

Preface

Historically, in most black communities, it was thought that children have a certain place, and that they should be taught to remember it. There were certain things considered to be “grown folks’ business,” and children were taught and expected to remain in their place. As one of my students wrote in my course on King during the 2013–2014 school year: “We were expected to be silent in the presence of adults, and we were not to even ask questions.” Strong, but loving parenting was necessary to ensure that children understood and abided by this code. This was all the more important during the time of blacks’ enslavement in this country, since the failure of an enslaved child to keep the secrets of what was discussed or heard in the enslaved quarters could very easily lead to beatings and/or lynchings. In truth, then, the expectation that black children would keep their place, hold their tongue, and not involve themselves in grown folks’ business is a carryover from slavery. But even after slavery, the period of Reconstruction (roughly 1867–1877) and beyond, blacks continued to believe that there were some things that simply did not concern their children, and that they should not be exposed to them. Whether intended or not, the practice slowly developed that required not only that black children not talk outside the home about matters pertaining to freedom, but they

were to know that this was an adult matter, and adults alone would address it. In part, at least, this is the context for the stance of those blacks like Thurgood Marshall, Malcolm X, and many black residents in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, in McComb, Mississippi, and numerous other places in the Deep South regarding the use of children and youth in the freedom struggle. Many adult blacks rejected the idea of utilizing black children and young people in this way, as we will see in this book. And yet, much to the surprise of many, but not all, it was the children and youth who boldly led the way in many of the civil rights campaigns, and who energized the movement at strategic moments. They asserted themselves, making it clear once and for all that they were fully aware of racial discrimination and its adverse effects on them.

This book focuses on the coming of age, self-determination, and role of black children and youths during the civil rights movement, and how their contributions aided the efforts of Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders. We will see that at some points young people actually initiated and led campaigns for civil rights and freedom, such as the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, and voter education-registration projects in Albany, Georgia, the Mississippi Delta, and Selma, Alabama. King exhibited deep respect and admiration for young people—from Montgomery, Alabama to Memphis, Tennessee. It was always his sense that because so much of the struggle for justice and freedom was about the future of these young people, and because they suffered the pain and agony of racial discrimination as much as black adults, they had every right to make their own contributions to eradicate injustice and to participate in the construction of a gentler and just society where the humanity and dignity of every person would be acknowledged and respected just because they were human beings.

To be sure, there was not always complete agreement between King and black youths regarding his increasingly staunch commitment to nonviolence as a way of life. This was particularly the case of those youths who were committed to movement goals, but did not undergo the rigorous training in nonviolence. This was the case of some Deep South youths, as well as many Northern black youths who went south to lend a helping hand. There were also instances in which some youths, particularly latecomers to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), believed that King's actions sometimes did not go far enough, and that he sold out, as in the case of the second march to the Pettus Bridge in Selma after the "Bloody Sunday" tragedy two days earlier in March of 1965. But for all of this, the relationship between King and black youth was complex, and although there was often mutual cooperation between them, tension and divisiveness also developed regarding differences in strategy as well as ideology. To his credit, Martin Luther King made every effort to express his disagreements with youthful activists behind closed doors rather than publicly or through the media. He always wanted to give the public impression of a united front.

Martin Luther King always acknowledged that children and young people are human beings, and therefore are also adversely affected by racism and discriminatory practices. It affects how they think of themselves, just as it affects adults, King reasoned. In light of this, children and young people should be allowed to protest that which undermines their humanity and sense of dignity. If children and young people are old enough to understand that racism means that they should be treated as less than their white counterparts, they are old enough to do something about it. But just here, is where the responsible, guiding hand of adults comes into play. Even though young people may want to do something to end discriminatory practices against them, chances are they do not know quite what to

do, or how to do it. This is a place where they can be taught the history of race relations, and God's expectation of human beings who face discrimination of various kinds. For King, this would also be the place at which young people can be taught the importance of nonviolence as the method for overcoming race discrimination and other forms of injustice.

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, SNCC members and other youth activists were among the first to learn that children know more than adults are sometimes aware, and that they instinctively want to push back when their humanity is threatened or otherwise undermined. A King protégé, James Bevel, saw the wisdom of putting this idea to work in the Birmingham campaign of 1963. He and his wife, Diane Nash Bevel, had learned from their organizing work with black youth in Mississippi that young people tended to be less afraid than black adults. Moreover, even when they could not articulate it well on their own, black youths knew almost instinctively when they were being mistreated because of their race. James Bevel had the wherewithal to see how such youthful energy and desire to get involved in their own liberation process could be useful in pushing the movement forward.

