

# Introduction

Because Martin Luther King Jr. was recovering from being nearly stabbed to death by Izola Ware Curry as he autographed copies of his first book (*Stride Toward Freedom*) at Blumstein's Department Store in Harlem on September 20, 1958, his wife delivered his written address to young people who participated in the Youth March for Integrated Schools in Washington, D.C. on October 25, 1958. King cheered, praised, and encouraged young people for what he considered a "great and historic demonstration" for freedom. Through his wife King told the youths:

There is a unique element in this demonstration; it is a young people's march. You are proving that the youth of America is freeing itself of the prejudices of an older and darker time in our history. In addition, you are proving the so-called "silent generation" is not so silent. . . .

Keep marching and show the pessimists and the weak of spirit that they are wrong. Keep marching and don't let them silence you. Keep marching and resist injustice with the firm, non-violent spirit you demonstrated today.

The future belongs, not to those who slumber or sleep, but to those who cannot rest while the evil of injustice thrives in the bosom of America. The future belongs to those who march toward freedom.<sup>1</sup>

Not only did King welcome and applaud the youthful activists to the struggle, he urged them from the beginning to adhere to nonviolence. Even at this early juncture in his civil rights ministry, King was aware of what the youth of the nation could contribute toward achieving the freedom and civil rights of all people. He applauded their demonstration and encouraged them to keep the faith, to keep protesting and demonstrating for freedom.

In March 1964, Martin Luther King gave an interview to the seventh-grade English class at the George A. Towne Elementary School in Atlanta, Georgia. From the responses that he gave to the questions posed, it was evident that he took the interview by his youthful audience seriously. His answers revealed much appreciation for their concerns, as well as his respect for those asking the questions. All of this was quite consistent with his long-held stance that children and young people have much to contribute to the civil rights struggle, and therefore should not be expected to merely be passive onlookers as adults engage the struggle for freedom and civil rights.

Two of the questions asked by the students pertained to the subject of where King got the inspiration to engage in civil rights work, and what he believed to be the role of young people in the movement. With regard to the first question, King told the students that it was actually quite easy for him to work in civil rights because he had grown up the son of a minister who was committed to applying Christian principles and the Christian love ethic to the problems of injustice and other social maladies that adversely affected black people. He had grown up the son of a minister who believed blacks were morally obligated to fight for their freedom and right to live with dignity. In this regard, King said, he saw his father as an excellent ministerial role model. But more to the point of how he

1. Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 4:515.

came to be interested in civil rights work, King told the students: “My home influenced me because of [sic] my father as a minister, was always interested in civil rights and helping people who had been treated unjustly or unfairly.”<sup>2</sup> He was further encouraged to move toward the ministerial vocation by the example of his Morehouse College teacher-mentors such as President Benjamin E. Mays and Professor George Kelsey. “As a young college student I was concerned about segregation and I always felt that one of the important roles of a minister is leadership in getting rid of segregation and discrimination.”<sup>3</sup> The church and its ministers were not to be silent, passive backseat passengers in that struggle. Instead, wherever they were stationed they were to be vocal, aggressive, importunate leaders for justice, desegregation, and integration. King told the young students that his social conscience was near full bloom by the time he entered college, and thus at an early age he was concerned about the plight of his people and desired to do something about it. He was not satisfied to just sit back and wait to see what others might do. He wanted to make his own contribution. Consequently, he decided fairly early that education would be a primary means of preparing for such a vocation, although he did not blossom academically until he began seminary.

In addition to tracing his own interest in civil rights work to the example of his father and teacher-mentors at Morehouse, King was equally emphatic in telling the students that they needed to be open and willing to learn, as well as to be thoroughly trained in the fundamentals of nonviolent resistance. On this point he said: “Children suffer as much or more as a result of the existence of segregation as adults do, therefore, children have the right and a

2. Martin Luther King Jr., Interview by Seventh-Grade English Class at the George A. Towne Elementary School, Atlanta, Georgia, March 11, 1964, King Library and Archives, 1.

