

## **An Incomparable Loss: The Mourning of Martin Luther King's Friends and Family**

Martin Luther King stepped out onto the balcony, smiling and laughing at his friends below as they got into their cars to head to dinner. King had just been teasing one of his top aides, Andrew Young, which had turned into a playful wrestling match. Other aides had ganged up on Young, mercilessly tickling him. A wild pillow fight had broken out, with Martin chasing his brother A.D. King around the room as if they were kids again. Out on the balcony now, King leaned over the rail and chatted with Jesse Jackson about music. He laughed as Andrew Young started goofily shadowboxing with the 6'4, 348 pound James Orange... who had almost become a pro-football player before joining King's organization, where he helped King build positive relationships with young people and gang members living in disenfranchised Black ghettos across the country.

King had been living in a state of constant despair and exhaustion recently, concerned that the civil rights movement was falling apart. Outside of the South, conditions for African Americans were worsening. New technologies had wiped out millions of jobs in steel, auto, meatpacking, tobacco, mining and cotton industries, and African Americans were the first to be let go. Unions often excluded them, and hiring discrimination made it difficult to find new work. Seeking a way out of poverty, masses of Black men went to Vietnam: although African Americans were only 13 percent of the nation's population, Black men made up almost 40 percent of Vietnam's soldiers. They were given the most dangerous missions and were killed at twice the rate of their White comrades. As jobs vanished from America's cities, White people found new opportunities in suburbs that systematically excluded African Americans. Very few White Americans understood that poverty and segregation had actually worsened outside of the South for African Americans during the civil rights movement, and many lost their sympathy for the continuing struggle for civil rights. Politicians thus felt less and less pressure to support that struggle, and even had an increasing incentive not to. As riots erupted in impoverished Black ghettos where police brutality ran rampant, politicians responded by demonizing African Americans for embracing a "culture of poverty" and "criminality." Such rhetoric helped lay the groundwork for the devastating system of mass incarceration that would even further eviscerate Black communities in the decades to come.

It was for these reasons that Martin Luther King was despairing. But what he was seeing in Memphis had raised his spirits: here was a living, breathing example of the labor and civil rights movements coming together as one. Here was a concrete manifestation of King's vision for solving poverty. And in a time where Black communities were often fracturing around their different ideas of how to move forward, here was a Black community that had united across their divisions of class, religious denomination, and age, in order to fight for the right to a living wage and humane working conditions for Black workers. Success for the striking sanitation

workers in Memphis would put the movement on the right track again by creating a powerful example of the fusion of racial and economic justice. It would be the perfect start to the enormous Poor People's Campaign planned in Washington the following month.

King smiled. A bullet blasted through his jaw, ripping off his chin, cutting through his jugular vein and spinal cord, and slamming him onto his back. His dear friend Ralph Abernathy had been in the room with him and rushed to his side, cradling his head: "Martin, Martin, this is Ralph. Do you hear me?" Abernathy saw Martin Luther King's lips quiver and thought he was trying to respond. King's eyes stared blankly out into space. An undercover agent named Marrell McCullough grabbed towels from a hotel cleaning cart as he bounded up the stairs, and tried to use them to stanch the wound as a pool of blood spread across the balcony. As howls of anguish erupted from the street below, the local reverend who had invited King and his friends to dinner, Billy Kyles, threw a blanket over King to try and keep him warm as King's skin began to grow pale.

A group of radical Black Power youth from a gang called the Invaders had just left the motel after meeting with King, where they discussed lending their street cred to an upcoming, nonviolent march. Having been shot at before, the Invaders scattered in all directions, thinking that it was they who were being attacked. One of their comrades, Charles Cabbage, had just gotten in his car when he heard the crack of the rifle shot. He slammed on the gas, only slowing down once he was sure he was far from danger. Turning on the radio, however, he heard that the gunfire had been aimed at King. The radio said to be on the lookout for a light blue or white Mustang. Cabbage was driving a light blue Mustang. Cabbage had just fled the scene. He hit the gas again, hid the car in his backyard, and covered it with tree branches as helicopters began to circle overhead. The young Black Power militant who had just been negotiating with King was soon overpowered by an immense nervous breakdown. His muscles began to freeze and spasm. While Cabbage slipped into an incapacitating seizure brought on by the trauma of the loss of King combined with the fear that he was a suspect, the real assassin slipped quickly across the border, out of Tennessee, and soon out of the country.

