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## “A Regular Fella”: The Boy Named M. L. King, Jr.

*Children will grow up substantially what they are by nature—and only that.*

—Harriet Beecher Stowe<sup>1</sup>

*What has not been emphasized enough is that Martin was once a boy. He, like others, developed gradually. He was funny. He was curious. He liked to play. He was a regular “fella.”*

—Christine King Farris<sup>2</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life and adventures as a child have seldom been taken seriously in works about him. It is too often forgotten that King, Jr. was an ordinary boy before he became a great man. In the rare cases in which his childhood has been seriously considered, it is used primarily to further highlight what Frederick L. Downing calls his “mythic and heroic trajectory.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, we get embellished portrayals of the gifted child who grew up to become a great hero, but

1. Quoted in Charles Noel Douglas, comp., *Forty Thousand Sublime and Beautiful Thoughts: Gathered from the Roses, Clover Blossoms, Geraniums, Violets, Morning Glories, and Pansies of Literature* (New York: Louis Klopsch, 1904), 257.

2. Christine King Farris, *My Brother Martin: A Sister Remembers Growing Up with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2003), 39.

not images of an average boy who looked, thought, and acted like a child before becoming a genuinely human and down-to-earth man.<sup>4</sup>

This first chapter reclaims King, Jr.'s childhood as foundational for understanding his essential "humanness." It begins with a focus on a boy who not only participated in a variety of rough-and-tumble play, as children typically do, but who, like so many other youngsters in his day, was also quite sensitive, curious, attentive, unusually mature in mental aptitude, and prone to a questioning attitude toward life.<sup>5</sup> Attention is also devoted to the human side of King, Jr., as revealed through the lens of his everyday life and interactions at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia; Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania; and Boston University in Boston, Massachusetts. King, Jr.'s Boston years—1951 to 1954—are treated as the terminal point for the content of this chapter because it was during this time frame that King, Jr.'s transition from boyhood to manhood, particularly at the level of his values and choices, first became most pronounced and evident.

### A. To Be Young, Curious, and Black: King, Jr.'s Childhood Years

In an article about Martin Luther King, Jr.'s childhood years, Willie Christine King Farris has noted that "my brother was no saint, ordained as such at birth." She went on to describe little M. L or Mike, as King, Jr. was affectionately called in those early years, as an average and ordinary boy who absolutely delighted in doing the kinds of things boys usually did.<sup>6</sup> An "extraordinarily healthy child" from birth, he

3. Frederick L. Downing, *To See the Promised Land: The Faith Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 11.

4. Christine King Farris, "The Young Martin: From Childhood through College," *Ebony*, Vol. XLI, no. 3 (January, 1986), 56; Alberta King, "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Birth to Twelve Years Old by His Mother," a recording, Ebenezer Baptist Church (18 January 1973), Library and Archives of The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., Atlanta, Georgia; and "'I Remember Martin': People Close to the Late Civil Rights Leader Recall a Down-to-earth and Humorous Man," *Ebony*, Vol. 39, no. 6 (April, 1984), 3-34, 36, 38, and 40.

5. Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1998), 1-12; Martin Luther King, Sr., *Daddy King: An Autobiography*, with Clayton Riley (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1980), 107-28; and Christine King Farris, *Through It All: Reflections on My Life, My Family, and My Faith* (New York: Atria Books, 2009), 16-27.

