The mill owner could not be found, so King left. He later heard that a mob of white men was forming and that he was the target. Rather than return home, he went into hiding deep in the woods for about six weeks.¹

Based on what Daddy King told her about the beating incident, Coretta King concluded that “the spirit of nonviolence was not inherited from Martin’s family.”² However, this was only a partial truth. It would have been more accurate to say that while King Jr. did not inherit the spirit of nonviolence from either his father or his paternal grandparents,³ his mother and maternal grandparents most certainly provided a significant example of nonviolent direct action.

The three chapters in Part 1 uncover and examine some of the roots of the protest and nonviolence traditions in Martin Luther King Jr.’s family history. While nonviolence implies protest, protest does not necessarily allude to nonviolence. For protest can be of the nonviolent or violent type. Taking “protest tradition” as an umbrella term, it would be true to say that it roots deep in the family lineage of King. But as we saw above, the nonviolence tradition does not apply to both sides of his family. Historically, both sides unhesitatingly protested injustice and violations to their personhood. Without doubt, King inherited the spirit of protest from both sides of his family. However, as we will see, only the maternal side can be credited with influencing him to be nonviolent.

Like most things, it can generally be said that violence and nonviolence are learned behaviors, such that it cannot be said that John Doe was born violent, or that Jane Doe was born nonviolent. (I don’t know if it’s possible to have a violent or nonviolent gene or to have either in one’s DNA, but in King’s day this was not thought to be the case.) Martin Luther King was not

1. Martin Luther King Sr. with Clayton Riley, *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), 35.

2. Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), 77.

3. Lewis V. Baldwin, *There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 124. Baldwin rightly calls into question Coretta King’s claim that her husband inherited nothing of the nonviolent spirit from his family.

born with the propensity for one or the other of these tendencies. However, his family upbringing, church attendance, schooling, and other environmental factors were potential contributors to whether he inclined toward violence or toward nonviolence.

King's mother had a very gentle personality in comparison to the volatile temper of her husband. Having grown up in the same house with both parents, King seems to have been more influenced by his mother's temperament. She was thought to have a loving and gentle spirit and King seems to have taken after her. This is not to say that either King or his mother never got angry and blew their stack. It is to say, however, that this would have been exceptional, uncommon behavior for either of them.

The ethics of nonviolence and the determination to resist or protest injustice is central to King's theological social ethics, and to a large extent it set him apart from virtually everyone else in the United States. King did not merely write about protest and nonviolence, he lived, practiced, and baptized them in the white-hot heat of the civil rights movement. I think we learn much about Martin Luther King the human being and "drum major for justice" when we look seriously at the protest and nonviolence traditions in his family background. By so doing, we learn much about his character, that is, his capacity and will to discipline himself to work toward the achievement of a specific set of values and to stay the course, no matter what. We will see that King certainly did this as he sought the attainment of the beloved community. He made personal moral slip-ups along the way, but by and large he was totally focused on the achievement of justice for those counted among the least of these.

Martin Luther King was a human being, no more or less so than any member of his family tree, or any other human being. I happen to think that it is important to acknowledge this at the outset of any discussion on King, because failure to do so might well lead to the troublesome tendency to dismiss his many contributions toward making better persons, a better nation, and a better world when it is discovered that he made egregious moral mistakes. Many people on the religious and secular far right have a strong track record of denouncing and dismissing King's many contributions because of his perceived moral weaknesses. Failure to acknowledge King's humanity may also cause some people to claim that while they still respect his sense of commitment and his courage to do all in his power to achieve the beloved community, they have lost respect for him as a human being because of the charge of moral wrongdoing, namely, plagiarism and womanizing.

Although this is the tendency of many on the religious and secular right, curiously it is also the stance exhibited by one of the best-known, most competent King scholars, David J. Garrow, who had the equivalent of a meltdown when Clayborne Carson, Director of the King Papers Project at Stanford University, and his collaborators broke the plagiarism story in 1990. A member of the Board of Directors of the King Papers Project, Garrow claimed to have been so troubled and distraught by the discovery that King plagiarized on a persistent basis during his seminary and doctoral studies that he could no longer hold him in as high regard as he previously had, even though he claimed to have retained great appreciation and respect for his courage, commitment, and contributions to the civil and human rights struggle.⁴

Every person develops in and emerges from a specific sociocultural and family context. Martin Luther King was no different. As King's sister has written, contrary to what many seem to believe, he did not just appear. "They think that he simply happened, that he appeared fully formed, without context, ready to change the world. Take it from his big sister, that's simply not the case."⁵ It stands to reason that people like King, who pursue formal intellectual studies, necessarily bring much to the classroom. Depending on the nature of one's formative influences, it might well be that he will easily resonate to certain formal intellectual ideas. I have tried to show in my previous writings on King that this is precisely what happened to him—that because of his family upbringing; because of the love and affection of his parents and maternal grandparents for each other and for the King children; because of his father's and maternal grandfather's outlook on ministry and their insistence that a minister is obligated to address the needs of the whole person; because of the liberal theological and social gospel influence of Benjamin Mays and George Kelsey at Morehouse College, in addition to the Christian realist ideas of Kelsey along with those of Walter Chivers and Samuel Williams, King was easily influenced by the social gospel teachings of Walter Rauschenbusch, the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, and the personalism of Borden P. Bowne, Edgar S. Brightman, and L. Harold DeWolf. And yet, King himself brought a lot to the table, such that we should not presume that he took everything from others, and had nothing of his own to give. He worked

4. See Rufus Burrow Jr., *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 9. See Peter Waldman, "To Their Dismay, Scholars of Martin Luther King Find Troubling Citation Pattern in Academic Papers," *Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 1990, 1.