From the 1950s through roughly the 1970s, black youth seemed to want to get involved in the struggle for civil rights and freedom because they were aware of its importance for themselves, for their parents and grandparents, and for those who would come after them. Since that time, however, things have shifted such that many black youth today seem to have little interest in such things, and seem to be content with what adults will do for them by way of social struggle. Very many seem content to pursue the elusive American dream, with no sense of the need for social critique. Let me give an illustration of what I am talking about here.

Several years ago, I was invited by a Midwestern university to give a lecture on King during a presidential election year. During the question and answer period, a black male student asked, “What can students do?” This was quite an appropriate question, since the conclusion of the lecture focused on implications of King’s legacy and the role of young people today. The student’s body language suggested that he was troubled when I responded that there are indeed things that students can do to contribute toward making a better society and world. The student seemed to suggest that this is adult work. Since he asked about what types of things students could do, I said that in a presidential election year, one thing they can surely do is to canvass neighborhoods in the immediate vicinity of the university to encourage people to register to vote, and if already registered, encourage them to actually go to the polls on election-day. I later heard back from the faculty member who extended the invitation to me. He informed me that the student had come to his office the next day and expressed his dismay that “adults won’t do their job, but always seem to expect young people to do what they themselves should be doing.” He apparently felt that since he was in college he should be permitted a kind of holiday from participating in any way in matters of social justice.

I took the young man’s reaction very seriously, since I had heard similar comments made by young people before. I was particularly alarmed because more often than not, such comments are made by college students. My concern was not caused by any sense of these young people being among what W. E. B. Du Bois once termed the *talented tenth*. The alarm was triggered just as much by the fact that such comments are made by too many noncollegiate black students too. What occurs to me each time I hear such things is that such persons either have no sense of the history of race relations in this country, particularly during the civil rights era, or they just have no

interest in knowing that history. Or perhaps they believe it has no relevance for their lives. While this is certainly the case with some, there is also good reason to suspect that more often than not, they just do not know the history; do not know that blacks' struggle against injustice and racism has historically been the concern of both adults and young people in the black community. They seem to have no sense of the large role that young people played during the civil rights movement, and that there is much that they themselves can do today.

It is therefore problematic to imply, as the aforementioned student did, that social justice work is adult work, and is not that about which young people should have to concern themselves. We will see that during the civil rights era many young people, mostly blacks, but some whites as well, actually dropped out of school to devote fulltime to the struggle, so important did they believe civil rights work to be. And yet, it was also the case that many students figured out ways to remain in school and to support the cause as best they could, sometimes participating in sit-ins and nonviolent demonstrations, passing out flyers door to door in neighborhoods near their college campus, and so on. But they did not, like the young man who asked the question, assume that they should be allowed to finish school, thus having a time for play, before being expected to contribute to the ongoing struggle for freedom. They knew that they and their people were in the fight of their very lives, and that every one of them had something to contribute; indeed, must contribute whatever they could. In my own experience, I find that far too many Afrikan American and other college students know little or nothing of that period of black history. There is therefore a need to learn this history and to begin appropriating it.

Now of course, some may be quick to say that the big advantage that young people had during the civil rights movement was that they actually lived through the events every day, and therefore could

not pretend ignorance; could not pretend that what was happening had nothing to do with them. Because they were aware of what was happening, and were often directly affected by it, they were compelled to act in a way and to a degree that students today are not. The student who asked the question after my King lecture did not feel compelled to act. I want to think that to a large extent this had to do with his simply not knowing enough about the history of race relations in this country.

In any case, I am convinced that one of the sheer failures of the educational system in this country is that of teaching students the history leading up to and including the civil rights era, and beyond. This is important not only for Afrikan American students, but for all students, for this was history that U.S. citizens—regardless of race-ethnicity—all made together, for good or bad. It is *our* history together, and therefore it concerns us all. Educational curricula need to be altered so that students will be taught this history and how it is connected to many of the still-existing racial, cultural, political, and social problems that we face as a nation. The hope would be that through such teaching, some, at least, would see the relevance of young people's contributions to social justice struggles, particularly when educators help them to make the connections with current-day issues that may be adversely affecting them. Indeed, when fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin's teacher, Mrs. Geraldine Nesbitt, was teaching her students about the U.S. Constitution in her Montgomery, Alabama classroom, she also helped them to make the connection between constitutional rights and bus segregation in that city. Because of this, Colvin, when subsequently ordered by a bus driver to give her paid-for seat to a white patron, refused, saying that, having paid the same fare as everyone else, she had a constitutional right to her seat. It seems to me that the educational component is a critical step as we think about how best to carry the struggle forward.

