

## **Martin Luther King, Jr.:**

### **A White Southerner's Perspective**

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A person's message often succeeds as much with outsiders as with the audience at home. As Gandhi astounded the British, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., left some of his greatest treasure to white Southerners, like me.

Dr. King taught me that people close to me, people whom I trusted, *my people*, people who had treated me well, wronged black people. Learning this lesson, I wondered how many other ways my people had taught me to transgress. Dr. King took away some of my props. I could no longer afford to accept anyone's views without first carefully examining them. He began my education.

Dr. King taught me that fair people sometimes have to subvert a sick society. While only a few in the black community considered him "subversive," in living room after living room in my part of town the name "Martin Luther King" used to turn even sweet grandmothers into raving preachers and jolly uncles into Klansmen and Citizens Councilors. It did not take long for me to see that the violence my people feared from Dr. King was the violence of our own nature. His doctrine of love exposed us, as spiritually impoverished. Without this painful exposure, few of us would have done much to remedy our plight.

Dr. King humanized my personal heroes. I do not mean remote heroes in books. I mean those closer to us, figures in one's family or community who, despite routine and heavy exposure, still suggest a measure of greatness. I could have chosen one of the little Confederate soldiers on any town square, or a daddy serving on a local school board. But Dr. King showed me that the soldier (my great-grandfather) fought in a morally questionable cause and that the school board which my father chaired, unjustly robbed black people of their human rights and personal dignity when it segregated them.

Dr. King became a different kind of hero, someone who showed that when we try to discover a just way, the world does not tumble down. On the contrary, it starts to make sense.

Dr. King did not allow even well-meaning white people to control him. He taught me to respect blackness as I had never done before. I graduated from high school

the year of the Little Rock decision. My environment had segregated me from all black people except domestic servants. I never met a black person with more than a high school education until I was out of college. I even had to sneak to read black literature, never mentioned by my professors. Dr. King broke through these barriers, revealed to me the inadequacy of my education, showed me that to live in the world, I had better start looking for leadership in new places, in black places, from black people.

Most importantly, Dr. King shared his dream of reconciliation. He taught me that no matter how wickedly my people had behaved, we whites might one day worthily sit at tables with blacks. Dr. King kept open for me and for all people, a chance to walk out of narrow racism into a world community right in my own home town.