

Martin Luther King

chapter ii



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In 1940s, the Civil Rights Movement appeared as a challenge to end up racial discrimination and segregation as a system that tended to separate blacks from all aspects of life. Though granted their freedom, blacks were still treated as some subordinate species to the white race: they were denied the chance to be promoted in their jobs and most of them suffered from a low income compared with white workers. Blacks had to live in separate neighborhoods under appalling conditions and were “ confined to the central city and notably dirty and unpaved slums”. 1

Martin Luther King (1929-1968) was born in Atlanta Georgia to grow up and become one of the greatest heroes of American history. As a boy, Martin was always taught to respect people and to settle disagreements with love, not hate. Martin's best friend was a white boy whose mother did not allow him to play any longer with Martin who was so astonished and bewildered that he ran to his mother and asked for an explanation. His mother told him that this was because he was black. He became very upset and could not understand how the color of someone's skin could make all the difference.

Martin's mother laid him in her lap and said” you must never feel that you are less than anybody else. You must always feel that you are somebody” 2. From that time on, Martin never forgot what his mother had told him and grew up determined that he would make the difference. Indeed, Martin Luther King became one of the principle leaders of Civil Rights Movement and the symbol of nonviolent protest in the struggle for racial justice (exemplified in the boycotts and sit-ins that he organized). King's view towards racism symbolized the voice of a generation and of a human being who saw in slavery an end to man's humanity:

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. ³ In Montgomery, black community endured the mistreatment of white bus drivers who cursed the black riders, humiliated them, and forced them to sit in the back of buses and even give up their seats to white passengers. On December 1, 1955, a black woman named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the bus to a white man.

Her rebellious action caused her imprisonment for disobeying the city law of segregation, but at the same time stimulated many blacks to stand up against racial discrimination demanding their equality and freedom. Almost three months after her arrest, Mrs. Rosa Parks explained why she refused to obey the city law of segregation, and why she decided to sit down in the “white” section of the bus: Well, in the first place, I had been working all day on the job. I was quite tired after spending a full day working. I handle and work on clothing that white people wear.

That did not come in my mind, but this is what I wanted to know, when and how would we determine our rights as human beings? It just happened that the driver made a demand and I just did not feel like obeying his demand. He called a policeman and I was arrested and placed in jail... ⁴ This incident and the “long-standing grievances about the mistreatment of blacks on city buses” ⁵ resulted in the organization of the famous “Montgomery Bus Boycott” that “marked the birth of a new era of African American history... and signaled the beginning of a new phase of King’s life” ⁶.

It all began when Montgomery blacks called a mass meeting and voted to boycott all city buses. Thus, hundreds of car pools were organized to take negroes to work; while most people walked. At the meeting, King viewed Rosa's arrest as the beginning of a series of passive protests against the whites' degrading treatment of all blacks in America and made a speech that thrilled millions of people and urged them to call for racial equality and desegregation using the weapon of love ... compassion and understanding:

Just the other day... one of the finest citizens in Montgomery was ... rrested because she refused to get up to give her seat to a white person... you know my friends there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time... when people get tired of being flung across the abyss of humiliation... There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing amidst the piercing chill of an Alpine November... On the first day of the boycott, King envisioned such a passive initiative as the "beginning" on the long road towards emancipation and freedom.

In Montgomery, King believed that a new history was written- a history that added new meanings to the life of every human being, to every American negro who was stumbling alone on the shore of life: Right here in Montgomery, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will say, " there lived a race of people, a black people, fleecy flocks and black complexion, but a people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And hereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization. 10

Though Martin advised all the blacks to take the initiative and boycott all city buses, he was never sure whether his passive strategies would succeed; yet the answer came to him the next morning when from his window, he could see a bus stop. The first bus was empty! So was the second. The third bus had just two white riders. It was the same story all over town. Black people were not riding the buses. They were walking, taking cabs or driving their cars to work. Some were riding on mules or on wagons pulled by horses.

“ A miracle has taken place,” King said. ¹ As a result, white segregationists resorted to violence and even to blood to end up the blacks’ attempts to see the light of the day instead of being forever imprisoned deep down the dungeon of darkness and servitude. Many a time whites attacked black men and women in the middle of the day; many a time they used bombs to frighten the blacks off: they burnt down black churches, schools and hospitals. In 1955, a bomb was thrown into the house of Martin Luther King who wrote about this incident in his book “ Stride towards Freedom”:

I walked out to the porch and asked the crowd to come to order. In less than a moment there was complete silence. Quietly I told them that I was all right and that my wife and baby were all right... I continued “ if you have weapons, take them home; if you do not have them, please do not seek to get them. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence... We must love our brothers no matter... what they do to us. King’s efforts never stopped; he led many peaceful protests against racial discrimination.

He wanted to change the cruel laws that forbid the black man from drinking out of the same fountain or using the same waiting room as the white man.

King knew that negroes will have to “ break down the walls of oppression and racial hatred” and he took it upon himself to lead them through long and dark corridors of violence and hatred into the light of peace and love. However, he saw in Gandhi a peaceful liberator who believed that his weapons of “ truth and love could bring the mightiest empire known to history to its knees” 12.