Reflecting on the civil rights era and the role played by herself and other young people, Diane Nash concluded that today's young people should be told about the struggle and the significant contributions made by their earlier counterparts; that it was not just adults who made contributions and sacrifices, including their very lives. "I think it's really important that young people today understand that the movement of the sixties was really a people's movement," said Nash. "The media and history seem to record it as Martin Luther King's movement, but young people should realize that it was people just like them, their age, that formulated goals and strategies, and actually developed the movement. When they look around now, and see things that need to be changed, they should say: 'What can I do? What can my roommate and I do to effect that change?'"¹ It might not be much that she and her roommate and others like them can do at the particular time, but the determination and courage to do *something*, matters, especially in the long sweep of things. Nash was remembering that during the civil rights movement, vast numbers of young people took it on themselves to actually fight for their rights; to contribute what they could. Her point was not to be unduly critical of King's role, for she was the first to admit that he was the symbol and beloved leader of the national movement. What Nash wants to convey to today's young people is that when she was a young college student, members of her generation jumped right in, wherever they were, and contributed what they could. They did not make excuses. They did not wait for the approval or permission of adults, including King, although they were open to sagely advice or counsel. They got involved, because they knew instinctively that their lives and futures, including that of the race, were at stake. Because it is often difficult for an

1. Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (New York: Viking, 1987), 131.

individual to step up to the plate, Nash reflected that it might be easier for such persons to seek out and join with a group or movement that may be trying to address a social issue that seemed particularly troubling. As for herself, Nash recalled that “[t]he movement had a way of reaching inside me and bringing out things that I never knew were there. Like courage, and love for people.”² Her point is that everybody can do something, an idea that Martin Luther King stressed frequently during movement days. Even those who could not accept his nonviolent philosophy, and thus were not allowed to march in the demonstrations led by him, could run errands, do filing, make telephone calls, pass out leaflets, and so forth.

Young people today need to know that they matter, that what happens to them matters, and what they do about it matters. But they also need to know that the practical world is such that they dare not sit back passively and hope that someone else—adults or otherwise—will address the problems that concern them. Many young people (of all social classes) during the movement years figured this out. They decided that their involvement in the struggle for civil rights was their decision to make, and no one else’s. Because many of the first youthful activists, e.g., SNCC youths, were trained in the method of nonviolence, they also understood that their involvement would be costly. They therefore braced themselves to face the consequences of their actions, including having to go to jail, and possibly even being made to disappear in one of the muddy rivers or an earthen dam in the Mississippi Delta.

Those who come to positive decision about carrying the movement forward will need fortitude and all that the term implies: determination, courage, endurance, strength, and stick-to-itiveness. During movement days, those who held the reins of power and privilege and benefited from injustices done to others generally did

2. Ibid.

not yield or share their power and privilege willingly, or out of a sense of morality, Christian or otherwise. It is no different today, which means that any struggle for justice will likely be a long and protracted one, with sometimes harsh consequences.

Although the primary focus of this book is on the contributions and sacrifices of Afrikan American youths, we will also see that many white youths made significant contributions and sacrifices during the civil rights struggle. Jim Zwerg was a white college student from Beloit College in Wisconsin, who had grown up in Madison. He volunteered to be an exchange student at the all-black Fisk University in Nashville. This was when he got caught up in the civil rights activism of the Nashville youth activists, many who were either in college, or had dropped out to devote fulltime to the cause. Zwerg joined John Lewis (now longtime U.S. Congressman) and other youth activists to continue the Freedom Ride in 1961 after another group of Riders had been brutally attacked outside Anniston, Alabama. Once the young people left the Birmingham bus terminal and arrived at the terminal in Montgomery, Zwerg and others were savagely beaten by racist thugs as they left the bus. Zwerg was likely beaten worse because he was white. In the warped minds of white supremacists, the worst thing a white person could do was to support and participate in the freedom struggle with blacks to make freedom and democracy a reality for all. Zwerg's injuries were such that he required extended hospitalization, and was unable to continue with his youthful Freedom Ride colleagues. From his hospital bed he displayed the fortitude that had already characterized his sister and brother Riders. He told an interviewer: "We will continue our journey, one way or another. We are prepared to die."³ This was the motto of the youthful Riders. Diane Nash, leader of the Nashville

