What’s the difference?

Using NSRF protocols vs. establishing a Critical Friends Group® community

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF Director

Many people know of NSRF® through the incredible library of protocols and activities that are available on our website—www.nsrfharmony.org. Because most of our protocols and activities are freely offered, educators have used them for many years, sometimes without the benefit of Critical Friends Group® coaches training or the support of another person who has taken the training. While our policy of free access has certainly benefitted educators, it has sometimes caused confusion between using our protocols and intentionally improving individual practice and school culture through the use of Critical Friends Group (CFG™) communities.

Perhaps a good way to begin to sort out this difference is to define both protocols and Critical Friends Group communities.

Protocols...

A protocol is a structured process or set of guidelines to promote meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving and learning. Protocols give time for active listening and reflection so all voices in the room are heard and honored.

CFG communities...

A Critical Friends Group community is a particular variety of Professional Learning Community (PLC) so unique that we’ve registered it as a trademark. CFG communities consist of 5-12 members who commit to improving their practice through collaborative learning and structured interactions (protocols), who meet at least once a month for about two hours. Critical Friends Group coaches create an environment of trust that allows participants to give and receive feedback most effectively, and to use our protocols and activities to help students — and teachers — create a culture of excellence.

CFG communities:

» honor and prioritize time for deep reflection,
» develop critical problem-solving,
» build trust between colleagues,
» reduce teacher and administrator isolation,
» reveal solutions to complex dilemmas,
» foster equity,
» change school culture,
» model and build 21st Century Skills

Most of all, CFG communities deeply support you and your colleagues working together to improve everyone’s work and that of your students.

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Over two decades ago, a group of educators was recruited to de-
velop some structured tools to help educators nationwide continually
improve their professional learning and develop best practices. This
group eventually became the Na-
tional School Reform Faculty. Ev-
evy day we strive to fulfill our mission,
“empowering educators to create
meaningful learning experiences for
all by collaborating effectively in
reflective, democratic communities
that foster educational equity and
social justice.”

Notice that nowhere in the mis-
mission statement are protocols men-
tioned. This is because protocols are
widely useful tools to get productive
work done in efficient and effective
ways, and CFG communities are only
one place where that can happen.

Let’s explore why Critical Friends
Group meetings (not just using proto-
cols) are vital to the positive change
of school culture.

Establishing a time and vehicle
for continuous improvement
acknowledges its value.

When institutions give time and
money to something, its constituents
understand the institution believes
those things to be important. Schools
and districts often say that they
want faculty to continually improve
their practice. However, unless the
administration supports that state-
ment with proper training (giving the
staff the tools to improve) and sets
aside time for the tools to be used
productively, significant improvement
is unlikely to occur.

Some school leaders say that this
work is important so they find money
to train people, but they don’t all
understand that the training in itself
is not enough. Administration must
build time into the schedule for the
newly trained coaches to lead this
important work.

The converse doesn’t work,
either. Setting aside “professional
learning community” time without
sending anyone to CFG coaches train-
ing may create a situation where
teachers meet regularly, but noth-
ing substantive gets done. The PLCs
create (or sometimes are handed)
the goals, but without a CFG coach,
the groups don’t have the vehicle
to reach the goals. Without train-
ing, members of a PLC don’t know
how they are supposed to talk about
important issues, how to translate
conversations into actions, how to
feel safe enough to do the hardest,
scariest work. Truly, the difference
between a CFG and any other PLC is
that, without a trained coach, a PLC
does not have the necessary skills
and tools to examine their work and
the work of others.

However, once a school gets a
critical mass of CFG coaches trained
(one coach per 8-10 staff) and the
coaches begin to consistently use
that training in regular CFG session
times, the work simply becomes part
of a school’s culture—everyone ex-
pects to learn best practices through-
out their career. Each individual
improves their practice, protocol use
spreads throughout the school, every-
one learns better and accomplishes
more in a shorter period of time.

Significant change takes time.

Many teachers will tell you how
frustrating it is when new initiatives
are introduced, only to be poorly
implemented or completely aban-
doned six months later because they
“weren’t working” or “didn’t show
measurable positive results.” Sig-
nificant change takes time. As CFG
meetings become a regular, eagerly
anticipated event on everyone’s cal-
endar, their impact becomes deeper
and more meaningful as time goes
on. Schools who survey their CFG
community members consistently
find that many participants report
a positive change already during the
first year of implementation. Admit-
tedly, the impact on markers like test
scores may take longer to develop.
We regret that we have no magic
wand to change everything for the
better immediately.