Back at the scene of the crime, Lorene Bailey, who owned the Lorraine Motel with her husband Walter, froze when she heard the crack of the rifle and realized that King had been shot. Having King stay at her motel had been the pride of her life, and now he had been killed there. Her husband later said that she began shaking wildly, "like a leaf in the wind." Later that night a blood vessel to her brain burst and she collapsed, fell into a coma, and died a few days later. King's brother had been in the shower and hadn't heard the shot; he emerged to find his worst nightmare unfolding in front of him and fell to the floor sobbing. A.D. King would drown in a pool the following year. Although there was no evidence of murder, King's brother was a good swimmer, and many of his friends couldn't help but wonder. A few years later a Black man walked into Ebenezer Baptist Church, where the King brothers had spent their childhood, and shot and killed their mother as she was playing the

organ. Martin Luther King's father had just lost two sons, and now he had to watch with his own eyes as the body of his beloved wife, Alberta Williams King, slumped across the organ.

Martin and A.D. King had called Alberta Williams King a few hours before Martin was killed, "just to pester her," their father Daddy King later wrote: the two brothers would try to disguise their voices and pretend to be someone else when they called their mother, and then break into howls of laughter. Martin told his mother that things were better in Memphis than he had expected; that the news reports were exaggerating the danger he was in; and that she need not worry. However, just a few weeks before this, Martin had made a point to sit down with his parents and ground them in the reality that he likely would not live much longer. He told them that large amounts of money were being offered to professional killers. Martin told his parents that they needed to spiritually prepare themselves for his impending death. By the time Martin sat his parents down for this talk, they had long lived in fear. For years, every knock on the door or telephone call they received felt like it would be news of their son's death. Now, later in the evening, at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, they heard the news they had long feared on the radio. Martin's parents wept silently. Daddy King later wrote of he and his wife: "Neither of us could say anything. We had waited, agonizing through the nights and days without sleep, startled by nearly any sound, unable to eat, simply staring at our meals. Suddenly, in a few seconds of radio time, it was over."

Back in Memphis, James Lawson was one of the first to be notified about King's death who wasn't actually present at the scene. He received a call immediately afterwards, as he was sitting down to have dinner with his family. Lawson had been studying nonviolent resistance in India when the Montgomery bus boycott broke out, and had rushed back to the United States to meet with King. He became perhaps the greatest trainer of nonviolent resistance in the country; training a group of students in Nashville who later became an important force in the sit-ins and Freedom Rides and helped to found SNCC. Lawson had moved to Memphis, and it had been he who had convinced King to come and support the Black garbage workers who had gone on strike. Fearing riots, he immediately rushed to Memphis's most popular Black radio station and recorded a tape that was played throughout the night, urging people to honor King's legacy and mourn with their communities rather than taking their rage out into the streets. After leaving the radio station, Lawson sat alone in his car, gripping the steering wheel. Even this profoundly spiritual, philosophical spirit, this student and warrior and mentor of nonviolent resistance, felt an overwhelming sense of rage. He understood better than anyone how disastrous King's death would be for the trajectory of the country. Lawson wanted to break down and scream and weep as he gripped his steering wheel, but he knew he had work to do. It would be Lawson who called the man who had emerged as perhaps Martin Luther King's greatest mentor, during the Montgomery bus boycott: Bayard Rustin.