King’s visit to India in 1957 helped reshape his understanding of Gandhi’s main principle of passive and nonviolent resistance against racial injustice and slavery: When asked what he acquired on the trip, King responded that he was more convinced than ever before that nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom. 13 King saw Gandhi as “ the father of nonviolence” and the symbol of free India” whose passive tactics or “ satyagrahi” “ seeks to expose the truth of unjust situation to the oppressor and the wider world” 14.

King adopted Gandhi’s new philosophy of peaceful resistance and Jesus’ Christian ethics of “ turning the other cheeks”, and even of “ loving your enemy” in order to develop a powerful weapon in the struggle of the African American community for human dignity: Gandhi and King joined India and the United States together through the bonds of shared suffering and struggle. In the fall of 1941, James Farmer-the founder of the Congress of Racial Equality wrote: We must withhold our support and participation from the institution of segregation in every area of American life.

Like Gandhi’s army, it must be nonviolent. Gandhi has the key for me to unlock the door to the American dream. Likewise, Martin Luther King

encouraged the black people to protest not in bloody war, but in peace and love. His passive protests “ appealed to Christian brotherhood and American idealism and created positive impression on people both inside and outside the South” to such an extent that he was elected as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957.

King stated his reasons for adopting nonviolence and love as the motto of the Civil Rights Movement: nonviolence] allowed the negro to develop a new image of himself. He felt that nonviolence helped to diminish long-repressed feelings of anger and frustration. By hating the segregation but loving the segregationists, the negro was able to forgive the transgressor and thwart his own growth of bitterness. 16 Thus, King was one of those rare politicians who opposed the involvement of America in the Vietnam War which he characterized as a “ great adventure that was playing havoc with the destiny of the people of the world”.

King was very much appalled by the destructive power of Vietnam war that continued to “ burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation’s homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love”. King criticized American interest to kill people- to kill a fellow human being, let alone little children who were

Left homeless, without clothes, running in packs on the streets like animals... deranged by our soldiers as they beg for food... selling their sisters to our

soldiers, soliciting for their mothers. King called that “ the madness must cease”; war is not the answer to solving man’s problems because violence breeds violence and destruction: Through violence, you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence, you murder the hater, but you don’t murder the hate...

Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to the night... Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. In his book *Stride towards Freedom*, King explained how Christian love and peaceful tactics were the motto of the civil rights movement. Nonviolent tactics, he believed was a moral necessity that helped man establish a sense of the self and to help defeat the white ego by making him feel ashamed of all his misdoings and mistreatment of a fellow human being.

Though King urged his people to advocate passive resistance, he abhorred “ silence” and called all the nations to awaken from their deep slumber and march on to struggle for a new world, a new reality that would establish man’s identity as a fully blooded human being who is endowed with due respect and dignity. Martin believed that it is high time that people should open up their eyes and see the world around them, the world that promised them freedom and equality but gave them nothing but pain and misery. He called all the citizens of America to wipe away their tears and to start believing that “ tomorrow is another day” not another yesterday.

King demanded that all the blacks and the suppressed break the shackles of silence and raise their voices so that they can be heard calling for their legitimate rights: We must move on... but we must speak. We must speak

with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart... 17 King's message of breaking the silence through peaceful protests was carried out by almost all negroes all over America.

In 1960, four young negro students initiated the first sit-in when they decided to sit down at the Woolworth's Lunch Counter that was only reserved for white customers. The black students stayed there all day and to their utter surprise, they were not arrested. " Now it came to me all in the sudden," one of the students stated " maybe they can't do anything to us. Maybe we can keep it up". The next day, they returned and then other negroes came to sit silently. On February 1, 1960, the movement spread to North Carolina when four negro students sat at the " White only" section of the restaurants waiting to be served.

Within days, the sit-ins spread throughout Carolina and within weeks they were taking place in cities across the South. Many restaurants were desegregated- a fact which proved beyond any shadow of doubt the efficiency of the sit-in movement due to the behavior of its participants who were dressed in their Sunday clothes, were quiet, nonviolent and respectful. Martin's response to the sit-ins was more complex. He applauded the fact that " American students have come of age. You now take your honored places in the worldwide struggle for freedom".

In April 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was organized in North Carolina to organize the passive sit-in movements and

unify all the blacks together because unity was another essential weapon that he used in his battle against slavery and racism. King urged all the blacks to unite together, work together and vote together in order to feel their beings: I want to say that with all of our actions we must stick together. Unity is the greatest need of the hour. And if we are united, we can get many of the things that we not only desire but which we justly deserve.

And don't let anyone frighten you, because we are doing it within the law. Martin King was asked to coordinate all churches and Christians in the South in the hope of creating an integrated community in America wherein brotherhood would be an actuality in every sphere of social life. King viewed the Civil Rights Movement as a microcosm of a beloved community where all the people " must... learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools".