3. Quoted in John Blake, *Children of the Movement* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2004), 33.

student activists, had said: “Mob violence must not stop men’s striving toward right. Freedom Rides and other such actions must not be stopped until our nation is really free.”⁴ It must have taken a real sense of determination and courage for young Zwerg to continue in the struggle for civil rights and freedom for all. Indeed, these were kids who would not be deterred by violence; not even death.

In truth, the lives of blacks and whites continue to be so integrally intermingled in the United States that it is virtually impossible for either group alone to succeed in establishing the beloved community wherein every individual person is respected by virtue of being a person, and where the needs of all are met before any has the right to collect and store away surplus goods. But in order to establish such a reality, civil rights youths had a good sense that strong alliance building was needed. Somehow blacks and whites had to figure out how to build coalitions around strong common interests. Such efforts among black and white youth of the civil rights era did not go unnoticed by Martin Luther King, who was always quick to applaud their efforts in alliance building and to encourage them to keep at it. When black youth initiated the sit-in movement and also insisted on the need for the Freedom Rides to continue, white youth of conscience and good will quickly joined in coalition with them, an alliance, King recalled, that stirred and “aroused the conscience of the nation.” This was all done by young people—kids—seeing the nation and world as it was, and making the decision to do something about it, with or without the support of adults. Neither blacks nor whites did a good enough job of addressing the racial aspects of the coalitions formed, which is why none of the alliances held together after the 1960s. And yet, it was a moment in history from which

4. Diane Nash, “Inside the Sit-ins and Freedom Rides: Testimony of a Southern Student,” in *The New Negro*, ed. Mathew H. Ahmann (New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1969), 53.

youth of today can learn valuable lessons should they see the wisdom of building coalitions with groups that share similar goals.

Just months before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King declared that although he was not completely optimistic, neither was he ready to concede defeat.⁵ To the extent that he trusted and had faith in God and the future, he had faith in human beings to do the things that make for a better society and world. The key, for King, was his faith in God, not in human beings as such. God was the source, the ground of any faith that King had in human beings. “I have faith in the future because I have faith in God,” King said, “and I believe that there is a power, a creative force in this universe seeking at all times to bring down prodigious hilltops of evil and pull low gigantic mountains of injustice. If we will believe this and struggle along, we will be able to achieve it.”⁶ King’s faith was in God, and through God, in human beings. Neither human beings nor God alone can abolish injustice and establish justice. Neither can establish the beloved community alone. Rather, King held, there must be ongoing cooperative endeavor between human beings and God.

Based on the youth activism that he witnessed from Montgomery to Memphis, Martin Luther King knew that if only because of those young people’s contributions, there was reason to hope that the beloved community could be achieved, or more nearly approximated. He had witnessed with his own eyes what the imagination, determination, and courage of committed young people could accomplish. On the contrary, and but for a few exceptions, there was much less reason to be hopeful about what adults (the “oldsters” King sometimes called them) would accomplish

5. Martin Luther King Jr., “Impasse in Race Relations,” in his *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 13.

6. Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5:418.

toward establishing the beloved community, since many of them tended to be far too conservative and timid to contribute meaningfully in this regard.

Youthful activists, through their various coalitions, accomplished much during the sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and numerous voter education-registration projects, most notably the Freedom Summer Project in the Mississippi Delta region. So much negative history existed between black and white youths that even on their best days their alliance was difficult, at best, to maintain. There were issues of trust that constantly arose, as well as elitism among some whites (intended or not!). There was deep suspicion on the part of many black youth activists. Moreover, the specter of racism loomed large, such that when blacks and well-meaning whites called attention to this it led to added strain on the coalition. Some wondered, for example, how the federal government could launch such a massive search for Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney when other civil rights activists—all black—had also disappeared in places like the Mississippi Delta and received virtually no attention. Indeed, some concluded that had Chaney, who was black, been the only missing civil rights worker, the federal government would likely have remained silent and uninvolved. Some, including white youths, voiced their concern that there was such a massive outpouring of grief throughout the country and within the federal government when white Unitarian Universalist minister James Reeb was clubbed to death in Selma, Alabama, while there was virtual silence outside the black community when Jimmy Lee Jackson, a black activist, was murdered by an Alabama state trooper in nearby Marion.