3. Ibid.

responsibility to participate in racial demonstrations if they are well disciplined. Those who participate in demonstrations must be disciplined in non-violence. . . . I do think children should be taught how to behave and what they are demonstrating for before they demonstrate.”<sup>4</sup> Young people should be willing to be instructed and guided on the seriousness of the demonstrations and the importance of disciplined nonviolent resistance and what that entails. This is an important point, for we will see that while there were many youths along the civil rights trail who willingly abided by King’s insistence on the need for disciplined nonviolent resistance, there were also many who rejected his unabashed, absolute commitment to nonviolence. For example, Nashville student activists (e.g., Diane Nash, John Lewis, James Bevel, and Bernard Lafayette) trained by James Lawson in Gandhian ideas and techniques bought into the idea of nonviolence as a way of life and took this attitude into the early phase of the work of SNCC. However, the increasingly strong contingent of Northern student activists who later joined SNCC exhibited less faith in nonviolence as the best means to social change, and had almost no appreciation for the idea of nonviolence as a way of life. In addition, many Deep South local black activists in the Mississippi Delta and Alabama also insisted on the need for self-defense, an ethic of which King himself adhered for a period during the early days of the Montgomery struggle.<sup>5</sup> At any rate, this attitude toward self-defense, particularly among youthful activists reared in the Deep South, contributed to the growing tension and division within SNCC itself, as well as with King, SCLC, and other traditional civil rights organizations. But for King’s part, it was clear that nonviolence was not only the best, but the only reasonable

4. Ibid.

5. See Rufus Burrow Jr., *Extremist for Love: Martin Luther King Jr., Man of Ideas and Nonviolent Social Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 201.

way to solve interpersonal and group conflict. This meshed perfectly with his conviction that the universe itself is situated on a moral foundation and is governed by absolute moral laws, the chief of which is love. Love, King believed, is at the heart of nonviolence.

During the early 1960s, there was a tendency of many in the media to credit Martin Luther King with spearheading the student sit-ins, the student Freedom Rides, and the utterly dangerous voter education-registration work in Mississippi and in Selma, Alabama. To King's credit, however, he did all he could to correct this misconception. He never sought to take credit for what he did not do. Indeed, from the time of the Montgomery bus boycott, King often reminded people that he did not start the boycott, but just happened to be in Montgomery when a myriad of forces and events conjoined to ignite it. When the sit-ins began spontaneously on February 5, 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina, King and other acknowledged civil rights leaders knew nothing about it until news of it was reported by both sympathizers and the media. In addition, when the Nashville student activists under the leadership of Diane Nash decided to continue the Freedom Rides in 1961 after CORE called them off because of the savage violence against the riders in Anniston, Alabama, King supported the initiative, but he did not try to take credit for the students' amazing and courageous decision to not allow any facet of the movement to be stopped in its tracks by violence. Much to the chagrin of the students, King did not accept their invitation to join the Freedom Ride. Reasons for this will be examined subsequently. For now, suffice it to say that the decision not to join the students early set the stage for mounting tension and division between the students and King (SNCC and SCLC).

Although Martin Luther King did not pretend to have anything to do with the start-up of the civil rights activity of young people, he was always willing to lend any support he and SCLC could. Indeed,

it was under the auspices of SCLC, and then acting executive director Ella Josephine Baker, that black and white student leaders (mostly college students) from across the country were invited to Baker's alma mater, Shaw University, on Easter weekend 1960, to discuss how to coordinate their efforts after they burst onto the scene with sit-in demonstrations. Unlike Baker, who argued for the autonomy of any student organization that might develop out of the meetings, King, (and much more so) Wyatt Walker, and others argued that any such group should be under the authority and supervision of SCLC. Baker pushed very hard against this idea. She had few supporters among the all-male cast of SCLC board members, but there were a few, and she held her ground. Although the students respected King a great deal at this time and invited him to give the opening address, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was born out of the Shaw meetings as a separate, autonomous entity, with its own leaders. They chose a group or communal leadership style (reflecting Baker's influence), instead of the more traditional charismatic leader model of King and his black Baptist cohorts. Since King was, from the time of the Montgomery bus boycott, receptive to and supportive of the civil rights work of all groups (e.g., the NAACP, CORE, the Urban League, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation) that opted for nonviolent approaches, indicators are that he was less troubled by the idea of an autonomous SNCC than was Wyatt Walker and other SCLC board members who preferred a more controlling, leader-centered approach.

