

A
TESTAMENT OF HOPE

The Essential Writings
and Speeches
of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Edited by

James Melvin Washington



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The Ethical Demands for Integration

Dr. King offered this eloquent defense of his philosophy of integration in this speech he delivered in Nashville, Tennessee, on 27 December 1962, before a church conference.

The problem of race and color prejudice remains America's greatest moral dilemma. When one considers the impact it has upon our nation, internally and externally, its resolution might well determine our destiny. History has thrust upon our generation an indescribably important task—to complete a process of democratization which our nation has too long developed too slowly, but which is our most powerful weapon for world respect and emulation. How we deal with this crucial situation will determine our moral health as individuals, our cultural health as a region, our political health as a nation, and our prestige as a leader of the free world. The shape of the world today does not afford us the luxury of an anemic democracy. The price that America must pay for the continued oppression of the Negro is the price of its own destruction. The hour is late; the clock of destiny is ticking out; we must act now before it is too late.

“FANATICAL DEATH THROES”

Happily, we have made some meaningful strides in breaking down the barriers of racial segregation. Ever since 1954, when the Supreme Court examined the legal body of segregation and pronounced it constitutionally dead, the system has been on the wane. Even the devout die-hards who used to cry “never,” are now saying “later.” Much of the tumult and the shouting interspersed with tirades against “race-mixing,” “mongrelization of the races,” and “outside agitators” represent the fanatical death throes of a dying system. As minimal as may be the “across-the-board” statistics, desegregation is in process. The bells of history are definitely tolling for segregation. I am convinced that in less than ten years desegregation will be a reality throughout the South.

DESEGREGATION NOT ENOUGH

However, when the *desegregation* process is one hundred percent complete, the human relations dilemma of our nation will still be monumental unless we launch now the parallel thrust of the *integration* process. Although the terms desegregation and integration are often used interchangeably, there is a great deal of difference between the two. In the context of what our national community needs, *desegregation* alone is empty and shallow. We must always be aware of the fact that our ultimate goal is integration, and that desegregation is only a first step on the road to the good society. Perhaps this is the point at which we should define our terms.

INTEGRATION THE ULTIMATE GOAL

The word *segregation* represents a system that is prohibitive; it denies the Negro equal access to schools, parks, restaurants, libraries and the like. *Desegregation* is eliminative and negative, for it simply removes these legal and social prohibitions. Integration is creative, and is therefore more profound and far-reaching than desegregation. Integration is the positive acceptance of desegregation and the welcomed participation of Negroes into the total range of human activities. Integration is genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing. Desegregation then, rightly, is only a short-range goal. Integration is the ultimate goal of our national community. Thus, as America pursues the important task of respecting the "letter of the law," i.e., compliance with desegregation decisions, she must be equally concerned with the "spirit of the law," i.e., commitment to the democratic dream of integration.

We do not have to look very far to see the pernicious effects of a desegregated society that is not integrated. It leads to "physical proximity without spiritual affinity." It gives us a society where men are physically desegregated and spiritually segregated, where elbows are together and hearts are apart. It gives us special togetherness and spiritual apartness. It leaves us with a stagnant equality of sameness rather than a constructive equality of oneness.

Therefore, our topic leads us to an analysis of the "oughtness" of integration. On the basis of what is right, why is integration an *end* and desegregation only a *means*? In the context of justice, freedom, morality and religion, what are the basic ethical demands of integration?

THE WORTH OF PERSONS

There must be a recognition of the sacredness of human personality. Deeply rooted in our political and religious heritage is the conviction that every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth. Our Hebraic-

Christian tradition refers to this inherent dignity of man in the Biblical term *the image of God*. This innate worth referred to in the phrase the image of God is universally shared in equal portions by all men. There is no graded scale of essential worth; there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right of another. Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator.

This idea of the dignity and worth of human personality is expressed eloquently and unequivocally in the Declaration of Independence. "All men," it says, "are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Never has a sociopolitical document proclaimed more profoundly and eloquently the sacredness of human personality.

Frederick Douglas stated the same truth in his lecture on the Constitution of the United States. He says: "Its language is, 'We the people'; not we the white people, not even we the citizens, not we the privileged class, not we the high, not we the low, but we the people . . . we the human inhabitants; and if Negroes are people they are included in the benefits for which the Constitution of America was ordained and established."