It was difficult for black and white youths to keep working together in common cause, but they did it better than most, until the alliance began to break down because of increased suspicion, as well as a sense among some black youth activists that they needed to do

some work among themselves, without whites being present. In part, at least, this is what happened to SNCC, which, from its inception, had been an interracial organization that was open to whites being in positions of leadership. In late 1967, King's assessment was that the general alliance between black and white youth activists had fallen apart "under the impact of failures, discouragement, and consequent extremism and polarization. The movement for social change has entered a time of temptation to despair because it is clear now how deep and systemic are the evils it confronts. There is a strong temptation to despair of programs and actions, and to dissipate energy into hysterical talk. There is a temptation to break up into mutually suspicious extremist groups in which blacks reject the participation of whites and whites reject the realities of their own history."⁷ That there was evidence that the old coalitions were breaking up did not mean, for King, that alliances were no longer important for those who had intention to continue the journey toward establishing the beloved community. Indeed, for King, coalition building for such people was all the more important, so much so, that what was now needed was a forging of even broader coalitions to include previously excluded groups, such as Hispanic youth and poor youth of all races that share common interests and goals, for example, civil rights, voting rights, healthcare, jobs that pay a living wage, reasonable immigration policies and practices, quality education, decent housing in relatively safe neighborhoods, and so on. Since Hispanics and Afrikan Americans are the largest and second-largest so-called minority groups in the country, respectively, it is most important that they commit to doing the very hard work of coalition building with each other. Together and together only, will they be a force to be reckoned with by the powers that be.

7. King, "The State of the Movement," Address presented November 28, 1967, at the Staff Retreat of SCLC at Penn Center, Frogmore, South Carolina, King Center Library and Archives, 7–8.

In the six chapters in this book, we will see that black children and youths made substantial contributions throughout the civil rights movement, beginning with the Montgomery bus boycott, the subject of chapter 1. Just like black adults, black youths were subjected to racist and disrespectful treatment on city buses in Montgomery. Moreover, we will see that the same year that Rosa Parks was arrested, black youths of Montgomery had also been arrested earlier in the year for refusing to give their seats to white patrons. When the black community agreed to a boycott of the buses, black youths were as supportive as black adults, willingly walking rather than riding the buses to and from school. Likewise, the training in nonviolence was provided for both adults and youths. Although a small number of white students exhibited support for the boycott, the numbers of white students who engaged in direct action swelled exponentially during the sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and voter registration projects throughout the Deep South.

Chapter 2 examines instances in which black youth actually led the way in the struggle for civil rights, with virtually no assistance from adults. This is what happened during the explosive sit-in movement that was ignited at the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina by four black male freshmen at North Carolina A&T. The sit-ins spread like wildfire in public places throughout the South and a few places in the North in the early months of 1960. Something similar happened in 1961 when student activists in Nashville, Tennessee, under the leadership of Diane Nash, insisted on the need to continue the Freedom Ride from Montgomery to New Orleans. As it turned out, the Riders got as far as Jackson, Mississippi before they were arrested and imprisoned for several weeks at the infamous Parchman state prison. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) originally initiated the Freedom Ride, but when the two busloads of riders were stopped at Anniston, Alabama and the riders

were brutally beaten and one of the buses was bombed, CORE director James Farmer called off the ride. Student leader Diane Nash insisted that there would be long-term consequences for the “success” of the movement if they called off the rides because of violence. Nash reasoned that if they did not proceed with the ride, the message would be sent to every racist thug in the country that the way to put a halt to civil rights demonstrations of any kind is to subject the participants to violence. The students’ argument won the day. Chapter 2, then, focuses on the youthful activists’ contributions to the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, which helped to push the movement forward. Here we see that the students’ contributions gave new meaning to the biblical text that “truly a child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6). A similar scenario would occur during the early weeks of the Birmingham struggle. The difference was that these were youths who were essentially under the supervision of the SCLC. In this case, as well as the sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and early voter registration-education projects, King and other adults were at best supporting cast. In these cases, young people were often more courageous than the adults in their communities.

