By Bennie Goodwin

Martin Luther King, Jr.,
American Social Educator

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was one of the Twentieth Century's most outstanding Black American leaders. Negatively, he has been portrayed as an anarchist, Communist sympathizer, and man of corrupt personal morals. Positively, he has been presented as an orator, theologian, politician, and the leader of a nonviolent freedom army.1

The purpose of this paper is to present Dr. King as a social educator who, by the presentation of selected ideas influenced a significant segment of the Twentieth Century American society toward positive social change. Dr. King's thought and activities have usually been described by the use of religious and military terminology. Admittedly many

1 Regarding Dr. King as an "orator" see Marcus Boulware, "Martin Luther King, Jr.," in The Oratory of Negro Leaders 1900-1968 (Westport, Connecticut: Negro University Press, 1970); see also Donald Smith, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Rhetorician of Revolt" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1964). The following dissertations and theses are registered at Atlanta's Martin Luther King Library and Documentation Center and are in various stages of completion: Nurline H. Grice, "The Influence of Black Power on the Rhetorical Practices of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."; Thomas Niccolls, "The Nature and Function of Rhetorical Imagery, A Descriptive Study of Three Speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr."; and Marvyn A. Warren, "A Rhetorical Study of The Preaching of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Pastor and Pulpit Orator."

Regarding Dr. King as "theologian," see Herbert W. Richardson, "Martin Luther King — Unsung Theologian," Commonweal, 88 (May 3, 1968) 201. Also of particular interest in this relationship is a work by Harry J. Colin, "The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr., Duke University.

Regarding Dr. King as a "politician" see Hanes Walton, Jr., The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971). See also Alex Willingham, "The Religious Basis For Action in the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King," also registered at Atlanta's King Library and Documentation Center.

Much of the biographical literature presents Dr. King as "the leader of a nonviolent army." Examples of such literature are: Robert Bleiweis, Marching to Freedom: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Signet Books, 1969); Edward Clayton, Martin Luther King: The Peaceful Warrior (New York: Washington Square Press, 1969); Nicholas Georgiody, et al., Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., American Negro Freedom Fighter (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Franklin Publishers, 1969); and Edward Preston, Martin Luther King: Fighter For Freedom (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968).


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of the “campaigns” did resemble “battles” and Dr. King frequently made extensive use of the vocabulary of religion. However, this study hypothesizes that Dr. King’s overall purposes, perspectives, programs and procedures can legitimately be described as educational and that Dr. King can justifiably be perceived as an American social educator of significant merit.

Periodically there appears in various societies individuals who have no power formally sanctioned by either public or private wealth, but who influence significant changes in those societies by the creative and persistent presentation of ideas. Socrates among the Greeks, Jesus among the First-Century Jews and Gandhi in India were such individuals. In Twentieth-Century America, Dr. King was such a person.

Now to illustrate that Dr. King was such a person—that is, a social educator—let’s raise four questions and discuss them briefly. They are: (1) What is education? (2) Who is an educator? (3) Who is a social educator? (4) Why do we perceive Dr. King as a social educator?

I. WHAT IS EDUCATION?

There are many ways in which the term education is used in everyday speech. The word education is sometimes used to refer to a product—as in the sentence, “He is an educated man.” At other times it is used to refer to a possession—as in the statement, “She has a good education.” In other instances, it is used in reference to the whole teaching-learning enterprise involving books, teachers, students, administrators, buildings, financing, etc. These are only a few of the many legitimate uses of the term education.

However, in this study the term education will be used to refer to that dialogical process in which idea-options are presented by way of symbols and/or symbolic acts with the intention of influencing the mutual thinking-behavior of the participants toward positive goals. This stipulative-descriptive definition suggests that education is a process that deals primarily with ideas that are presented in dialogical fashion by the use of symbols (words primarily, whether written or spoken, but also pictures, signs, etc.) and symbolic acts (acts which point to ideas). This definition also suggests that education is intentional. Its purpose is to influence all who participate in the process toward goals that enhance personal and social well-being. Which is to say, that if the process does not lead to the mutual personal and social enhancement of those who participate, then it is not an educational process but perhaps a process of training, propagandizing, or indoctrination.


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II. WHO IS AN EDUCATOR?

The second question is: Who then is an educator? Briefly, an educator is a person who deals primarily with ideas in order to influence change. He persistently produces and presents ideas in a dialogical context with the intention of influencing toward positive goals those who participate in the process. In his role as an educator, he seeks to influence change by producing and presenting ideas rather than by the personal use of direct economic, political, military, or even negative psychological pressures such as deceit or hatred. An educator believes in the power of ideas and uses them positively as his instruments for change.

