

Martin Luther King, Jr. Breakfast
Vassar College
January 20, 2019

In my brief remarks I would like to focus on Service and Humanity. This day, this weekend, should not be a celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life. This static way of thinking about history, I argue, is responsible for the very bland and selective memories we decide to share on this day, year after year. King's life and work has been reduced to four words, I Have a Dream. Our public imagery of King is stuck on August 28, 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

When I asked my 5-year old son what he learned about Martin Luther King in school, he said, "I saw two movies. He was killed...no, shot then killed and he was in a box like Grandma Mills. And, he was put in jail, and he wrote on toilet paper. And, children were marching." I was pleased he had some reference for the Birmingham Campaign of 1963 and King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. Although he didn't actually remember his grandmother passing away, he was one years old, he was clearly drawing on the collective memory of our family and making use of that history to make connections. This is kind of detail is rare. Elementary students tend to get taught about King as a pastor and peacemaker; both of which are true. Yet, I believe they are more than capable of handling a deeper truth.

In the later years of King's life, he knew he was going to die. Or, better yet, he knew he was going to get killed. For anyone thinking about mortality, or their death, they tend to think expansively about their life. King had long ago prepared for this moment. As early as 1956, when he began to fully form his ideas on nonviolence, he talked extensively about

redemptive suffering, which suggested that unearned suffering was redemptive, and that faith was essential in giving one's life to a cause such as racial and economic justice.

Throughout his activist life, King engaged in the ultimate question of how do you work in service of justice and humanity. I argue that King was trying to grapple with three elements of humanity: self, culture, and society. By thinking about death, he made sense of life. And life, for King, was about Service! How does culture help us mediate between self and society?

I'm going to focus my remarks on King's February 4, 1968 sermon titled Drum Major Instinct. I focus on this sermon for two reasons: first, it is here that King brought together much of his thinking on leadership and service and second, at his funeral, excerpts from this sermon were played.

On Feb. 4, 1968, from pulpit of Ebenezer Baptist Church, he preached a sermon about the Drum Major Instinct. According to King, the drum major instinct was a "basic desire for recognition, for importance, that same desire for attention, to be first...to lead the parade." He believed that people genuinely like to do good deeds, but they also like to be praised for it. I'm not sure I agree with King that attention and being first/ being praised are comparable. Also, there seems to be a fine line between seeking praise or attention and seeking acknowledgement. But, we'll come back to that in a minute.

King connected the persistence of the drum major instinct with American capitalism. He argued the advertisers had a way of tapping into human behavior---tapping into the drum major instinct—to sell products. You've seen the many commercials or advertisements that suggest that this product will turn heads. It'll make people ask, "where'd you get those shoes." This drum major instinct, King believed, caused people to live above their means.

When people feed their egos with consumer products, their sense of themselves becomes distorted. People need to harness the drum major instinct because it does various things to the personality: it causes people to engage in activities to get attention and to push others down to lift themselves up. “The drum major instinct,” he was concerned, “can lead to exclusivism in one’s thinking, and can lead to one to feel that because he has some training, he’s a little better than that person that doesn’t have it, or because he has some economic security, that he’s a little better than the person who doesn’t have it. And that’s the uncontrollable, perverted use of the drum major instinct.” It also leads to “tragic race prejudice,” where some feel superior to others. The tragedy of a culture of competition—taken out of capitalism’s playbook—was that it fueled white supremacy or, as King put it, “the most tragic expressions of man’s inhumanity to man.”

For King, nations were not above the drum major instinct. He argued, “God didn’t call America to do what she’s doing in the world now. God didn’t call America to engage in a senseless, unjust war, [such] as the war in Vietnam. And we are criminals in that war. We have committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world...And we won’t stop it because of our pride, and our arrogance as a nation.” His words are no less true and haunting fifty-one years later.

What did this tragedy, this drive to be first or recognized, mean for King, and what might it mean for us? He did not leave his congregation wondering. “If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. With this definition of greatness, it means everybody can be great, because everybody can serve.”

Service for King was central to humanity. It was central to how we position ourselves in society and how we stand up in a society that normalizes injustice. For example, we know that King died in Memphis supporting black sanitation workers. In his last speech on April 3, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, he alluded to the meaning of service. He told the crowd, “don’t ask ‘if I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor?’ The question is not ‘if I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?’” but rather, “‘If I do *not* stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?’ that’s the question.” The issue here is the line between sympathy and empathy. You can be sympathetic and unchanged. Empathy generally calls people to action—calls people to serve.

The individuals that Wes highlighted—Bayard Rustin, Stanley Levison, and Ella Baker—were exemplary people who embodied that selflessness to serve without attention; they shied away from it. We recognize members of the Vassar community today for their service to help transform Vassar into a more equitable institution. Let us all use this day, this moment to commit or recommit ourselves to something much bigger than ourselves.

Thank You.

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