Segregation stands diametrically opposed to the principle of the sacredness of human personality. It debases personality. Immanuel Kant said in one formulation of the *Categorical Imperative* that "all men must be treated as *ends* and never as mere *means*." The tragedy of segregation is that it treats men as means rather than ends, and thereby reduces them to things rather than persons. To use the words of Martin Buber, segregation substitutes an "I-it" relationship for the "I-thou" relationship. The colloquialism of the southern landed gentry that referred to slaves and/or Negro labor as "hands" betrays the "thing" quality assigned to Negroes under the system. Herein lies the root of paternalism that persists even today. The traditional southerner is fond of "his Negro" as he is of a pet or a finely-tooled fire arm. "It" serves a purpose or gets a job done. The only concern is performance, not well-being.

But man is not a thing. He must be dealt with, not as an "animated tool," but as a person sacred in himself. To do otherwise is to depersonalize the potential person and desecrate what he is. So long as the Negro is treated as a means to an end, so long as he is seen as anything less than a person of sacred worth, the image of God is abused in him and consequently and proportionately lost by those who inflict the abuse. Only by establishing a truly integrated society can we return to the Negro the quality of "thouness" which is his due because of the nature of his being.

LIFE DEMANDS FREEDOM

A second ethical demand of integration is a recognition of the fact that a denial of freedom to an individual is a denial of life itself. The very character of the life of man demands freedom. In speaking of free-

dom at this point I am not talking of the freedom of a thing called the will. The very phrase, freedom of the will, abstracts freedom from the person to make it an object; and an object almost by definition is not free. But freedom cannot thus be abstracted from the person, who is always subject as well as object and who himself still does the abstracting. So I am speaking of the freedom of man, the whole man, and not one faculty called the will. -

Neither am I implying that there are no limits to freedom. Always freedom is within predestined structure. Thus a man is free to go north from Atlanta to Washington or south from Atlanta to Miami. But he is not free to go north to Miami or south to Washington, except by a long round-the-world journey; and he is not free to go to both cities at one and the same time. We are always both free and destined. Freedom is the chosen fulfillment of our destined nature.

With these qualifications we return to the assertion that the essence of man is found in freedom. This is what Paul Tillich means when he declares, "Man is man because he is free," or what Tolstoy implies when he says, "I cannot conceive of a man not being free unless he is dead."

WHAT IS FREEDOM?

What is freedom? It is, first, the capacity to deliberate or weigh alternatives. "Shall I be a teacher or a lawyer?" "Shall I vote for this candidate or the other candidate?" "Shall I be a Democrat, Republican or Socialist?" Second, freedom expresses itself in decision. The word decision like the word incision involves the image of cutting. Incision means to cut in, decision means to cut off. When I make a decision I cut off alternatives and make a choice. The existentialists say we must choose, that we are choosing animals; and if we do not choose we sink into thinghood and the mass mind. A third expression of freedom is responsibility. This is the obligation of the person to respond if he is questioned about his decisions. No one else can respond for him. He alone must respond, for his acts are determined by the centered totality of his being.

From this analysis we can clearly see the evilness of segregation. It cuts off one's capacity to deliberate, decide and respond.

The absence of freedom is the imposition of restraint on my deliberation as to what I shall do, where I shall live, how much I shall earn, the kind of tasks I shall pursue. I am robbed of the basic quality of man-ness. When I cannot choose what I shall do or where I shall live or how I shall survive, it means in fact that someone or some system has already made these a priori decisions for me, and I am reduced to an animal. I do not live; I merely exist. The only resemblances I have to real life are the motor responses and functions that are akin to humankind. I cannot adequately assume responsibility as a person because I have been made a party to a decision in which I played no part in making.

Now to be sure, this is hyperbole in some degree but only to underscore what actually happens when a man is robbed of his freedom. The very nature of his life is altered and his being cannot make the full circle of personhood because that which is basic to the character of life itself has been diminished.

“SOCIAL LEPROSY”

This is why segregation has wreaked havoc with the Negro. It is sometimes difficult to determine which are the deepest—the physical wounds or the psychological wounds. Only a Negro can understand the social leprosy that segregation inflicts upon him. The suppressed fears and resentments, and the expressed anxieties and sensitivities make each day of life a turmoil. Every confrontation with the restrictions imposed is another emotional battle in a never-ending war. He is shackled in his waking moments to tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next and in his subconscious he wrestles with this added demon.