Members of CFG communities
collaborate with their colleagues and
work steadily through their entire
careers to improve their practice.
Using protocols during staff meet-
ings will make for a productive and
efficient staff meeting. Using proto-
cols to deeply look at and learn from
student and adult work over a period
of time in trusted CFG communities
creates a stronger working environ-
ment, more satisfied teachers, and a
better education for our students.

All members fully participate.

CFG communities are deliber-
ately small enough so that all partici-
pants can participate. The ideal size
is between 6-10 members. Everyone
doing CFG work is expected to partic-
ipate in two ways. One: they must
give feedback on work that their
critical friends bring to the meetings.
Two: they must, at some point during
the school year, bring a piece of their
own work or their students’ work for
the group to examine. In this way,
no one can passively buy out. It’s
true that everyone learns whenever
anyone brings work to the table, but
the deepest, most profound learning
for one individual happens when the
meeting focuses on that one person’s
own dilemma or piece of work.

Everyone gives and receives feed-
back and everyone takes away valu-
able learning experiences no matter
which role they happen to be in at
that time. Everything done in a CFG
meeting is about improving practice,
although there are many choices as
to what aspect of their practice that
person is working on. Using proto-
cols during a planning session may
help show you steps detailing how
to implement your plan, but it likely
will not help you become a better
teacher—but using protocols within
a long-term, trusted CFG community
will.

All teachers are leaders and
must be responsible for their
own learning.

“Teachers as leaders” is a phrase
used a lot these days. Most use it to
acknowledge that teachers are lead-
ers in their classrooms and may take
on other roles such as mentoring or
coaching.

However, many schools and dis-
tricts direct teachers to lead by guid-
ing their own learning—continuously trying new techniques, strategies, technology, and other tools in their classrooms. When a teacher belongs to a CFG community, participants commit to taking on this “learning leadership” role. Because of the trust built up in the group, all members can consistently work collaboratively to give each other honest feedback and informed ideas about how to improve their practice, how problems might be solved or new content created.

Again, this focus on adult learning is the crux of what makes using protocols in a CFG meeting different that using them in the classroom or at other meetings. CFG communities are the reliable space where adults learning together can turn education theories into practice and standards into actual student learning. They are about colleagues working together to improve their work and that of their students, continually striving for excellence through shared goals, norms and values.

Protocols = tools. Critical Friends Group = environment for improvement and cultural change.

Remember, protocols are simply tools that can be used to get collaborative work done efficiently and effectively, in meetings, classrooms, and elsewhere. Critical Friends Group meetings use protocols as a means to create an environment where all members work collaboratively to consistently improve their practice. When the majority of your educators participate in regular CFG meetings, that multitude of educators improving their individual practices results in improvement throughout the entire school or district. Everyone becomes more connected and collaborative in the meetings, and feels more empowered to learn and improve. Having gained the power to improve their own practice, the CFG members shift school culture positively. Protocols by themselves don’t have that much power for organizational change.

For more info, see our Frequently Asked Questions and our Self-Guided Tour to CFG Work.

Sharpen your facilitation skills, and improve student achievement AND school culture through CFG training!

Sign up for spring or summer Critical Friends Group® New Coaches Open Trainings

Current options:
March 9-11 in Orlando, FL Last two days TBD by participants
June 22-26 in Nashville, TN
July 6-10 in Los Angeles, CA
July 13-17 in Bloomington, IN

Trainings this spring and beyond include our updated coaches training manual, with new and improved protocols and activities!

Rave reviews:
“Best PD EVER!”
“Informative! Educational! Protocols I can use frequently in my work.”
“...the protocols are really useful in bringing out our ‘best selves.’ They drew me into the activities in a way that nudged me towards being fully present. I developed a greater awareness of the effect of my behavior and how it might benefit or hurt the rest of the participants.”

To enroll or learn more, click through to the NSRF website or call 812-330-2702!
One popular and effective NSRF protocol is **Affinity Mapping**. We’ve used it here and on the next page to demonstrate the difference between critics and Critical Friends Group collaborators.

For more information on the differences, consult the **Self-Guided Tour to CFG Work** or our **Frequently Asked Questions** page.
Participate and maybe win a prize!

An upcoming issue of Connections will feature articles and another protocol visualization on the topic of “Technology use in schools.” Please join us! Email luci@nrsfharmony.org with “the good, the bad, and the ugly” of tech use in your school. We’ll award a year’s membership to one lucky participant. If you’d like to write an article about technology (or another topic for a later issue), tell us. Authors we publish receive a membership.
What you need to know about ...

