

Preface

Much of the inspiration to complete this book came through a very memorable experience I had back in early 2003, after being invited to give lectures on Martin Luther King, Jr. at the St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, an all-black congregation led by my friend and former seminary classmate, the Reverend Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood. I had talked about King, Jr. for almost an hour, highlighting his greatness and many achievements over the thirteen-year period of his very public life, and during the Q and A period, an attentive and curious little boy, who could not have been more than ten years old, asked the question that caused everyone present to stop, think, and frame the discussion in more reasonable, realistic, and down-to-earth terms. Referring to King, Jr.'s assassination, the youngster asked me: "Did the man who killed Dr. King think about his children?" It was, in some ways, the most profound question ever put to me about Dr. King during my twenty years of teaching and writing about him. We were all reminded at that point that while King, Jr. was, and remains, a towering figure and a celebrated leader, he was also a regular person, and, like so many other men, a husband and father. This is too often forgotten in a culture in which we have lionized King, Jr., sanitized his image, and made him larger than life.

That little boy, in his own innocent and humble way, confronted me with a greater sense of urgency regarding the need to re-evaluate King, Jr. with an eye toward reconnecting him to his basic humanity. That is what this book is all about. This is not the first book to highlight

this need to humanize King, Jr., but it is the first in-depth and highly analytical treatment of King, Jr. from the standpoint of his fundamental “humanness.” The King, Jr. presented here is not so much the great leader who led freedom marches, delivered dynamic sermons and speeches, and dominated headline-making activities, but the ordinary human being who grew up saying and doing what little boys said and did, and who loved to eat, appreciated music and dance, enjoyed the company of females and sex, delighted in sports and games, was a mimic and quite playful, and had the gift of wit, humor, and laughter. This is the King, Jr. that we all need to come to terms with and accept if we are to really understand and properly celebrate him. It is about separating the man from the myth, while placing each in its proper context.