6. Farris, "The Young Martin," 56.

found great pleasure in climbing, jumping, and sticking his head out of the back door windows of parked cars.<sup>7</sup> King, Jr. also enjoyed playing different games with his older sister, Christine, and his baby brother, A. D. The King home at 501 Auburn Avenue Northeast in Atlanta, Georgia—comprising also the children’s parents, King, Sr. and Alberta Williams King; their maternal grandmother, Jennie C. Parks Williams; their great aunt, Ida Worthem; and their uncle Joel King<sup>8</sup>—was often the scene of spirited activity, as King, Jr., Christine, and A. D. did their share of running, tussling, and tumbling, in addition to playing “hide and seek” and “tag” and locking themselves in the hall cabinet, almost breaking the door at one point.<sup>9</sup> Christine “was often teased by her more rambunctious younger brothers,” and the play did get a little too rough at times, but King, Jr., unlike A. D., was never known in his neighborhood for toughness or for antagonizing other children.<sup>10</sup> However, this did not mean that the youngster was totally incapable of the kind of genuine fighting to which boys commonly resorted. On one occasion, when A. D. antagonized Christine, King, Jr. “conked his battling brother over the head with a telephone, leaving him dazed and wobbly on his feet.” After determining that A. D. was not seriously injured, M. L., Sr. and Alberta Williams King, the children’s parents, found some humor in the incident and laughed mildly, sensing that little A. D. had gotten a taste of his own medicine.<sup>11</sup>

But King, Jr., who inherited his “single-minded determination, faith

7. Clayborne Carson, et al., eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume I. Called to Serve, January 1929–June 1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 359; Farris, “The Young Martin,” 56; Farris, *Through It All*, 21–22; and King, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Birth to Twelve Years Old.”

8. This type of family fabric made all the more possible the transmission of cultural and spiritual values across generations, dating back to the slave quarters. King, Sr. was a Baptist pastor; his wife, Alberta, an accomplished musician; Mama Jennie, a widely sought-after speaker; Aunt Ida (Grandma Jennie’s sister), a teacher; and Uncle Joel, a preacher. All were deeply rooted in southern black Baptist Protestantism, and were exemplary in their faith. See Farris, *Through It All*, 31; Farris, “The Young Martin,” 56; and Lewis V. Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 91–126.

9. Carson, et al., eds., *King Papers*, I, 359; Farris, “The Young Martin,” 56; Farris, *Through It All*, 21–23; King, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Birth to Twelve Years Old”; and Frederick L. Downing, *To See the Promised Land*, 43–44.

10. King, *Daddy King*, 126.

11. Christine recalls that despite “being the baby, A. D. never acted it.” From the beginning, she added, “he was the bravest and most ‘devilishly creative’ of us all.” Philip Lenuud, one of King, Jr.’s boyhood friends, reported that as a teenager, A. D., perhaps spoiled because he was the youngest of the trio, had conflicts with even M. L., Sr., and his daddy threatened to put him out of the house

and forthrightness” from his father, fondly called Daddy King, did not have the temper of the elder King, who allegedly got physical on one occasion with a preacher who owed him money and refused to pay the debt.<sup>12</sup> When it came to matters of temperament, King, Jr. tended to be more like his mother, Alberta, from whom he “got his love, compassion and ability to listen to others.” Mother Dear, as King, Jr. and his siblings called her, “was the strong pacifist in the family,” and King, Jr. “got that from her.”<sup>13</sup> King, Jr. himself recalled that he was never “one” to “retaliate” or “to hit back too much,” that this “was a part of my native structure so to speak. . . .”<sup>14</sup> Daddy King, also weighing in on the question of his son’s manner of thinking and behaving as a child, noted that King, Jr. “was always a little sensitive in his responses to even the most casual matters, and he was always one to negotiate a dispute instead of losing his temper.”<sup>15</sup> King, Jr.’s mother Alberta agreed wholeheartedly, declaring: “No, he didn’t fight at all. He didn’t fight like a lot of little boys, guns or anything.”<sup>16</sup>

At a time when boys took pride in and virtually glorified their pistol and holster sets, King, Jr. absolutely refused to play with guns.<sup>17</sup> This tendency on the child’s part owed much to the teachings and example of not only his mother, but also Grandma Jennie and Aunt Ida—all of whom shared, to some degree, Daddy King’s idea of a “morally strict,”

on a few occasions. See Farris, *Through It All*, 22; King, *Daddy King*, 126–27; and A Private Interview with Philip Lenud, Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, Tennessee (7 April 1987).

