

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Kitchen Table

On January 16th, 2001, sixteen of us were arrested for blocking the entrance to the U.S. Mission at the United Nations on First Avenue in New York City. We were honoring Dr. King's birthday, and commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Gulf War massacre. We held a brief prayer service centered around a sampling of the meager daily food rations which Iraqis suffer. Then, we walked to the entranceway, held signs calling for an end to the sanctions on Iraq, and sang peace songs. In two minutes, we were arrested, handcuffed and hauled away.

Though our gesture may have appeared to be small and symbolic, and was ridiculed by passers-by and ignored by the media, it was a profound spiritual experience for us.

I have been arrested in New York City for opposing war and injustice over twenty times since 1984, but rarely I have landed all the way at the bottom of the barrel like we did that winter day.

After the unarmed African immigrant Amadou Diallo was shot forty-one times by New York police and over a thousand of us were arrested for civil disobedience at New York police headquarters, Mayor Guiliani cracked down on all protests. He announced that any one arrested in New York City, no matter how minor the charge, would be put through the system.

First we sat for hours in the local precinct holding cell on 57th street. At first, our imprisonment offered a great chance to catch up with friends like Kathy Kelly of Voices in the Wilderness, Sisters Ardeth Platte and Carol Gilbert of Jonah House, Richard Deats of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Karl Meyer of the Catholic Worker, and my Jesuit brothers, Simon Harak and Daniel Berrigan.

The eight of us men sat crowded together in a stinking, filthy cell, without any food until late in the evening. Then, the police handcuffed us together, to two feet of stainless-steel chain, and marched us out at 1 a.m. into the bitter cold. Hunched together in the back of a police van, we were driven to Central Booking at 100 Center Street, where everyone arrested in Manhattan is eventually brought.

A new TV show was premiering that same night called, "100 Center Street." It purported to tell the adventures of New York's police, lawyers and judges as they send people to this dungeon. The show should have been called by the more common name for this hellhole, "The Tombs."

That day, over 500 people had been arrested on the streets of New York, making it the most crowded Tuesday night in the history of the Tombs, as far as any jailer could remember.

At 2 a.m., we were led by our chains down a street to wait in the freezing night air before entering the Tombs. But all the cells were full. So we were led back down the street, to sit and freeze for an hour and a half in the back of a police van. Finally, by 3:30 a.m., we were brought in, where they took mugshots, searched us and interviewed us. Eventually we were locked into another small cell.

What an experience to be chained to your friends in the freezing cold, escorted at night by armed guards along the streets of New York, and then led slowly, precariously down endless stairwells to some dark, dingy prison cell, like a Roman slave dungeon.

In a flash, your faith, stamina, nonviolence and spirituality are tested. You quickly find how strong your spirit is, not to mention your body. Instantly, the Gospel of Jesus, the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of St. Paul come alive, with their stories of jail cells, and prison guards.

The jailers laughed and joked with one another. All things considered, they appeared fairly considerate to the prisoners. And yet, they oversee one of the most inhuman places in the country.

Once we hit rock bottom, we saw a vast array of crowded jail cells, full of hundreds of African-Americans and Latinos. Our fellow prisoners were tired, anxious, frustrated, and probably scared, knowing that they would most likely be sent on to Riker's Island, the largest prison in the world.

We met an elderly Muslim man who worked as a subway token distributor, and was accused of stealing; two young people picked up for selling Superbowl t-shirts without a permit; and several others accused of selling or using drugs.

Throughout the day, my friends and I tried to cheer each other up, share our stories, describe our work, and told hilarious jokes. For most of the day, ten of us sat in a small cell, against the wall, with room for one or two people to stretch out on the dirty floor.

At 11 a.m., a baloney sandwich appeared. All I could do was eat the Wonder Bread. We endured bright lights, loud noise, endless harassment, with nothing else to drink or eat or read. Every hour or two, they pushed us into one or two large cells, and reassigned new cells to us, as different names were called out to appear upstairs before a judge. By the afternoon, my friends and I were exhausted and getting sick.

Finally, at 5 p.m., we were brought upstairs to stand before a judge. We pled not guilty. A trial date was set. We were released back onto the cold streets of New York.

The whole terrible ordeal, 29 crushing hours in the System, in The Tombs, left me hungry, nauseous, and exhausted. And yet that was the point. This is what life is like every day, not just for the disenfranchised of New York City, but for the children of Iraq. Everyday is a like a day in the Tombs for the children of Iraq. They are consigned to death. Throughout our ordeal, our prayer was for the children of Iraq. When asked by jailers or other prisoners, we told the story of the dying Iraqi children. To a person, they understood.