Without question, Martin Luther King loved children and young people. From the beginning of the movement, he displayed a good sense of their importance to the struggle for civil rights, acknowledging that the demonstrations that black adults were waging were also about the day-to-day lives of black youths, as well as their futures. He always told black children and youths that

the nonviolent demonstrations that SCLC and other civil rights organizations were engaged in was about the futures of young people. Looking back, Jawana Jackson recalled “Uncle Martin” saying to her: “We’re doing this to help you and all of the little children.”<sup>6</sup> In addition, King was generally quite comfortable around children and young people, and they seemed often to gravitate toward him, a point that James Bristol made as early as 1959 during King’s trip to India. In his tour diary, Bristol wrote that during a visit to one of the Ashrams King’s popularity among the children was noticeably evident. Bristol wrote of what he perceived as King’s “great love for children,” referring to him as a “pied piper” who “moved about the Ashram with several children clutching his arm or holding his hand.”<sup>7</sup> There were similar displays of his affection for children and King’s popularity among them in various cities throughout the United States.

That King was so popular among many young people and understood that the struggle was also about them and that they had something important to contribute is no small matter. Although black youths respected and admired King for his leadership and contributions, we will see that many, particularly Northerners who joined SNCC and other youth civil rights organizations, disagreed with him at times and rejected his ideology, his integrationist ideas, and his unyielding commitment to nonviolence as more than a strategy or technique. While there was mutual love and respect between King and black youths, there were also generational, cultural, and even geographical differences that led to tension and division between them.

6. Ellen Levine, *Freedom’s Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1993), 131.

7. *The Papers* (2005), 5:210 n. 2.

The six chapters in this book focus on the contributions of primarily black children and youths in Deep South states who stepped up to the plate during a particularly dangerous period in the struggle against racism and racial discrimination in the United States. This was their way of showing that they wanted to do more than just passively exist in their present condition of deprivation and oppression; that they were somehow satisfied with second-class citizenship and race discrimination. They desired, instead, to have a life worth living. Furthermore, they were willing to struggle for such a life; a struggle that would at times include children as young as four years of age. The chapters in this book examine the contributions of black children and youths in Montgomery, the sit-ins and Freedom Rides, the events in Birmingham, and Mississippi, and Selma.

Although the focus is on the contributions of black youths, it would be an unforgivable error to be completely silent regarding the supportive role played by white youths, mostly from the North, but a few southerners as well. As important as the Freedom Summer Project was in 1964 when hundreds of mostly white college volunteers from the North descended on the Mississippi Delta, we will see that white youths were involved in earlier campaigns as well, not least the sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and Birmingham. Like their youthful black counterparts, white youth also suffered the inhumane and violent treatment of white hate groups. And yet we will see that in virtually every case the violence toward blacks was more severe. For example, it was not enough to lynch a black person. Racial hatred seemed to require that they be decapitated, that the body be literally cut in half, or that the face be disfigured beyond recognition. While to a large extent black youths had no choice but to fight for their freedom, white youths chose to put their own freedom on the line in order to fight for the freedom of blacks. Some of the volunteers figured out that because of the relational nature of what it means to



be a human being, by fighting for the rights of blacks they were also fighting for their own rights. Like their black counterparts they too had a vision of a United States of America that was not, but could be; a vision of a truly democratic nation that was interested in the well-being, not of a select few, but of all citizens. We will see that to their credit, many understood that, historically, the country valued the lives of whites much more than those of Afrikan Americans, and that there was something fundamentally wrong with such a stance and the practices that ensued.

The witness and sacrifices of these young people—blacks and whites—is a tremendous lesson for youth of today, and is also an excellent reason for them to read, study, and reflect on the contributions of young people during the civil rights movement. Even today, young people in the United States have much to offer toward the achievement of a more just and humane society and world, but many are not aware of this, and one wonders whether they would know what to do about it if they were. What we learn in this book is that young people of the early and later civil rights era did not wait to be given either the permission or support of adults before courageously leaping into the fray. Many acted solely on the basis of their conscience and did not give much thought to whether parents, teachers, or other adults supported them. When they did think about such matters they were still not deterred from making their contributions.