III. WHO IS A SOCIAL EDUCATOR?

The third question is: Who is a social educator? A social educator is an individual who carries out the educational process in the wider context of his or her society rather than primarily in an educational institution. The social educator is an outstanding person who by the presentation of ideas via symbols and symbolic acts intentionally influences relatively permanent social change in the thinking-behavior of a significant segment of his or her society.

The presentation of ideas to influence social change, that is the important phrase in this definition. It is important because the underlying thesis of this paper is that it is truly possible to influence significant social change by the persistent presentation of socially transforming ideas, providing these ideas are presented effectively by word and deed. “Praxis” is the term used by Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, to describe the process that constantly combines theory and practice, saying and doing, reflection and action. It is axiomatic with social educators that only via the process of fusing socially revolutionizing symbols and symbolic acts, can social change be effected by educational methodology.

IV. DR. KIng: A SOCIAL EDUCATOR?

Now let us turn to the final question: Why is it proper that Dr. King be perceived as a social educator? First, a social educator must possess socially transforming ideas.

The statement regarding education as an exclusively positive process raises the question of ethics in relation to education. Colin Greer has suggested in his book *The Great School Legend* (New York: Viking Press, 1972) that education can be a negative as well as a positive process. He implied that “poverty, salvery, crime, cruelty, and indifference” also constitute “educational influences” (p. 50). It is my position that the educational process is always intentional and positive, and that when the presentation of idea-options is misused, it ceases to be education and becomes something else—maybe training, propagandizing or indoctrination. This position is corroborated by R. S. Peters in *Ethics and Education* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scott, Foreman, 1967). There he states that education “implies that something worthwhile is being or has been intentionally transmitted in a morally acceptable manner” (p. 3).

4 See Freire, pp. 53-54, 75ff.
Dr. King's major ideas may be stated as follows:\(^6\)

(1) There is one major problem of mankind. It is the problem of sin or alienation from God and subsequently from one's self and one's fellow human beings.

(2) This one major problem has three primary contemporary national and international manifestations. They are racism, poverty, and war, to which numerous other problems are auxiliary — included are such problems as poor education, unemployment, police brutality, and crime.

(3) The problem of alienation is rooted in the human will. It is therefore within man's power to bring about the resolution of this major problem by the proper exercise of his volitional prerogative, his will.

(4) The proper exercise of man's volitional prerogative by which he may overcome alienation is love. Love, in a theological context, is the dominant attribute of God whom King perceived as a cosmic personal Being always working to overcome alienation. Love, in a socio-political context, is an attitude of "understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill" among and between people, which, when concretized where major social evils are present is best expressed by specific symbolic acts of nonviolent resistance to specific social injustices.

King perceived the philosophy of nonviolent resistance as rooted in divine-human love and therefore an adequate antidote to alienation. He perceived the practice or strategy of nonviolent resistance as the necessary expression of that philosophy and therefore believed that nonviolent resistance was adequate to deal with the various contemporary social expressions of the basic problem.

Perhaps Dr. King's four major ideas can be succinctly expressed in the following sentence. *Dr. King taught that the ubiquitous presence of alienation which manifests itself in social injustices can be overcome by the omnipotence of love whose influence for social change is most adequately expressed by nonviolent resistance.*

Dr. King was a man of hope. He never deserted his faith in the idea that God and man working in partnership — using pressure (nonviolent direct action), power (political action), and personality alteration (conversion, religious or otherwise) — would effect change in the American social structure. I believe Dr. King was a social educator because his hope for social change was based on socially transforming ideas.

Secondly, a social educator must creatively present his socially transforming ideas to his society. Dr. King was not only painfully aware that serious social problems existed and eloquent in his analysis of such problems but he insisted that change was possible and worked assiduously to influence these changes into reality. A social educator is one who not only possesses socially transforming ideas but one

\(^6\)For a more detailed discussion of Dr. King's major ideas in this connection, see Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Nobel Lecture," *Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Atlanta, Georgia: Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial Center, 1972), pp. 29-38. See also his chapter entitled, "The World House," in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (New York: Harper, 1967), pp. 167ff; and "A Testament of Hope," *Playboy*, 16 (January, 1969) 174ff.
who persistently presents these ideas to his society even at great risk and sacrifice. That is what Dr. King did by way of symbols, oral and visual, and by way of symbolic acts.

Symbols. He wrote six books and numerous articles and gave hundreds of speeches and sermons before millions of people. The form of his messages was interesting and logical, with ideas well linked together and easy to follow. He skillfully cited famous names and artistically weaved together poetry, hymns, and spirituals. His messages had intellectual depth and emotional elevation. He spoke often of the Greek philosophers — Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle — and quoted passages from Shakespeare, Carlyle, and James Russell Lowell. He was very "history-conscious" and would sometimes give a panoramic view of history from the Greeks to the Twentieth Century in order to clarify and emotionalize a strategic point. But he would not hesitate to tell a homey "Aunt Jane" or Mother Pollard story, if he sensed that such a reference would give the message greater force.