Is there any argument to support the withdrawing of life-quality from groups because of the color of their skin, or the texture of their hair or any external characteristic which has nothing at all to do with life-quality? Certainly not on the grounds of morality, justice or religion. Nothing can be more diabolical than a deliberate attempt to destroy in any man his will to be a man and to withhold from him that something that constitutes his true reserve. Desegregation then is not enough for it only travels a part of the distance. It vouchsafes the lack of restriction against one's freedom but it does not prohibit the blocking of his total capacity. Only integration can do this, for it unchains the spirit and the mind and provides for the highest degree of life-quality freedom. I may do well in a *desegregated* society but I can never know what my total capacity is until I live in an *integrated* society. I cannot be free until I have had the opportunity to fulfill my total capacity untrammelled by any artificial hindrance or barrier.

Integration demands that we recognize that a denial of freedom is a denial of life itself.

THE UNITY OF HUMANITY

A third ethical demand of integration is a recognition of the solidarity of the human family. Integration seems almost inevitably desirable and practical because basically we are all one. Paul's declaration that God "hath made of one blood" all nations of the world is more anthropological fact than religious poetry. The physical differences between the races are insignificant when compared to the physical identities. The world's foremost anthropologists all agree that there is no basic difference in the racial groups of our world. Most deny the actual existence of

what we have known as "race." There are four major blood types and all four are found in every racial group. There are no superior and inferior races.

The next truth is evidential in the history of mankind. Not only are all men alike (generically speaking), but man is by nature a societal creature. Aside from the strength and weakness found in *Homo sapiens*, man has been working from the beginning at the great adventure of "community." Whenever Cro-magnon man, under whatever strange impulse, put aside his stone ax and decided to mutually cooperate with his cave-man neighbor, it marked the most creative turn of events in his existence. That seemingly elementary decision set in motion what we now know as civilization. At the heart of all that civilization has meant and developed is "community"—the mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of man to assume a semblance of responsibility for his brother. What began as the closest answer to a desperate need for survival from the beast of prey and the danger of the jungle was the basis of present-day cities and nations. Man could not have survived without the impulse which makes him the societal creature he is.

The universe is so structured that things do not quite work out rightly if men are not diligent in their concern for others. The self cannot be self without other selves. I cannot reach fulfillment without thou. Social psychologists tell us that we cannot truly be persons unless we interact with other persons. All life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. This is what John Donne meant.

GOD AND HUMAN WORTH

Now let me hasten to say that while all of the three aforementioned points are basic, they represent Christianity's minimal declaration of human unity. In the final analysis, says the Christian ethic, every man must be respected because God loves him. The worth of an individual does not lie in the measure of his intellect, his racial origin, or his social position. Human worth lies in relatedness to God. An individual has value because he has value to God. Whenever this is recognized, "whiteness" and "blackness" pass away as determinants in a relationship and "son" and "brother" are substituted.

For me, this is a welcome conference. In the last few years we have had to face admittedly some very sharp changes in our customs and mores in the South. They have been difficult changes, not only to whites, but also at times to Negroes.

"... BECAUSE IT IS RIGHT!"

Nevertheless, as difficult as the changes may be, it is change produced

by that which is right. Yet it is this simple truth that has escaped the focus of the nation's and the South's attention. It is sad that the moral dimension of integration has not been sounded by the leaders of government and the nation. They staunchly supported the principle of the Court's decision but their rationale fell short of being prophetic. They sounded the note that has become the verse, chorus and refrain of the so-called calm and reasonable moderates—*we must obey the law!* The temper of acceptance might be far different if only our leaders would say publicly to the nation—“We must obey the mandate of the Court *because it is right!*”

This conference places the issue of national morality squarely before us. Desegregation is not enough; integration alone is consonant with our national purpose.

Let me hasten to say that despite the tremendous difficulties that integration imposes, nonetheless, work toward its implementation is not to be abandoned for the sake of approximating the more accessible goal of desegregation. Further a word of caution might be said to those who would argue that desegregation should be abandoned and all of our energies invested in the integration process. It is not an “either-or,” it is a “both-and,” undertaking. Desegregation is the necessary step in the right direction if we are to achieve integration. Desegregation will not change attitudes but it will provide the contact and confrontation necessary by which integration is made possible and attainable.