Rustin received the news from Lawson before the national news networks had picked it up, and quickly boarded a flight to Memphis. In mid-flight, the airplane received orders from President Johnson to turn around and bring Rustin to Washington D.C. The President sought Rustin's advice on the appropriate federal response to King's death. Rustin warned Johnson that he needed to do something that would assure America's poor that hope was on the horizon, and that he needed to honor King by passing legislation focused on the economic justice issues he died fighting for. Thurgood Marshall – who had just become the nation's first Black Supreme Court Justice – expressed a similar opinion, warning the President that the nation had slipped into a deep “mood of depression” that required immediate and meaningful action. When Rustin finally arrived in Memphis, he told the striking garbage collectors that what they were doing represented a “totally new stage” in the civil rights struggle. The fusion of the struggle for racial justice with labor rights would be the path forward to wiping out poverty in the United States, he said. They must continue. Rustin – the master organizer of the March on Washington – stayed in town to orchestrate a completely silent march of 42,000 people. Shortly afterwards, the striking garbage collectors succeeded at winning basic labor rights, such as being paid for overtime work, gaining access to promotions previously available only to Whites, setting up a grievance procedure so they could challenge their bosses when they had been wronged without being fired, and forming an officially recognized union.

As for President Johnson, he leveraged the pressure created by King's death to pass the last major piece of civil rights legislation of the 1960s: the Fair Housing Act of 1968. It was, in part, a reaction to Martin Luther King's Chicago Campaign of 1966, where he pushed for an end to the rampant housing discrimination that existed throughout the entire country. Johnson had tried to pass a fair housing act after King's Chicago Campaign, but with 70 percent of White Americans telling pollsters that they opposed opening up their neighborhoods to African Americans, Congress overwhelmingly refused to support the bill. Now, it succeeded by just one vote. The Fair Housing Act made it a crime to deny anyone the right to buy or rent property based on race, but just like the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling 15 years earlier, it had weak enforcement powers and didn't lead to nearly as much change as many had hoped. In the words of historian Jason Sokol: “From the perspective of many political leaders, the bill was significant primarily because it allowed them to boast that they had enacted a major civil rights law,” and thereby create the illusion that they were honoring Martin Luther King. Like so much civil rights legislation before it, the actual effectiveness of the Fair Housing Act was not the point.

Meanwhile, riots rippled through 125 cities across the nation, with some lasting over a week. 72,800 Army and National Guard troops were deployed, and 50,000 soldiers stood ready for deployment on military bases around the country. It was the largest domestic deployment of military force since the Civil War. By the end of the week, the nation had sustained over \$100 million in property damage, much of it explicitly targeted at White owned businesses with known histories of

discrimination. 21,000 Black people were arrested. 40 people were killed, 2,500 were injured, and over 5,000 people were left homeless. Almost all were Black.

In the Black ghettos of the nation's capital, Stokely Carmichael – who had unleashed the call for Black Power two years earlier while marching with King – roamed the streets, attempting to calm the growing and angry crowds. Although Carmichael and King were portrayed as total opposites, the two men had developed a deep friendship, with King being almost a fatherly figure to the young Black Power militant. They both had a deep love for Black culture and history and Black rural folk traditions. Both were students of philosophy. When White Americans heard “Black Power” they tended to imagine a Black version of the violent domination signified by White power, but what Carmichael meant was having equal access to political power, economic power, and cultural power... meaning cultural empowerment and Black self-love. Having power meant to not be disempowered; it meant to not be politically powerless and economically destitute. For Black Power activists, cultural empowerment also meant not watering down Black speech and Black feelings in order to gain concessions or respect from Whites. White people were often angered, scared and confused when Black people expressed their honest thoughts and feelings about their oppression, and these reactions contributed to the demonization of Black Power and to the backlash of White “moderates” against the completion of the civil rights movement.

For King's part, the notion of Black Power was not new to him, and indeed it had deep historical roots reaching back across the generations. At a mass meeting during the Montgomery bus boycott a decade earlier, King had told the crowd “...until we as a race learn to develop our power, we will get nowhere. We've got to get political power and economic power for our race.” Ending segregation had always been just the beginning for Martin Luther King. While the two men had many disagreements, Carmichael also felt many commonalities with King. He had been moved by King's deep and obvious love for Black people, and by his ability to connect with them in communities across the nation. He had personally witnessed King risk his life over and over again. When the media began portraying Carmichael as an enemy of King, Carmichael had reacted by praising King whenever he could.