Coming up from the Tombs, gasping for fresh air, in the end we felt grateful. Grateful for the opportunity to take a stand on behalf of the suffering Iraqi children. Grateful to taste the daily life inflicted on the disenfranchised and imprisoned. Grateful to understand anew what Jesus endured, what the Gospel calls us to risk for the sake of justice and peace.

Once again, we realized the truth of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad."

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Thinking of Dr. King during his birthday holiday always leads me to ponder his experience and relationship with God. Who is this great God who calls us to make peace, do justice and show compassion to one another? In the past few years, I have been reading the writings of Dorothy Day and Mahatma Gandhi to ponder their personal experience of God, how they imagined God, and what they heard God saying to them. I have discovered, however, that like most of us, these peacemakers rarely shared their private prayer publicly.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was no exception. King never spoke about his private prayer, his personal relationship with God, or what God said to him--except for one incident, a spiritual experience which occurred at the beginning of his public career and transformed his life. I find it helpful to reflect on King's relationship with God in order to find how God may be speaking to us today.

It was the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott. Shortly after Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her bus seat for a white man on December 1, 1955, Martin Luther King, Jr. suddenly emerged as a confident, new leader who could take on the evils of racism, violence and injustice. Privately, however, King was a reluctant prophet. He was willing to work for nonviolent social change, but he did not want to be thrust into the spotlight of national leadership.

Like other organizers, King originally thought the boycott would only last a few days. As those days turned into weeks and then months, and as white Montgomery realized that the bus boycott posed a much more serious threat than first thought, Dr. King began to receive death threats telling him that if the boycott was not called off, he would be killed. Two months into the boycott, when King was arrested and jailed on the charge of speeding, he thought for sure he would be lynched. By now, King was receiving forty telephone calls a day threatening his life. Suddenly, he felt overwhelmed with fear.

As David Garrow explains in the biography, [Bearing the Cross](#), King's struggle of faith reached a crescendo on Friday night, January 27th, 1956. That night, King returned home near midnight after a long strategy session with his colleagues. Coretta was sleeping soundly, but King was too preoccupied to fall asleep. The phone rang and a sneering voice told King that if he wanted to remain alive, he had to leave Montgomery in the next few days. King hung up and felt devastated. He could not take it any more. Restless and fearful, he went to the kitchen, made some coffee and sat down at the kitchen table.

For the rest of his life, King would look back on the moment that followed as one of the most profound spiritual experiences of his life. In perhaps his only public sharing about his experience of God, he spoke of that event over and over again. His book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, tells the story:

I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without

appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.

The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.

Three days after God spoke those words of encouragement, King's house was bombed and his family nearly killed. "Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly," King later wrote. "My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it."

When angry crowds gathered in front of his house an hour after the bombing, King spoke as never before of the need to love one's enemies and become a people of nonviolence. "We must meet hate with love," King declared from his broken front porch. "Remember, if I am stopped, this movement will not stop because God is with the movement. Go home with this glorious faith and this radiant assurance." As King later reflected, "A night that seemed destined to end in unleashed chaos came to a close in a majestic group demonstration of nonviolence."

Up until that midnight encounter with God at his kitchen table, King said eleven years later in a public address, "I had never felt an experience with God....It seemed at that moment, I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.' I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone."

Exactly one year later, King awoke to find twelve sticks of dynamite on his front porch; the fuse had smoldered out. That morning, he thanked God for the strength he had received one year earlier to carry on with the struggle for justice, even in the face of ongoing danger. "You gave me a vision in the kitchen of my house," King prayed, "and I am thankful for it....So I am not afraid of anybody this morning. Tell Montgomery they can keep shooting and I'm going to stand up to them. Tell Montgomery they can keep bombing and I'm going to stand up to them. If I had to die tomorrow morning, I would die happy because I've been to the mountaintop and I've seen the promised land and it's going to be here in Montgomery."

On April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated, King repeated that same claim of having been to the mountaintop and seen the promised land. The strength he found to witness for justice and peace had its roots in that midnight experience of

God at his kitchen table years before. God had indeed strengthened Martin and in turn, Martin was able to strengthen the rest of us.

What is the voice of God saying to us today? "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever." These are the words of the God of Martin Luther King, Jr., the same God of Dorothy Day and Mahatma Gandhi, the God of all who hunger and thirst for justice.

I believe that the words spoken to Martin King that dark January night in 1956 were words meant for all of us. What God said to Martin Luther King, Jr. in the midnight hour at his kitchen table many years ago, God whispers to each one of us. The God of Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks to all of us.