Presently in King studies, I find that there is too little emphasis on discussions of his love and adoration for children and youths; his desire that they each have all of the things necessary for a life that is truly worth living; and his sense of their responsibility to help make this a reality. Although King never wanted to put children in harm's way, he discovered early in his civil rights ministry that it was virtually impossible to avoid this completely if they were to be

allowed to make their own contributions toward the achievement of freedom and justice. Civil rights work in the Deep South was dangerous work for participants, regardless of age and race. Indeed, we will see that during the Birmingham campaign in 1963, it early became clear that from the standpoint of strategy there may be times when the children and youths can be more successful in accomplishing the objectives of the movement than the adults; can even lead the adults to deeper, more committed involvement in the struggle, or could even be the primary reason that some adults eventually found their way to involvement in the struggle. Sometimes, King learned, it is children and young people who lead the way for the involvement of otherwise passive, sometimes fearful, apathetic parents, teachers, and other adults.

During the Birmingham campaign of 1963, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's progress stalled early when the jails quickly filled with the available committed adult demonstrators and there were too few remaining who could continue the nonviolent demonstrations on a mass scale in order to produce the impact that was needed to ensure media attention and that of the federal government. They did not have the numbers to accomplish what was desired. Although reluctant at first, King, at the urging of one of his close advisors, finally decided to allow massive numbers of black children and youths to participate in the demonstrations. It is important to remember that the decision to permit the involvement of children and young people was not simply a point of strategy for Martin Luther King. Rather, he respected the dignity and worth and the agency of the children as human beings,<sup>8</sup> and wanted them to contribute toward their own liberation as well as help to shape their own future. But not only this, King simply adored the children

8. *Ibid.* (2007), 6:212.

and felt a real sense of commitment to their present and future well-being.

There were times when Martin Luther King even appeared to be eager to be around children. And why would this not be the case for one who was a loving father and by this time had three young children and an infant of his own with whom he was not able to spend much time because (rightly or wrongly) he had given his life to his ministerial calling and the movement? King missed his own children in the worst way, and thus it should come as no surprise that he was so open, gentle, and patient with children in Birmingham, Selma, Atlanta, Chicago, and other cities. In a sense, many of these were King's surrogate children—his children away from home. There were times when, in a parental sort of way, he could be very protective of the children he encountered along the way.

Martin Luther King believed that everybody had something of value to contribute to the struggle for civil and human rights. He preferred that would-be demonstrators be willing to commit totally to the philosophy by which he lived, that is, that they be staunchly committed to nonviolence as a way of life. But he was a realist, and like Gandhi, he knew that most people would not be able to measure up, but that the “creative minority”—those committed to nonviolence in a thoroughgoing way and who viewed it as the only way of living in the world—would be able to encourage the less committed to at least use the methods of nonviolence pragmatically, or as a strategy. In any event, King made it clear that all volunteers could participate in some way in the direct-action campaigns of the nonviolent army under the leadership of SCLC, if not in the demonstrations themselves. Virtually anybody who wished to make a positive contribution was encouraged to join the nonviolent army. It was particularly important to encourage the involvement of the

children and young people. Who would have thought that these, ranging from young children to young adults, would play such a vital role throughout the movement, especially in the Mississippi Delta, Birmingham, and later, in Selma?

To be sure, young people such as those affiliated with SNCC and others who were not under the watchful eye and supervision of SCLC also made significant contributions to the further advancement of the movement. Not only did they, more than any other civil rights activists, break ground in some of the most feared and dangerous areas in the Deep South such as the Mississippi Delta region and Alabama's Loundes County, but their refusal to give in to political expediency served to challenge King and other civil rights leaders to press for and hold out for more than they might otherwise have done in their negotiations with local white leaders, as well as federal authorities. Even the young people had a sense that it was naïve to think that they would get everything they demanded. But by demanding more, they also believed that they would get more. This brings to mind an idea expressed by social gospel proponent Walter Rauschenbusch in 1912: "We shall demand perfection and never expect to get it. But by demanding it we shall get more than we now have."<sup>9</sup> The young people seem to have understood this much better than their more conservative, cautious adult leaders. By demanding more, they put moral and political pressure on SCLC and other more traditional civil rights organizations to not settle for minor concessions. It was a reminder that the ideal of love demanded more than oppressors were generally willing to concede.