12. Farris, “The Young Martin,” 57; and Baldwin Interview with Lenud (7 April 1987).

13. Farris, “The Young Martin,” 57; Baldwin Interview with Lenud (7 April 1987); King, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Birth to Twelve Years Old”; Downing, *To See the Promised Land*, 43–44; Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1993; originally published in 1969), 77; and Baldwin Interview with Lenud (7 April 1987).

14. King made these comments in the context of an interview in which he declared that he was never apt to retaliate against whites who verbally and physically assaulted him when he was a child, and this included the white woman who “slapped me” in “one of the downtown stores of Atlanta” “when I was about eight years old.” See “Face to Face: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Freeman,” U. K. (London?), recorded from transmission and aired (29 October 1961), King Center Library and Archives, 4–5.

15. King, *Daddy King*, 126.

16. Alberta elaborated further, noting that this tendency toward nonviolence “came up” in King, Jr., and that “that was a part of him when he got to be a man.” She went on to say: “And that was why when he wanted to get things done and make things better for all of us, he wanted to do it without a lot of fussing and fighting. He wanted to do it another way. And he did.” See King, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Birth to Twelve Years Old”; and Downing, *To See the Promised Land*, 43.

17. King, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Birth to Twelve Years Old”; and Downing, *To See the Promised Land*, 43.

somewhat “provincial,” and “rather regimented” upbringing for his children. In conformity with the King family’s house rules, King, Jr. not only went to bed early, arrived at school on time, returned home immediately after school, did his homework, and attended Sunday School and Church,<sup>18</sup> but also limited himself, for the most part, to toys that were considered safe and enjoyable as well as educational for youngsters. King, Jr.’s toys “included a train, building blocks, skates, and a bicycle,” with “a swing, a slide, and a basketball goal” in the backyard. The youngster played hard and “perhaps with some abandon,” and on a few occasions, was either frightened, grazed, or slightly struck by a car as he chased balls or rode his bicycle in the streets. Constant warnings from his parents about playing in the streets were not always heeded. In any case, King, Jr. “had a good time when he was a little boy,”<sup>19</sup> and he never got into the kind of trouble that required the attention and involvement of his principals, teachers, the police, or other authority figures outside the family. Undoubtedly, young King, Jr.’s “congenial home situation,” in which his parents “always lived together very intimately” and hardly “ever argued,”<sup>20</sup> was more significant than anything else in the shaping of this side of his personality.

Despite King, Jr.’s generally peaceful childhood demeanor, he nevertheless had a strong inclination toward the kind of mischief that caused discomfiture in others, including his own sister, Christine. He and A. D. beheaded a number of Christine’s dolls and “scattered their body parts throughout the house” and “in the backyard in the weeds near the fence.” Needless to say, such behavior was always most annoying for Christine, who “liked playing with dolls. . . .”<sup>21</sup> At times, King, Jr. joined both of his siblings in frightening people with their

18. It is reported that King, Jr. left for school at 8:00 a.m. and returned home by 3:00 p.m. At Sunday School, and at the meetings of the Baptist Youth Training Union, the boy heard Bible stories that he memorized. See King, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Birth to Twelve Years Old”; and Downing, *To See the Promised Land*, 45–46.

19. King, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Birth to Twelve Years Old”; and Downing, *To See the Promised Land*, 43–44.

