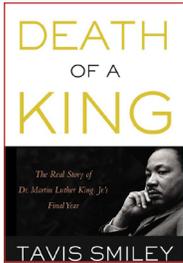


Book review

Death of a King: The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King's Final Year

Reviewed by Dave Lehman, Connections Executive Editor



Death of a King: The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King's Final Year

by Tavis Smiley
with David Ritz
Little, Brown and
Company, 2014

January 19th would have been the 86th birthday of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. As Dr. King has had a major impact on my life, and we share January birthdays (mine ten years after Dr. King), this review will be more personal than others I've been writing for Connections.

Subtitled, *The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King's Final Year*, this book reviews King's life between 4 April 1967 and 4 April 1968. At the time, I was in Ghana, West Africa, directing the UNESCO Pilot Project for English Speaking African Secondary Schools. I learned about many of these events via the Voice of America and BBC radio. As one of only two Americans on the project, I was the brunt of criticisms by some of the Africans with whom I was working, and, as a white American, I was viewed being guilty of King's assassination.

On January 19th this year, were I back in Ithaca, New York, where I was principal/teacher of a middle and high school for thirty years, I would be one of the cooks for the school's annual MLK Jr. community breakfast birthday celebration. The breakfast will again be held in the gymnasium of an elementary school with hundreds attending. It was initially held in the small gym of the Greater Ithaca Activities Center, a community center just across the street from the our original

school building, the New Junior High Program. The breakfast was started in 1975 by myself and three others from the community—a professor from Cornell University, our African-American school district social worker, and the African-American director of the center. I mention this here because, like Tavis Smiley, author of *Death of a King*, my life has been, and continues to be, profoundly affected by the life and teachings of Dr. King. As Smiley says in the introduction to the book :

“As a young boy growing up in a trailer park in rural Indiana, my initial encounter with the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. altered the very course of my life.... I became a lifelong student of his work as a minister, advocate, and writer. His call to radical democracy through redemptive love resonated with me on a profound level.... I was barely a teenager when I began entering statewide oratorical interpretation competitions by declaiming King's most famous speeches.”

So here's another connection. Although I didn't enter statewide oratorical contests, one year I did win the adult division of the Martin Luther King oratorical contest in Ithaca. And my career demonstrates King's influence in my own commitment to democratic schools.

Smiley may not be new to you as he is the host of the PBS-TV program “The Tavis Smiley Show,” and author, co-author, or editor of several previous books including *The Covenant with Black America*, *The Covenant in Action*, *What I Know for Sure*, and *Keeping the Faith*, among others.

In his introduction to *Death of a King*, Smiley explains why he wrote the book:

“The question I attempt to answer

in this book is simple: In his last year, what kind of man has Martin Luther King Jr. become?

“In my view, he is a man whose true character has been misinterpreted, ignored, or forgotten. I want to remember-and bring to life-the essential truths about King in his final months before they are unremembered and irrecoverable. This is the King that I cherish: the King who, enduring a living hell, rises to moral greatness; the King who, in the face of unrelenting adversity, expresses the full measure of his character and courage. This is the King who, despite everything, spoke his truth....”

Smiley uses strong words here - “a man whose true character has been misinterpreted,” “enduring a living hell,” and “in the face of unrelenting adversity.” What do these phrases mean? Through 24 chapters Smiley elaborates further on these issues surrounding King's life. Smiley has interviewed nineteen individuals who knew King well, including his wife, Coretta Scott King, and such famous names as Harry Belafonte (a popular singer of the time and particularly close friend of King), activist and comedian Dick Gregory, and longtime politicians Jesse Jackson and Andrew Young. Another person interviewed is Dorothy Cotton, author of her own book about her work with King, *If Your Back's Not Bent: The Role of the Citizenship Education Program in the Civil Rights Movement*. Cotton is a friend of mine from Ithaca, and I was happy to be of some assistance in the writing and editing of her book.

Smiley includes accounts of the steady stream of strategic meetings between King and various organizations with which he was involved: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the

*"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant." ~ Tavis Smiley, **Death of a King: The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Final Year***

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the United Pastors Association, the Poor People's Campaign, and the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam. Smiley also refers to subsequent planning meetings for "The Mobilization," the March in New York City from Central Park to the United Nations building in protest of the Vietnam War. The book includes snippets of news stories from the New York Times, the Washington Post, Life and Time magazines, and interviews on such television shows as "Meet the Press" and the "Merv Griffin Show."

In this final year of his life, King's messages consistently connected three of his passions, as evidenced in this quote: "We must see how the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together ... you can't really get rid of one without getting rid of the other(-s)."

It was this expansion of Martin Luther King Jr.'s mission, to poverty and militarism, beyond his original commitment to civil rights, which brought disagreement from some of his fellow organizers and closest friends.

The dates that bracket Smiley's "final year" in the life of Martin Luther King Jr. are April 4th, 1967, when King delivered his impassioned speech in opposition to the Vietnam War at Riverside Church in New York City, and exactly twelve months later, on April 4th, 1968, when he was assassinated in Memphis where he had traveled in support of the striking garbage workers.

King's friends and colleagues pleaded with him to keep the focus on seeing to the full implementation of Lyndon Johnson's "Civil Rights Act" of 1964 and the "Voting Rights Act"

of 1965. He came to be denounced publicly and privately ("enduring the public hell" and the "unrelenting adversity") by Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young, who led the NAACP and the Urban League; by clergyman and congressman Adam Clayton Powell; and by legal giant Thurgood Marshall.

Yet, Martin Luther King Jr., the consummate preacher, carried on, speaking his truth as in the several sermons which Smiley includes in **Death of a King**. Smiley notes that King was often at his best when he strayed from his prepared text, and spoke from his heart and soul. For example, in these excerpts from one of King's many sermons given at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, he anticipates his impending demise:

"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 be able to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question... say that I did try to feed the hungry... say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked... say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness."

Smiley's book also includes lighter moments when King is being driven in a car to a march or speech, or flying cross-country, returning home to Atlanta, too often for too short a visit re-connecting with his family. It was at these times that we learn of King's love of gospel and rhythm and blues music as he would listen to Sam and Dave, Ike and Tina Turner, his good friend Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, the Staple Singers and others. Love of this music led to an eight-city series of fundraising concerts which became a tremendous disappointment as most of them barely broke even, and the crowds were nowhere near what he had expected.

Then in mid-March of 1968 King first went to Memphis to offer his support to the striking garbage workers. It was there, barely a month before he

returned and was shot, that he gave a speech at Memphis's Mason Temple to rally the garbage strikers and their supporters:

"You are demonstrating that we are all tied in a single garment of destiny... The man who has been to 'No House' is as significant as the man who's been to Morehouse [referring to his alma mater]... The person who picks up your garbage is as significant as the physician.... All labor has worth.... You are reminding not only Memphis but the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages.... The vast majority of Negroes in our country are still perishing on a lonely island of poverty in a vast ocean of material prosperity."



Tavis Smiley

So I find myself wondering on this 86th birthday of Martin Luther King Jr.: what would he have to say about Ferguson, Missouri? What would he have to say about Citizens United? What would he have to say about the "Voter ID" law? What would he say about 25% of American people, predominantly people of color, living in poverty, with a government unwilling to raise the minimum wage? And what would he have to say about our schools, particularly our urban schools, with the dramatic achievement gap between whites and students of color?

Therefore, I invite you readers of Connections to use this January of 2015 to read Tavis Smiley's book, **Death of a King: The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Final Year**. 