In the chapters that follow I focus on the contributions, creativity, energy, spirit, fearlessness, and the power of young people—from grade school through college—to the struggle for civil rights and

9. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912 [1926]), 126.

freedom. In virtually every civil rights campaign, beginning in Montgomery, young people were involved and made their presence known and felt in positive—and at times negative—ways. In the earlier stages of the movement, essentially led by King, they were not formally included in the strategies for the civil disobedience campaigns, for example, in Montgomery. Youth activists led the way in the Albany, Georgia campaign of 1961 as a result of the leadership and work of SNCC, which sought to organize local blacks for what they knew would be a long protracted struggle for voter registration. SNCC activists essentially broke ground for the campaign that was later initiated by SCLC in Albany. SCLC failed to achieve its goals there, but King and his staff learned valuable lessons about how to carry out nonviolent direct-action projects in more efficient ways. After the Albany debacle, King was convinced that nonviolence was on trial and that they needed a test case, which, unknown to him at the time, would be Birmingham, Alabama.

To be sure, Afrikan American youths in Montgomery did not ride the buses to school and other places during the boycott. In this regard, they were significant participants in the boycott, although not much scholarly attention has been given at this point to uncovering any formal plans that might have existed as to how they were to be utilized in a strategic way. We know, however, that such a plan was in fact developed by SCLC leadership during the Birmingham campaign eight years later. But it is important to understand that young people made important contributions to the movement from Montgomery onward. Few understood better than King that young people were, like their parents and other adults, moral agents, self-determining beings who could decide for themselves how to respond to the racism, discrimination, and segregation that they too experienced each day of their young lives. Although not much has been written about it to date, we will see that King was not blind

to the effect of the bus boycott on black youths in Montgomery. Moreover, black youths were not passive bystanders in Montgomery or any of the Deep South campaigns.

James Bevel, a younger protégé of King in SCLC, would argue in the early, but failing stage of the Birmingham campaign, that if it was reasonable to allow young children to make the decision to accept the Christian faith and to join the church (which was a common practice in black Baptist churches), it was reasonable to allow them to make their own decision as to whether to participate in the nonviolent demonstrations. What was happening to adults in southern black communities, Bevel convincingly argued, was also happening to the children. They were suffering right along with their parents, teachers, and other adults. They too experienced blatant and subtle forms of racism. They therefore wanted to participate in the struggle to eradicate racial discrimination and related forms of injustice. Indeed, Gwendolyn Patton told Charles Cobb Jr. that in 1952, when she was nine years old in Montgomery she made her first intentional protest against racism when a white counter boy called her a “pickaninny” at a drugstore. Her reaction was to deliberately spill water onto the counter.<sup>10</sup> A consideration of the recollections of some adults regarding the role they played when they were children and young people during the early movement years will confirm black youths’ desire to protest the injustices done to them. For our purpose, the focus, in part, will be on reflections and contributions of a few black adults who grew up in Montgomery, Birmingham, the Mississippi Delta, and Selma, who share memories of the way it was. Attention will also be given to the contributions of youths who did not operate under the auspices of SCLC and other traditional civil rights organizations.

10. See Charles Cobb Jr., *On the Road to Freedom: A Guided Tour of the Civil Rights Trail* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008), 208.

How did Martin Luther King and other local and national leaders react to and encourage young people? How did young people's fearlessness, sense of commitment, energy, enthusiasm, involvement in the demonstrations, sit-ins, kneel-ins, stand-ins, Freedom Rides, and distrust of the political process and the federal government influence King's thinking and action? These are some of the questions to be examined in this book. Since many of these young people, especially Deep South ones, had been reared in the church and were taught the same faith and religious values as adults, we will also look more intentionally at King's understanding of the role of the church in the face of injustice, as well as the positive contributions of local churches, prayer meetings, singing, and praying in preparation for and during the demonstrations. We will find that singing was particularly important for black youths, as well as many white youths involved in the Freedom Summer Project in 1964. We begin with a consideration of the struggles and contributions of black youths in the Montgomery, Alabama campaign to desegregate the city buses.