We next turn to the Birmingham campaign in chapter 3. Birmingham was pivotal in King’s civil rights ministry, for this would be the civil rights campaign in which the method of nonviolence was essentially on trial. When Martin Luther King and SCLC launched what they called Project C (“confrontation”) in Birmingham, it did not take long before the campaign sputtered. Most of those who were committed to the demonstrations had been jailed already and the leadership was left wondering how best to give the campaign the shot of adrenalin that was needed to push it forward. Part of the aim was to fill the jails to overflowing, but they had essentially run out of bodies. It was at this point that SCLC staff member James Bevel suggested the idea of using massive numbers of black children and

youths as nonviolent demonstrators. This not only had the potential for filling the jails, but it also had the important prospect of arousing the conscience of the nation. How would everyday American citizens react as they sat around their televisions and watched black children being carted off to jail for demonstrating nonviolently for their freedom? Bevel's idea led to the famous Children's Crusade, and proved to be yet another instance in which the children and young people literally led the way. Indeed, in this case, black children actually saved the Birmingham movement from collapse. The involvement of children and youths was illustrative of both determination and self-determination among young people to take their lives and futures into their own hands and to demand that they be treated as human beings with dignity; to demand that they be granted their God-given rights and those guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.

It would be going too far to say that the Birmingham campaign caused the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to be passed. However, one is on quite solid ground when declaring that it contributed much toward the passing of that bill. As King, SCLC, and other civil rights groups pushed ahead in Birmingham, student activists in SNCC, along with youthful activists in CORE were breaking ground in the very dangerous Mississippi Delta, as they sought to organize and instruct rural and city blacks in voter education and registration. This is the subject of chapter 4. Youths such as Bob Moses, Chuck McDew, and Bob Zellner (SNCC's first white field secretary), were among the shock troops to enter Mississippi for the express purpose of helping to organize black residents for voter registration. The chapter examines the role of the amazing but dangerous Freedom Summer Project of 1964, which brought more than 600 mostly white student volunteers from colleges and universities of the North, and

some from the South to work in the project. These young people established Freedom Schools and Cultural Centers, in addition to participating in the dangerous work of voter registration. Not all of the youths made it through Freedom Summer alive, including some local leaders. In addition, many were subjected to violence by the Klan and other white hate groups throughout the state. And yet, what is important here is that black and white youths led the way, even to the point of making the ultimate sacrifice. They possessed a healthy sense of fear for this most feared and dangerous state in the nation, and were determined that fear would not deter them from achieving their goal.

We will see in chapter 5 that the voter registration campaign in Selma contributed much toward the passing of the Voting Rights Bill of 1965. Not unlike the Freedom Summer Project in the Mississippi Delta, the Selma campaign was bloody and violent. We will see that the “Bloody Sunday” tragedy that occurred during the first attempted march from Selma to Montgomery was a significant contributing cause of the passage of the voting rights bill. Once again, we will see that at critical stages it was the children and young people who put their fears aside, and led the way. Because of the courage and determination of these young people, more adult members of the black community—parents, schoolteachers, and other professionals—got involved in the demonstrations and were also subject to violent treatment and arrests. They saw their children and students on the front lines; saw them being beaten. They could not remain standing on the sidelines, passively accepting what they witnessed. Martin Luther King never lost faith in young people and their ability and determination to help move this society in the direction of the beloved community. This is an important point to keep in mind in any discussion on King, youth, and the civil rights movement.

Chapter 6 is the last chapter in this book. It is an important chapter because it seeks to address the challenges to young people today, in light of the contributions of King and young people during the civil rights struggle. King seldom gave a speech, sermon, or wrote a book without inquiring and responding to the question, “Where do we go from here?” It is actually the question that no serious theological social ethicist will fail to address. The question is particularly relevant today when youth violence and homicides in black communities soar to astronomical numbers, whether on the Southside of Chicago, Illinois, or in the inner city of Indianapolis, Indiana. The question to be examined in chapter 6 is not: What would Martin Luther King be saying and doing were he alive today? Rather, the question is: What should those, particularly young people, who know and understand King’s legacy and ideas, be saying and doing in the face of such a high incidence of youth violence and homicides, as well as the extraordinary numbers of youths who are undereducated, who drop out of secondary schools, and who are jobless, or appear to be condemned to working nonliving wage, dead-end jobs? The previous chapters reveal how youths of a generation ago stepped up to the plate and answered the call. This chapter challenges youth of today to do the same, and reminds them that doing so is the best way to ensure that theirs will be a future worth living—not dying!—for.