Now, in the Black ghettos of D.C., Stokely Carmichael stopped a young man who had begun breaking windows. He took his gun. He prevented a group of security guards from being attacked. When Carmichael stood up to speak to the growing crowds on the streets, they chanted “Black Power!” and he replied, “Brother King is dead; keep a cool head!” Stokely urged them to de-escalate the tensions on the streets by returning to their homes. But he also said that White America had killed the opportunity for nonviolence when they killed King; that King had been the only force advocating nonviolence that Black Power militants like himself admired and would listen to. A race war might be coming, Stokely told the crowd. Don't be undisciplined and riot. Channel your anger into disciplined preparation for race war. Untold numbers of Black Americans agreed... and they took action. King's death transformed the Black Panther Party for Self Defense from an organization

based in Oakland – with a second chapter in L.A. – into an organization with dozens of highly militant and effective chapters across the nation. As Black America prepared to physically defend itself, the FBI cracked down with an even fiercer brutality than it had shown to its most profound enemy: Martin Luther King.

A few days later, Stokely Carmichael, his fiancé Miriam Makeba, and his friend Cleveland Sellers drove to Atlanta, passing through numerous cities under martial law, to attend King's funeral. Unable to contact King's family, they rose extremely early to try and get into the church. The crowd outside Ebenezer Baptist Church, however, was already swelling to 60,000 - mostly poor African Americans. It looked as though those let into the church were primarily White dignitaries from across the country, which infuriated Carmichael and Sellers. They pushed through the crowds and waited for the King family to arrive at the entrance, and then audaciously jumped in behind them. The guards at the entrance were surprised, but recognizing Stokely, let them through. These legendary Black Power militants who loved King sat a few rows behind the King family, in the same aisle with the governor of New York state and the mayor of New York City. Looking around, they were disturbed to see many political figures who had never supported King. They were troubled to see so few Black freedom fighters, including no one else from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee... although one of its great leaders, James Foreman, was indeed in the audience, sitting alongside a man he had profound disagreements with: the president of the NAACP, Roy Wilkins. Carmichael and Sellers – with all the alertness of true soldiers – then noticed someone hiding in the back of the church: another SNCC member, understanding that grassroots folks like himself wouldn't be let in, had snuck into the church in the middle of the night.

Another Black luminary who pressed through that vast crowd to become one of the merely 1,300 entrants into Ebenezer Baptist Church was James Baldwin. Baldwin's memory of King's assassination was already a haze: in his words, it had "retired into some deep cavern in my mind." The famed author did what he could to squeeze through the crowd, inch by inch, until the wall of people simply became impenetrable. Not only was every inch of street and sidewalk and lawn occupied... so were the limbs of the trees. The crowds had overflowed onto the rooftops of houses. Baldwin later wrote: "Every inch of ground, as far as the eye could see, was black with people, and they stood in silence." He was finally able to wave down someone at the entrance of the church, and was literally lifted over the crowd. Inside the church he described "a tension indescribable – as though something, perhaps the heavens, perhaps the earth, might crack." Soon, busloads of sanitation workers – who Martin had died defending in Memphis – poured in. They had travelled unstopping through the night, and had not even had time to change out of their work clothes. Ultimately, 120 million Americans – out of the 1968 population of 201 million – watched the funeral service on television. Martin's wife Coretta decided to let her husband deliver his own eulogy. A recording of his voice, from a church service exactly two months before his death, unfolded before the vast audience:

*"I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long... Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize... that's not important... I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity..."*