Critical Friends Group® and CFG® are trademarks of the NSRF®

Harmony School Corporation (of which the NSRF® is a division) legally owns the Critical Friends Group® and CFG® registered trademarks and as such, no party may use them without our permission*, especially when advertising Critical Friends Group trainings, seminars, products or materials. Recently, Harmony/NSRF successfully settled a lawsuit protecting our trademark from being used by another organization.

The trademark is important to us, and to you. Here’s why.

Just as you want to know what to expect when you open your preferred brand of soft drink, you can expect the highest quality experience when being trained as a Critical Friends Group coach by an NSRF-certified National Facilitator. If someone suggests you take a training from them, see if the training is listed on our website, and if not, ask them if they are currently working with the NSRF. Without a current NSRF National Facilitators certification, we cannot guarantee the quality of training they might provide.

Therefore, even if you complete their training, we could not allow you coaches’ access to our website (including all the new and updated protocols, activities and other support materials for coaches), nor would you be eligible to purchase the new Coaches Handbook set to be published in 2015. In contrast, NSRF CFG trainings include a year’s coaches membership and the new Handbook (if trained this summer or later, or the ability to purchase the Handbook if they were trained by us earlier).

What’s required of NSRF National Facilitators?

NSRF National Facilitators (those who may train others to become CFG coaches) are well-trained professionals. They are required to complete the initial five-day coaches training themselves, and then spend over a year honing their practice, interning, and meeting high NSRF standards using the most up-to-date materials. Once they’ve been certified, they continue to work with the NSRF organization to ensure that the trainings they perform fulfill the required standards of content and teaching. All this so that when you see “Critical Friends Group,” you can trust what you’re getting.

*I’m already a trained CFG coach. Can I call myself that, and our meetings “Critical Friends Group meetings”?

Absolutely. If you’ve been trained as a coach or even have just been participating in CFG meetings in your school, you have our permission to continue calling your communities by that name. We protect our trademarks from others suggesting they are equipped to train new coaches or otherwise earn money thanks to our marks, but we’re delighted to support educators doing the work in the field!

Also, we encourage that CFG meetings always have an NSRF-certified CFG coach at the helm, for the best outcomes and to avoid “protocol disasters.” But part of being a good coach is facilitating other CFG members in leading protocols as they become more familiar with the form.

Phew! Okay, then.

For these reasons and others, NSRF remains committed to protecting our Critical Friends Group trademark. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Michele Mattoon, NSRF Director, Michele@nsrfharmony.org or 812-330-2702.
From the Research Desk

Collaboration and diversity essential

By Dave Lehman, Connections Executive Editor and NSRF National Facilitator in Wisconsin

Part of the NSRF Mission Statement are the following phrases—“empowering educators to create meaningful learning experiences for all, by collaborating effectively...” note, for all by collaborating! Thus, I found it particularly supportive to see this concept reflected in the special section of the October issue of the Scientific American magazine devoted to “The State of the World’s Science 2014.” In the opening article of nine in this special section, “The Inclusion Equation,” Executive Editor Fred Guteri states:

“Collaboration has been a recurring theme in science and technology in recent years. The life of the mind is increasingly transnational. It roams centers of excellence from every continent, linked by communications of great speed and breadth.”

The spring 2013 issue of YES! magazine was devoted to the theme, “How Cooperatives Are Driving the New Economy.” In this issue, Eric Michael Johnson, graduate student in the history of science at the University of British Columbia, wrote about a “New Theory of Evolution: Survival of the Nicest.” Citing the recent extensive research of Michael Tomasello of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology at Leipzig, Germany, Johnson developed a “comprehensive evolutionary theory of human cooperation.” Here is an account of human evolution which has predisposed us to work collaboratively, with cooperation favoring survival. (Also see Tomasello’s 2008 book, Why We Cooperate.)

I would add that this is not a “new” theory of evolution, even in 2008, but goes back at least to the turn of the 19th century with the writings of Petr Kropotkin (Russian geographer, economist, activist, philologist, zoologist, evolutionary theorist, philosopher, writer and prominent anarchist) and his seminal book, Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution. Kropotkin’s work first appeared as a series of articles in the magazine, “The Nineteenth Century” in 1890, then as a book in 1902. In summary, drawing on an extensive analysis of animal behavior as well as human societies, the medieval cities, and modern villages, Kropotkin said, “In the practice of mutual aid, which we can retrace to the earliest beginnings of evolution, we thus find the positive and undoubted origin of our ethical conceptions; and we can affirm that in the ethical progress of man, mutual support—not mutual struggle—has had the leading part.”