King viewed the black community as one harmonious part that is " tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an escapable network of mutuality... whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly". As such, all the blacks worked together in a symbolic alliance and as such had felt oneness of being and the urgency of their sticking together to achieve their dreams of freedom and equality. In May 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality " CORE" sent freedom riders of both races who travelled around the South in buses to begin a " protest journey" for racial inequality and segregation laws into the South. The freedom rides began in Washington and spread to many Southern American states.

Violence broke through: buses had been burnt by the Whites, while the black riders were severely attacked and beaten when they got off the bus.

Nevertheless, the freedom riders continued their way “sur la route de la victoire” and did “result of the desegregation of some bus stations... and demonstrated to the American public how far Civil Rights Workers would go to achieve their goals”. On the importance of such a passive movement, one freedom rider named Gaston declared “Many people do not know about the Freedom Riders and The Civil Rights Movement... It is important to show where our country has been in the past.

It has been a long road for many people and tonight we are trying to reenact this path the freedom riders traveled... The freedom Riders of the 1960s, were looking for a path to freedom and a path to a better life”. Many peaceful demonstrations were led to emphasise the “determination of the marchers to achieve their goals of equality and integration” and to end up segregated restaurants, hotels, buses and “housing”. Demonstrations lasted for months without any visible violence. In May 1963, King and his followers went further to stimulate school children and teenagers to join in.

This process triggered the whites who sent police officers with attack dogs and firefighters with high-pressure water hoses against the marchers. Scenes of young protesters being attacked by dogs and pinned against buildings by torrents of water from fire hoses were shown in newspapers and on televisions around the world”. During the demonstrations, King was arrested and sent to Birmingham Jail where his efforts never stopped but continued in the shape of written letters in which he emphasized that all

Individuals had the right to disobey unjust laws not through violence but through peace and love.

His letters testify to his being like a prophet who felt himself "compelled to carry the Gospel of freedom beyond my own home town". In his letters, King recalled the history of the negroes and the maltreatment of all blacks who began to develop a sense of unconscious bitterness toward white people. To win the battle, King urged his people to fight "a degenerating sense of nobodiness" and to develop a sense of "somebodiness which symbolized the victory of human worth and which gave black and poor people hope and a sense of dignity".

From behind his iron cages, King condemned segregation that gave the "segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority". Though the blacks were abused, though they "have languished in filthy, roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of policemen who view them as "dirty nigger lovers", they never stopped the fight because freedom was rooted deep down in their psyche and "that is what happened to the American Negro.

Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained". The next move was in August 1963 when demonstrators, led by Martin Luther King, assembled under bright sunny skies and gathered on the grounds of the Washington Monument to begin the mile-long march to Lincoln Memorial. With locked arms and held hands, all the demonstrators shouldered their

way sur la route of freedom singing cheerful songs and carrying banners with slogans “ We march for freedom”.

From the steps of Lincoln Memorial King delivered his “ I have a dream” that came as a great beacon of hope to every negro “ who... is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land”. In his “ I have a dream”, King emphasized that Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice... Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the sunlit path of racial justice... Now is the time to make justice a reality or all of God’s creation.

In simple and most evocative words, King described his dream of equality and unity in America: I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character... I have a dream that on day every valley shall be exalted, And every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. And all flesh shall see it together...

Even in his moments of utter despair, even when the whites bombarded his home, King never gave up hope; he had such a strong faith in “ the symphony of brotherhood” that “ will take the blacks into an oasis of freedom and justice where “ one day little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers”. King ended up his speech with a wish that all people and all races,

be they Protestants, Catholics or Jews, call for freedom and sing with a loud voice " Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last".

Martin's efforts to better all life conditions of blacks made him recognized worldwide as the " apostle of freedom" and gained him in 1964 the Noble Peace Prize as a memento for his dedication and perseverance. King emphasized that he accepted this prize on behalf of all men who love peace and brotherhood... this reward which I receive on behalf of that movement is a profound recognition that non-violence is the answer to the crucial, political and moral question of our time- the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression".

The prize was the motive, he continued, that inspired millions of people and incited them to work harder determined to make the dream- the American dream- come true. On April 3, 1968, he travelled to Memphis and delivered his last speech in which, it seemed, he predicted his own end: I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. And I am happy... Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968.

His death did not mean the end: King lit up the candle for the coming generations who were handed over the torch to continue their struggle against racism and discrimination. It was their fight now: King had died, but he did not leave them stumbling in a vacuum; they were well prepared for the next battle because King had taught them how " to destroy the barriers of fear and insecurity that had been hundreds of years in the making". He had

taught them how to endure the bitter maltreatment of the white race with smiling faces that challenged the white ego and exposed his brutality and savagery.

King had showed his people the way and they had followed his lead because they knew he was the one- the chosen one who is going to take them through “ thousands midnights... dreary with low- hovering clouds” into the light of the morning... the new morning of salvation and freedom. Even now whenever you pass by his grave, there you will see an inscription on his tombstone: “ Free at last, Free at last, Thank God Almighty I am free at last... ” We may not win tomorrow... but we won't quit, we won't give up... sure we have not realized all our ambitions; certainly we have a long way to go. But the important thing is that we were on the way.