"Stand up justice and peace, speak the truth and do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will never leave you." These are words to stake one's life on, as Martin King discovered. They are words that can transform us all if we are willing to believe God and take them to heart, as Martin did. They are revolutionary words, words that call forth a real and living faith, words that demand risk and response, a lifelong commitment to justice and truth, a willingness to lay down our lives in the nonviolent struggle for justice and peace, as Martin King, and Jesus, demonstrated.

Since this is one of the only personal experiences of God that King shared in all his writings, speeches, and sermons, we can conclude that it held great meaning for him. It reveals a spirituality of nonviolence and justice that is rooted in a deep and courageous faith. God is portrayed by King as the One who encourages and strengthens us for the struggle, especially in our darkest, weakest moments. Perhaps the words God spoke to King that night are words that we can all take to heart, words that we can ponder and imagine God saying to us as well. If so, we may find ourselves with new strength to stand up and risk our lives for God's reign of justice and peace on earth.

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One year later, on January 22, 2002, in honor of Dr. King's birthday, several hundred people of faith and conscience gathered in New York City for a weekend of prayer and discussion about the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, the U.S. sanctions on Iraq, the U.S.-funded occupation of Palestine, and Dr. King's teachings on nonviolence. Then we all walked to the U.S. Mission to the United Nations for a vigil.

Forty-seven of us blocked the entrance to the building, held banners calling for an end to the war, sang hymns and read from Dr. King's speeches. After an hour, we were arrested and carted off to jail until early the next morning.

Many said afterwards, "Well, what good did that do?"

My friends and I conclude that actions speak louder than words, that years of peace pastorals, encyclicals, sermons, conferences, and petitions will not break the culture's addiction to war. As the Gospel makes clear, only active nonviolent resistance, a direct intervention, can help us take a step toward peace.

When we read the lives of the great peacemakers from Francis of Assisi to Dorothy Day, it is clear that their deeds, not just their words, made the difference. They were not concerned with big numbers and dramatic results, but deeply committed to putting the Gospel into practice in their own lives before God. They spoke out for peace with their very lives.

Francis walked into enemy territory in a time of war to meet the Sultan. Dorothy sat down in Washington Square in New York City, refusing to cooperate with the U.S. nuclear air raid drills, was arrested and jailed. Their small, loving actions continue to reverberate throughout history.

Liberation theology insists that we cannot think ourselves into a new way of acting; we have to act our way into a new way of thinking, of being, of living.

The Pentagon, White House, weapons manufacturers, and corporate executives want us to bicker over questions of morality and the just war theory so they can keep on murdering thousands of people in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and elsewhere half way around the world without any disruption from us.

But our silence is complicity. To make true peace we have to disturb the false peace. The Gospel demands we disrupt the government's war making.

"Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good," Gandhi taught. We can't worship both the God of peace and the false gods of war. We must obey God's law of nonviolence and that requires disobeying the culture of war.

"But peacemaking is not my vocation," many people say to me. I think every Christian is called to be a peacemaker, to live the life of active nonviolence in confrontation with the state's systemic violence.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus declared. "They shall be called the sons and daughters of God." Every one of us is a son or daughter of God, every one of us is the beloved child of the God of peace. That means, every one of us is a peacemaker. We all need to get engaged in the public witness for peace, whether we like it or not.

As Christians living in this culture of war, our allegiance is not to the Pentagon, the flag, the government, the president, or America; it is to the peacemaking Jesus.

Jesus lived a life of action. He practiced public, provocative, creative nonviolence, with regular acts of nonviolent civil disobedience. He was a one person crime wave, breaking every law that violated God's law of peace. He organized the poor in Galilee and walked to Jerusalem in a campaign of active nonviolence. He entered the corrupt Temple, turned over the tables of the money-changers, drove out the cattle, and declared the place as house of prayer. He did not hurt or kill anyone, but he took dramatic, direct action for justice. For this deed, he was arrested, tried, tortured and executed.

As his followers, every one of us has this same vocation of active nonviolence. We are all called to love our enemies. Right now, that means simply trying to stop our government from killing them.

"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values," Dr. King said on April 4, 1967, one year before his assassination, during his famous speech against the Vietnam war in New York City. "We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society...A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war...Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism...We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter--but beautiful--struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons and daughters of God."

When the churches start acting like the peacemaking Jesus, heed the example of Dr. King, resist our country's horrific wars and point out God's alternative of nonviolence, then we will begin to realize our common vocation, and know what it means to be blessed.

But we will only receive that blessing after we take action for peace.