Today's most famous leader of SNCC, Congressman John Lewis, was not inside the church that day. Lewis had received the news of King's death while at a rally for Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign. One of Kennedy's aides had pressed through the crowd to find Lewis and tell him before the news broke. Lewis felt time pause. He would later write that a part of his spirit seemed to die that day. Lewis gathered himself together and huddled with some of Kennedy's aides. They all decided that the presidential candidate needed to inform the crowd. In an age before news transmitted instantly over the internet and smartphones, it would be Kennedy's televised address that broke the news to many people across the country. Kennedy soon called King's wife, Coretta Scott King, to offer her any help necessary. He put a private jet at their disposal, arranging transportation for the King family to the funeral, and for King's body to be transported from Memphis to Atlanta. He also reserved large sections of several hotels in Atlanta to ensure that the thousands of people who would be coming to the funeral would have places to stay. Referring to his brother's assassination a few years earlier, Robert Kennedy commented that he had experience with this sort of thing.

At 3AM on the night before the funeral, John Lewis led Robert Kennedy personally into Ebenezer Baptist Church, where they viewed King's body alone, in the quiet of the night. Lewis, feeling that he had had a final, meaningful moment with King, decided to give up his seat at the funeral the following day so that someone else could attend. He would later stand with King's family as Martin's casket was lowered into the ground. Like many African Americans, John Lewis then threw himself full force into supporting Robert Kennedy's candidacy for president, feeling that he was the best hope now for the continuance of the struggle for civil rights. Such hopes were soon shattered: Robert Kennedy would be assassinated two months later, just after giving a major speech alongside Cesar Chavez. Like Martin – and so many others in the civil rights struggle – Robert Kennedy had foreseen his own death, telling an aide that "There are guns between me and the White House."

As for Coretta Scott King: as Martin had leaned over the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, he had chatted with Jesse Jackson below. It was Jackson who first called Coretta, but he couldn't bring himself to break the news: he said King had been shot... but that maybe he would be all right. Although King had not died immediately, he had obviously sustained a mortal wound. King's aide Andrew Young intervened and told Coretta that her husband did not have long to live and that she

needed to get down to Memphis. The mayor of Atlanta and a contingent of police rushed her to the airport to board a plane, and it was at the airport that Coretta received the news that her husband had already died. She decided to not board the plane, but to console their four children in the comfort of their own home. King's friend Andrew Young later wrote that he suspected that Martin and Coretta had prepared their children for this moment, just as King had prepared the rest of his family. One of Young's most vivid memories of the days following King's death was of King's children telling him: "Daddy wouldn't want us to hate the man who killed him. He was just an ignorant man who didn't know any better." And: "This man didn't know our Daddy, did he? Because if he had known Daddy, he wouldn't have shot him." Coretta, however, was worried about their youngest child, the five-year-old Bernice, affectionately nicknamed "Bunny." Bunny was very quiet and Coretta worried about what she was going through: one time Bunny was flipping through a family photo album and innocently asked her mother who would be killed next.

Coretta had lived with the likelihood of her husband's death ever since the Montgomery Bus Boycott, during which their house had been bombed. Ever since that moment, the threat of death had been constant, and she had been the number one force in Martin's life helping him to proceed on the path that he needed to walk, through the dark valleys of doubt and fear. In 1963, as they watched the news coverage of President Kennedy's assassination, Martin had said, "This is what is going to happen to me." He had believed it already, but knowing that the very president of the United States couldn't be adequately protected increased King's belief that nothing in the world could save him. Coretta knew it to be true. Just as her husband often told crowds that the movement needed to continue even if he didn't make it – even once he was no longer there with them – so too did Coretta say this in her own speeches to packed audiences. In the last months of Martin's life, it was clear that the threats were escalating. When he left for a speaking tour to promote the Poor People's Campaign, he gave his wife a synthetic rose – a flower that would always last, in case he didn't return.