20. Carson, et al., eds., *King Papers*, I, 360; and Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 4–5.

21. Farris, *Through It All*, 22.

Grandma Jennie's "old fox fur," which was "complete with head and glass eyes." The youngsters would "tie the fox fur to a long stick," hide behind shrubbery in their front yard, and take turns wiggling and dangling the fox as unsuspecting folk approached, thus scaring them "as they walked by on the sidewalk." This prank was particularly effective with women, who "would scream and clutch their husbands by the arm." The "great commotion" that followed proved gratifying for King, Jr. and his siblings, who likely responded with a lot of giggling and high-pitched noises. The "little prank went on for quite a while," but ended abruptly when neighbors informed Daddy King of what his children were doing.<sup>22</sup>

King, Jr. was viewed in certain family circles as a "bullheaded" boy who always preferred to lead, rather than follow.<sup>23</sup> But, interestingly enough, he usually played the role of teaser and prankster without becoming overly aggressive, and was never seriously agitated when his classmates and playmates teased, played mischievous tricks, or poked fun at him. At times, he was called names that corresponded with a particular aspect of his personality or behavior. When King, Jr.'s mother, Alberta purchased him a brown tweed suit for his sixth-grade graduation from Atlanta's David T. Howard Elementary School, the boy wore the suit so much until his friends jokingly called him "Tweed," a "name that stuck with him for the next several years." King, Jr. apparently took all of the teasing and laughter in stride.<sup>24</sup> Strangely, the youngster's love for that "tweed" or "draped suit," which was "tight at the ankles and baggy in the legs,"<sup>25</sup> was actually suggestive of what would become a lifelong fascination with and appreciation for nice, fancy, and stylish clothes.<sup>26</sup>

The ordinary routines of child's play constituted the source of much of King, Jr.'s fun, happiness, and sense of security in those early years.

22. *Ibid.*, 22–23.

23. *Ibid.*, 21.

24. Farris, "The Young Martin," 57; and Farris, *Through It All*, 27.

25. Farris, "The Young Martin," 57.

26. King, Jr.'s sister Christine recalls that their parents taught them "to dress properly and appropriately at all times." Daddy King was known to wear a necktie everyday, even "if he had his sleeves rolled up." See Farris, *Through It All*, 18.

His experiences with playing were important for his own growth and emotional well-being, and they helped him to relate in generally positive ways to nature and the physical world, to better understand self and others, to develop strong interactive skills, and to build solid social relationships. It is difficult to imagine a better background, especially for one who would grow up to become a major participant in types of community formation.<sup>27</sup> But there were also experiences that were not as enriching and empowering—though nonetheless educational for King, Jr. A case in point was the youngster’s relationship with two white boys whose father owned a store in the King family’s neighborhood. The boys became King, Jr.’s “inseparable playmates” for a few years. They “played ball” and “climbed trees” together, but when King, Jr. was about six years old, his white playmates told him that their “father had demanded” that they not “play childhood games” with him any longer, obviously because he was colored.<sup>28</sup> Shocked, confused, and utterly devastated, little King, Jr. turned to his mother for an explanation:

My mother took me on her lap and began by telling me about slavery and how it had ended with the Civil War. She tried to explain the divided system of the South—the segregated schools, restaurants, theaters, housing; the white and colored signs on drinking fountains, waiting rooms, lavatories—as a social condition rather than a natural order. Then she said the words that every Negro hears before he can yet understand the injustice that makes them necessary: “You are as good as anyone.”<sup>29</sup>

27. It could be safely argued that one has to begin with King, Jr.’s childhood experiences in order to comprehend what would become his life long quest for community, or the truly integrated society and world. This point was first made in the most emphatic and sophisticated terms in Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 82; and Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead*, 16–63.

28. “Face to Face: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Freeman,” 2–3; Carson, et al., eds., *King Papers*, I, 362; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1958), 19; King, *Daddy King*, 130; and Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 3–4. King’s sister, Christine corroborates much of this account, reporting that she, King, Jr., and their brother A. D. “could often be found in the backyard playing with other neighborhood kids, two of whom were little white boys. . . .” See Farris, *Through It All*, 24–25.

29. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 18–19; “Face to Face: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Freeman,” 3; and Farris, *Through It All*, 25. At another point, King recalled that “We were at the dinner table when the situation” with the two white boys “was discussed.” See Carson, et. al., eds., *King Papers*, I, 362.