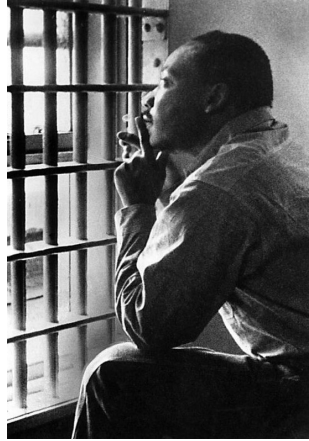


From the Mountaintop: Commemorating the Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Memphis, Tennessee, a city of musicians, heard an incomparable performance on April 3, 1968. It is doubtful that it will ever be surpassed, because to do so, would require the performer to be prophetic. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s final speech, that night, is a milestone in American history, and poetry, as significant as is Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.



Dr. King in jail in Birmingham.

The poem would never have been made, would never have been composed and declaimed, except for the determined intervention of the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King's closest friend. Abernathy, who, in his introduction to King that night, would humorously refer to himself as "(King's) dearest friend and other brother" and as "one of the world's greatest preachers!" had brought King there, despite his fatigue and reluctance to appear. Abernathy told King this was a core crowd of sanitation workers who had braved a night of hell-fire to hear him, and they would feel cut off from a lifeline if he let them down. His entrance caused an eerie bedlam.... Cheers from the floor echoed around the thousands of empty seats above, and the whole structure rattled from the pounding elements of wind, thunder, and rain.... King came smiling to the microphones about 9:30 p.m., just as the storms crested," reported author Taylor Branch.

Outside, "the wind howled like a hammer." There were multiple tornadoes; at least five people died in the storm. Rain fell in slanted sheets, and only about two thousand people were there that night in Bishop Charles Mason Temple, unlike the 15,000 that had heard King there two weeks before. King was at the lowest ebb of his popularity in his entire career; 75% of the nation's population thought he had lost touch with the American people, particularly because of his announced opposition to the Vietnam War. The sanitation workers, prevented from forming a union, were on strike because of the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker, crushed to death on the previous February 1st by a malfunctioning compactor in their truck, because, under segregation, they could not seek shelter from the rain anywhere else—these sanitation workers were the "despised and rejected." What should King choose to say to them?



April 1968 Sanitation workers strike that brought Dr. King to Memphis, Tennessee.



Strategy session (clockwise from Martin Luther King, Jr.): Andrew Young, Stanley Levinson, Clarence Jones, Cleveland Robinson, James Bevel, Martin Luther King, Jr.

King *said* nothing to them; he *sang* to them. And the first thing he did, was to transport them above the garbage of the streets of Memphis, to the very roof of the universe itself. "*Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world. And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, 'Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?' would take my mental flight by Egypt and I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn't stop there. I would move on by Greece and take my mind to Mount*

Olympus. And I would see Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon. And I would watch them around the Parthenon as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality. But I wouldn't stop there...

"Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty and say, 'if you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy.' Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, the only when it is dark enough can you see the stars."

Poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his "A Defence of Poetry" contends that prophets are poets. *"Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present*

as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present." Martin Luther King, in the prophetic tradition, brought the sanitation workers that night to the stage of world history, to discuss their cause on that stage, because he recognized that they deserved to be there. When he concluded with the now-world-famous *"I've Been to the Mountaintop"* ending, the reason for its electrifying effect, was that everyone there, for that moment, could see the Promised Land. It was the future in the present, summarized in the final words of King's song: *"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!"*

That night, and in the last 24 hours of his life, Martin Luther King was the freest man in the United States, perhaps on Earth. In our recall of that moment, and that speech, tonight, and in our recall of all the poets and prophets that have done as Martin King, let us remember: *"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."*



Thousands march in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral procession in Atlanta, Georgia, April 9, 1968.



Dr. Ralph David Abernathy and his wife, with Dr. and Mrs. King and children, march on the front line, leading the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965.



March on Washington, August 28, 1963.