DESEGREGATION IS “ENFORCEABLE” BUT INTEGRATION IS NOT

I can summarize all that I have been saying by affirming that the demands of desegregation are enforceable demands while the demands of integration fall within the scope of unenforceable demands.

Some time ago Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick made an impressive distinction between enforceable and unenforceable obligations. The former are regulated by the codes of society and the vigorous implementation of law-enforcement agencies. Breaking these obligations, spelled out on thousands of pages in law books, has filled numerous prisons. But unenforceable obligations are beyond the reach of the laws of society. They concern inner attitudes, genuine person-to-person relations, and expressions of compassion which law books cannot regulate and jails cannot rectify. Such obligations are met by one's commitment to an inner law, written on the heart. Man-made laws assure justice, but a higher law produces love. No code of conduct ever compelled a father to love his children or a husband to show affection to his wife. The law court may force him to provide bread for the family, but it cannot make him provide the bread of love. A good father is obedient to the unenforceable.

LAW CAN HELP

Let us never succumb to the temptation of believing that legislation and judicial decrees play only minor roles in solving this problem. Morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. Judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless. The law cannot make an employer love an employee, but it can prevent him from refusing to hire me because of the color of my skin. The habits, if not the hearts of people, have been and are being altered everyday by legislative acts, judicial decisions and executive orders. Let us not be misled by those who argue that segregation cannot be ended by the force of law.

But acknowledging this, we must admit that the ultimate solution to the race problem lies in the willingness of men to obey the unenforceable. Court orders and federal enforcement agencies are of inestimable value in achieving desegregation, but desegregation is only a partial, though necessary step toward the final goal which we seek to realize, genuine intergroup and interpersonal living. Desegregation will break down the legal barriers and bring men together physically, but something must touch the hearts and souls of men so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right. A vigorous enforcement of civil rights laws will bring an end to segregated public facilities which are barriers to a truly desegregated society, but it cannot bring an end to fears, prejudice, pride, and irrationality, which are the barriers to a truly integrated society. Those dark and demonic responses will be removed only as men are possessed by the invisible, inner law which etches on their hearts the conviction that all men are brothers and that love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation. True integration will be achieved by true neighbors who are willingly obedient to unenforceable obligations.

THE DISCIPLINE OF NONVIOLENCE

I cannot conclude without saying that integration places certain ethical demands upon those who have been on the oppressed end of the old order. Perhaps this is why it is my personal conviction that the most potent instrument the Negro community can use to gain total emancipation in America is that of nonviolent resistance. The evidence of the last few years supports my faith that through the use of nonviolence much can be done to raise the Negro to a sense of self-respect and human dignity. The Gandhian concept of noninjury parallels the Hebraic-Christian teaching of the sacredness of every human being.

In the context of the Negro's thrust for the full exercise of constitutional privilege, nonviolence has introduced the additive that has helped the Negro stand taller. When a library is declared to be desegre-

gated, the presence and practice of nonviolence allows him to seek the use of the facilities without fear and apprehension. More than this, it has instilled in him the verve to challenge segregation and discrimination in whatever form it exists. Nonviolence in so many ways has given the Negro a new sense of "somebodyness." The impact of the nonviolent discipline has done a great deal toward creating in the mind of the Negro a new image of himself.

It has literally exalted the person of the Negro in the South in the face of daily confrontations that scream at him that he is inferior or less than because of the accident of his birth.

HOW NONVIOLENCE HELPS

Nonviolence helps the individuals to adhere to proper means and proper goals. The nonviolent technique is double-barreled; not only has the Negro developed a new image of himself employing its practices, but it has also thwarted the growth of bitterness. In a very large measure, nonviolence has helped to diminish long-repressed feelings of anger and frustration. In the course of respecting the discipline of the nonviolent way, the Negro has learned that he must respect the adversary who inflicts the system upon him and he develops the capacity to hate segregation but to love the segregationist. He learns in the midst of his determined efforts to destroy the system that has shackled him so long, that a commitment to nonviolence demands that he respect the personhood of his opponent. Thus, nonviolence exalts the personality of the *segregator* as well as the *segregated*. The common denominator of the flux of social change in the South is the growing awareness on the part of the respective opponents that mutually they confront the eternity of the basic worth of every member of the human family.