More recently, in the 1960s we had the neo-Social Darwinism of Robert Ardrey’s books African Genesis (1961) and The Territorial Imperative (1966) and Konrad Lorenz’s On Aggression (1966). Together, Ardrey and Lorenz claimed that human evolution was determined by competition and a violent “killer instinct,” an “aggressive drive” in the human species.

In response, Ashley Montagu (British-American anthropologist who popularized topics such as race and gender and their relation to politics and development) wrote and

WHAT ARE YOU READING?

We’re all voracious readers in the office of the National School Reform Faculty, and we always have a few books in progress. Here are just a few of the titles queued up for us right now (not counting books on Dave’s desk and Michele’s Kindle!). Some of these came to us after attending the National Association of Independent Schools’ People of Color Conference.

So, what are YOU reading these days that’s really lighting you up with enthusiasm or wonder ... or both? If you have suggestions for us to review and maybe sell on our website, email us!

Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All, by Tom Kelley & David Kelley
Waking Up White: and Finding Myself in the Story of Race, by Debbi Irving
Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation, by Derald Wing Sue
The Power of the Social Brain: Teaching, Learning, and Interdependent Thinking, by Arthur Costa and Pat Wilson O’Leary
The Science of Trust: Emotional Attunement for Couples, by John M. Gottman, PhD
edited *Man and Aggression* (1968), *The Nature of Human Aggression* (1976), and *Learning Non-Aggression: The Experience of Non-Literate Societies* (1978). Throughout, Montagu cites extensive evidence supporting the cooperative, collaborative nature of human beings as the determining factors in our evolutionary survival, including evidence from numerous “primitive” societies and their child rearing practices in which this kind of cooperation is actively taught to the young.

Thus, given the extensive work of Kropotkin and Montagu and others, I would argue with Johnson’s claim of a “new theory of evolution,” and would suggest educators consider doing something that all the high school seniors do each year at the Lehman Alternative Community School, a public middle-high school in Ithaca, New York. The “Senior Team Interdisciplinary Graduation Project” at LACS requires seniors, in teams of three or more, to select a current issue or topic on which they do research, including the intercultural impact of their project. The teams then take a public stance or position, presenting it orally and in writing, to the School Board, the Common Council, or a local Town Board. Often the teams produce a booklet to be distributed throughout the community. With these projects, the students actively demonstrate that they have learned throughout their secondary school career, culminating in this Senior Project—that they can work collaboratively.

In a subsequent article in the October *Scientific American*, “How Diversity Works,” Katherine Phillips, professor of leadership and ethics and Senior Vice Dean at Columbia Business School, states:

“The fact is that if you want to build teams or organizations capable of innovating, you need diversity. Diversity enhances creativity. It encourages the search for novel information and perspectives, leading to better decision making and problem solving. Diversity can improve the bottom line of companies and lead to unfettered discoveries and breakthroughs.”

Here I am reminded of my first literary encounter with the writing of the African-American environmentalist, Jennifer Oladipo. Her brief essay, “Global Warming Is Colorblind,” appeared in the November/December 2007 issue of Orion magazine. As a young volunteer working in an urban nature preserve in Louisville, Kentucky she was struck with the absence of other persons of color. With a bit of research, she realized that the nature preserve did not publicize its programs in the predominantly minority areas of town. The title of her article was reinforced by her plea, “Nobody benefits from the perception that enjoying and caring for the environment is an exclusively white lifestyle.” I again encountered Oladipo in my review of her book *Colors of Nature* (2011) for the November 2012 issue of Connections. By that writing, Oladipo was an award-winning writer and journalist, having been named Kentucky’s first African American state-certified environmental educator.

The articles in *Scientific American* recognize the increasing diversity of professional scientists, while calling for an even more diverse population to enter scientific fields. Here “diversity” refers not only to race, but to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and differences in income levels. The enormous value of increased diversity has been clearly shown over recent decades of research by organizational scientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, and demographers—diverse groups are more innovative than homogeneous groups. As pointed out by Katherine Phillips in her article, this is not only because people with different backgrounds bring new information. Simply interacting with different people forces everyone to prepare more thoroughly, to anticipate alternative viewpoints, and to expect that reaching consensus will take effort.