On April 5, the day after Martin's death, friends and relatives flooded into the King family's home. Many of them later recalled the strong smell of coffee as pot after pot was brewed – for many had not slept the night before. They recalled the endless boxes of tissues being brought in as others were being emptied out. They recalled the two men who stood at the door – one White and one Black – each of whom gave a big hug to every single person who entered. Some felt slightly star struck by the guests – especially the famed singer, actor, and activist, Harry Belafonte – who arrived, he told Coretta, to help her do "the menial things:" washing dishes and helping her take care of the kids. He also helped her choose Martin Luther King's funeral suit and ensured that her family would be financially secure in the years to come... for Martin Luther King had died with only \$5000 in his bank account; enough to pay for his family's needs for a few months. King brought in enormous sums from his speaking tours, but he gave it all back to the movement.



Some of those present at the King family's home that day probably wondered who the slightly uncomfortable looking and unfamiliar White man was who kept ducking into the King's bedroom with Belafonte to check on Coretta and the kids. That was Stanley Levison. Levison was an ex-Communist and a wealthy Jewish businessman from New York. Together with Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin, he had been involved in an effort to fund movements in the South that were trying to get off the ground... including the Montgomery bus boycott. From that moment on, Levison had been King's invisible confidant, the man who King always knew he could call if he woke up at 3AM filled with fears or with new ideas he wanted to explore. Although King and his mentor Rustin had drifted apart in the years since the Voting Rights Act was passed – over a difference of ideas regarding where the movement should turn to next – King's relationship with Levison had never wavered, because Levison had no interest in pushing King's ideas or strategies in a certain direction. He simply wanted to help King talk through his difficult emotions and refine his own thoughts. King, knowing that Levison didn't want anything from him in return – such as to influence his ideas or to gain status through associating with him – trusted Levison more than anyone else to be brutally honest with him. One of King's good friends and most important aides, Andrew Young, later said of Levison: "Of all the unknown supporters of the civil rights movement, he was perhaps the most important." Levison joined his friend Belafonte in ensuring that Martin's wife and children would have no economic difficulties, and he continued to fund a variety of movement causes until the day he died.

At a rally in Memphis the following day, Coretta told the striking sanitation workers and their supporters that the struggle must continue until every person was truly free, until every person could live a life of dignity. "His campaign for the poor must go on," she said. And then her voice cracked. "How many men must die before we can really have a free and true and peaceful society?" On April 8, she led the mass march in Memphis that had been organized by Bayard Rustin and James Lawson. Many Black Memphians later said that listening to Coretta Scott King had inspired the crowd and grounded the rage that so many of them felt. As cities around the nation burned, Memphis stayed quiet, and many felt this was largely due to the influence of Martin Luther King's powerful wife.

In Atlanta the following day, April 9, an old wooden cart drawn by mules – symbolizing the labor and poverty of Black sharecroppers – carried Martin's body from the church where he had been raised, five miles to Morehouse college, where he had studied. Coretta walked at the front of a funeral procession that drew a crowd of 150,000... 140,000 of whom were Black. John Lewis walked alongside the wooden cart that bore King's body. King's mentor at Morehouse, Benjamin Mays – who had met personally with Gandhi in 1936 and helped transmit the tradition of nonviolent resistance to Black America – gave the eulogy: "He believed especially that he was sent to champion the cause of the man farthest down. He would probably say that, if death had to come, I'm sure there was no greater cause to die for than fighting to get a just wage for garbage collectors."

On May 2, Coretta stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel where her husband had been shot. Looking out over the crowd below, she launched the Poor People's Campaign. The campaign went down in history as disorganized and ineffective; partly the result of the trauma the organizers had just endured. Often unsaid, however, is that many who attended – including representatives of Native American reservations, poor White communities, and Latino neighborhoods and migrant labor camps – returned home with fresh ideas, having plugged into a multiracial, nationwide network of antiracist and antipoverty activists. Many who participated emerged as new leaders of Chicano and Native American civil rights struggles. Meanwhile, Coretta was flooded with invitations to speak across the world, and later wrote that her travels were “a humbling reminder that our mission was respected on a global stage.” Indeed, just as freedom fighters across the world had looked to Gandhi, they now looked to the example of King. Martin had died fighting for humane working conditions for Black garbage collectors in a single city. But he also died having provided lessons for all people committed to building a just and humane world... lessons for people of all races, and even of all nations.