5. Christine King Farris, *Through It All: Reflections on My Life, My Family, and My Faith* (New York: Atria, 2009), 3.

hard and diligently with others' ideas, but these were filtered through his own sociocultural, religious, and family context.

Other than in my courses on Martin Luther King, I have not—before now—written much about the protest and nonviolence roots of King's thought and practice. This first section of the book seeks, in part, to show that even though there was a period when the boy King—like many young boys—did not hesitate to settle disputes with his fists or wrestling skills, he soon grew out of this and was much more inclined to use his intellect to resolve conflicts, which also made him amenable to nonviolence. In part, this appears to have been the result of the guidance and tender care of his mother and maternal grandmother. Just as King was counseled by his mother when he was a boy, that the Christian faith required that he love the racist parents of his white friend who forbade them to play together because of their racial difference, we can be sure that Mama King, a Christian and First Lady of Ebenezer Baptist Church, continued to remind him periodically of this requirement. Indeed, Lewis Baldwin, reflecting on an interview with Philip Lenud, a boyhood friend of King, reports that King's first direct and real contact with nonviolence was through his mother who, according to Lenud, "was the strong pacifist in the family, and [King] took that from her."⁶ Baldwin contends that Mama King's pacifism derived from her deep emotional and spiritual security, on which King Jr. apparently drew heavily.⁷

We will see that in one form or another Martin Luther King was exposed at home and in church to some of the basic ideas of personalism, Christian realism, the social gospel, and liberal theology. But this was not all. He also gained rudimentary knowledge about nonviolence during his formative upbringing. Moreover, he would not learn the formal names of most of the aforementioned schools of thought until he entered Crozer Theological Seminary in the fall of 1948. King's father, maternal grandfather, and teacher-mentors at Morehouse College taught and lived social gospel Christianity, took seriously the prevalence and power of sin (as stressed in Christian realism), and emphasized the idea of a personal God and the dignity of persons, as stressed in personalism and liberal theology. Thus, King could declare in his first term at Crozer, and even before he read Walter Rauschenbusch(!), that he was "a profound advocator of the social gospel."⁸ After all, this was the type of ministry done by his father and maternal grandfather, as well as other black Atlanta

6. Baldwin, *There Is a Balm*, 123.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 19.

ministers with whom King was acquainted when he was a boy, such as William Holmes Borders. In addition, we will see that King likely got his first formal introduction to Gandhian nonviolence not at the predominantly white Crozer Theological Seminary, but through Benjamin E. Mays's Tuesday chapel talks at Morehouse College. The idea of nonviolence as the most reasonable and Christian way to resolve conflicts was instilled in King by his mother, with the support of his maternal grandmother. This we may refer to as his *homespun* sense of nonviolence.

In my work and teaching on King I assume his humanity, with all of the strengths and weaknesses thereto pertaining. King was a human being, pure and simple. By his own admission, he was, in this sense, as much a sinner as anybody else. His aim was not to be perfect, nor to be a saint—for these were impossible in any case—and nothing I shall say will in any way be aimed at making him out to be otherwise. Perhaps like Gandhi, King also believed that the word *saint* should not even be part of the human vocabulary. The limitations and weaknesses of human beings are such that the word “is too sacred . . . to be lightly applied” to human beings, said Gandhi.⁹ Martin Luther King sought only “to be a good man,”¹⁰ to be faithful to his God, and to be a drum major for justice and righteousness.¹¹ When it is remembered that he was first and last a human being, it should not be difficult for the thinking person to concur with those who conclude that notwithstanding his moral shortcomings, Martin Luther King was indeed faithful to his people and to his God to the very end.

What do we learn about Martin Luther King Jr.'s commitment to protesting injustice, and doing so nonviolently, when we examine his family roots? When we look at the contributions of some of the key members of King's family tree he comes alive to us in new ways. We get a better sense of why he was the person he was, and why, despite his shortcomings and limitations, he remained faithful right up to the moment that a 30.06 slug from a high-powered rifle ended his life. Were there attributes of his grandfathers, grandmothers, and parents that made him more susceptible to being influenced by certain of the formal intellectual ideas he was exposed to at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University? Do we at least see evidence of some of these ideas in members of his family tree? Are there

9. M. K. Gandhi, “Neither a Saint Nor a Politician,” in *In Search of the Supreme* in three volumes compiled and edited by V. B. Kher (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1961), II:241.

10. Martin Luther King Jr., “Unfulfilled Dreams,” in *A Knock at Midnight*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 198.

11. See David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 555.

particular attributes of King's grandparents and parents that are revealed in his own personhood and public work? Do we find roots of his personalism, social gospel Christianity, and Christian realism in his grandparents and parents? Do we find evidence of these in his teachers at Morehouse? Or is it the case that he was first introduced to the ideas represented in these doctrines by his white seminary and graduate school professors?

Indeed, can it be reasonably argued that King was not influenced by the philosophy of personalism to any significant degree, as Garrow, David Chappell, and Keith D. Miller¹² seem to imply, or that it is the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism that stands out most in King's theology and social activism,¹³ and not personalism, as Chappell contends? Or is it more plausible to say that King was much influenced by aspects of both schools of thought as well as others, although his basic philosophical stance was personal idealism or personalism? In any case, a consideration of some of the key personalities in King's family tree will shed some light on these and related questions, as well as the spirit and practice of protest and nonviolence that were at the center of King's adult life. What do we learn about such matters through an examination of contributions of his grandparents and parents? This is the focus of the three chapters in Part 1.

12. See David Garrow, *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Carlson, 1989), 1:xiv; David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 53, 54, 222n32; and Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 7, 17.

13. This is a position advocated by David L. Chappell in his *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).