Turning then to the topic of gender diversity, the work of female animal behaviorists, particularly primatologists, is instructive. This field classically has been dominated by male researchers studying predominately male primates to the exclusion of female primates. This unrecognized gap in research led to erroneous conclusions about violence and aggression as the key factors in social hierarchy, ascribing the same aggression and domination of males to the early evolution of humans.

Enter Shirley Strum and her fifteen year, close-up study of olive baboons in Kenya from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s resulting in her book, *Almost Human: A Journey into the World of Baboons* (1987). She learned that baboons live basically in a peaceful society where friendship trumps violence and aggression in achieving desired results, discovering the “almost human” exchange of favors as the basis of baboons’ social and sexual activities in which aggression was simply mal-adaptive.

Here, too, is the work of Carol Gilligan, a professor at New York University, and previously a graduate student of Lawrence Kohlberg at Harvard University while he was developing his famous “theory of moral development” (*Essays on Moral Development*, vol. 1, 1981 and vol. 2, 1984). Gilligan became an outspoken critic of Kohlberg (*In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, 1982), based on two things. First, Kohlberg only studied privileged, white men and boys, leading to a biased opinion against women. Second, in his stage theory of moral development, the male view of individual rights and rules was considered a higher stage than women’s development in terms of its caring effect on human relationships.

Building on the work of Carol Gilligan, we subsequently have the writings of other feminists, including Nel Noddings (professor emeritus at Stanford University), as in her book, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984). She argues for an ethics based on a natural caring, a feminine view rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness in contrast to the classical view of male development based on principles and propositions, cognition, logic and reasoning rather than caring. [Here I should quickly add that, as a male, my own education has been greatly enhanced by my five daughters, all professional educators!]

In closing, I’ll return again to the Lehman Alternative
Community School, and its “Graduation by Exhibition,” and suggest high school educators consider it as a model. These seniors demonstrate that they are “critical thinkers and problem solvers who understand bias and take action to eliminate it” (Essential III.A. of “The Seven Essential Skills, Knowledge, and Attitudes of a Global Citizen”). To complete this graduation requirement, students show how they have taken action to understand and eliminate a personal and/or societal bias, and have reflected on the personal impact of oppression and the impact of their own actions.

Additionally, these seniors must demonstrate proficiency in Essential V. B., “researchers with an historical perspective who understand global studies and multiculturalism.” This involves several things: the in-depth study of at least two cultures different from their own, including knowledge of historic, economic, social, religious, geographical, and /or political roots of those cultures; and participation in group work to learn and teach effectively about global studies.

How do your students demonstrate their knowledge, skills and attitudes related to issues of collaboration and diversity? We at NSRF and Connections would love to hear from you! Email us your thoughts and experiences, especially if we can share them with readers of future issues of Connections!

Dave Lehman is the former founding principal/teacher of the Lehman Alternative Community School in Ithaca, NY. This public middle-high school was named for Dave and his wife Judy by the Ithaca, New York Board of Education upon their retirement after 30 years. Dave was a member of the very first “Principals Seminar” leadership group at the beginning of the NSRF, under the umbrella for the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Soon thereafter he was trained as a CFG coach and then an NSRF National Facilitator. His email is davelehman@mac.com

Why do some protocols call for the presenter to “scoot back and turn away” from the group?

Some protocols include a step after presenting and clarifying questions in which the presenter separates themselves from the group so the group may discuss the topic while the presenter listens and takes notes.

If you haven’t experienced this for yourself, it may seem an extraordinarily strange request. Years of protocol testing and refinement have proven that nonverbal cues from a presenter can stifle open discussion, reducing the ease and expansiveness of a discussion.

For example, see these photos from a recent open training: each group is engaged, attentive to the work at hand, while the presenter leans in to listen and take notes, not interrupting the flow.

Thanks, attendees of the October Open Training, for letting us use your photos! These groups were practicing the Consultancy and Dilemma Analysis Protocols.

Check out the schedule of upcoming open trainings for this spring and summer!

Is it time for you to take the plunge and be trained as a CFG coach?

Or maybe you’ve been coaching for a long time and want to become a national facilitator?
Death of a King: The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King’s Final Year

Reviewed by Dave Lehman, Connections Executive Editor

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 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 Memphians 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.”

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.
Shout-out to researchers

Have you written a thesis or dissertation on a topic associated with Critical Friends Group® work or NSRF® protocols?

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