His use of picturesque expressions added beauty and interest to his message. When speaking of the music of the German masters, he would talk about the "glad thunders and gentle sighings of Handel, the majestic sweetness of Beethoven and the charming melodies of Bach." Or when seeking to contrast talk with action, he spoke of "a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds." He often talked about the "agonizing darkness of midnight," the "slumbering giants of gloom," the "sunlit pathways of hope" and the "pending cosmic elergies" that would be turned one day into "creative psalms of peace."

He had a way with words. He could make them stand up straight and tall like soldiers marching in a parade. He could make words dance and laugh and play like children romping on the beach. His words made some people happy and others sad. They inspired and rejoiced his friends, they depressed and infuriated his enemies. Words were his idiom, he used them to state the case and to express his dreams. Yes, he had a way with words and he used them effectively — with or without music — to get across his message of love, justice and hope.

Symbolic Acts. Dr. King's other pedagogical method was the use of the symbolic act, the nonviolent act which pointed to an idea. It is for this use of nonviolent direct action as a pedagogical instrument


7 Dr. King's "I Wouldn't Stop There," speech on a record entitled Free At Last (Detroit Motown Records, #929) is an excellent example of the "panoramic view" technique. See King, Strength To Love, p. 117, for an example of a "Mother Pollard story."

8 The quotes in the above paragraph are from King, Strength To Love, pp. 68, 26, 49, 66, 7, and the final one is from p. 50. The quote regarding "pending cosmic elergies" is from Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Casualties of the War in Vietnam," printed address given at the Nation Institute in Los Angeles, California, February 25, 1967.

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for social change, that he is most well known. It was through the use of nonviolent pressure — by way of boycotts, sit-ins, marches and demonstrations — that Dr. King taught the nation that his dreams were more than mere fantasies. It was by way of the nonviolent direct action methodology that Dr. King influenced social change.

Please notice I did not say *produced* social change because it is not within the province of the social educator to produce social change. It is his task to creatively and persistently present ideas. It is these ideas, effectively presented, which create the pressure which motivates those in power to produce the necessary social changes.

Of itself, the symbolic act — whether it be a rent strike, a sit-in, a march or a fast — achieves no relatively permanent social change. It represents the *idea* that a particular social change is *necessary*. When hundreds of concerned persons went South on the Freedom Rides in 1961, their riding itself did not accomplish change. It was a symbolic act pointing up their conviction that social change was necessary. It was an Interstate Commerce Commission decision, a political decision, that brought about the desegregation of interstate travel, not the Freedom Rides.\(^\text{10}\) It is not usually within the social educator’s power to *bring about* social change, his task is the creative and persistent presentation of socially transforming ideas. In the United States relatively permanent social change is produced by Congressional legislative acts or Supreme Court decisions, enforced when deemed necessary by the executive branch of the Federal Government. An American social educator must build up enough pressure to influence positive action on the part of one or all of these branches of government. I believe Dr. King was a social educator because he creatively and persistently presented to his society socially transforming ideas, in spite of grave risk and personal sacrifice.

Dr. King was stabbed in Harlem, beaten in Selma, and stoned in Chicago; his house was bombed twice, he was jailed 39 times and he lived under the constant threat of death. Yet, in spite of all of his suffering and the suffering of his followers, he insisted on the validity and power of his ideas. His willingness to suffer for his convictions gave added moral force to the presentation of his ideas.

Finally, a social educator’s success may be determined by the significant social changes influenced by his ideas. Dr. King and his allies influenced at least three social changes that may be described as relatively permanent in nature. Which is to say that the changes were produced by Congressional legislative action or by a Supreme Court decision and are therefore enforceable by the executive branch of the government. These three major relatively permanent changes were

the following: (1) the desegregation of public transportation, (2) the desegregation of public facilities—eating, sleeping, buying, etc., and (3) the desegregation of voting privileges.

The social changes influenced by Dr. King’s teachings were tremendously significant, particularly to America’s citizens of color, but the lessons that he taught us which resulted in the changes were even more significant. He taught us that longstanding dehumanizing social customs could be changed in a relatively short time and that the church, among other institutions, could be a vital force in the initiation of those changes. But perhaps the most important lesson he taught us was that fear, our fear, could be conquered and that Black people can and will work together for their own liberation. He believed in the “Beloved Community” — the brotherhood of all people under the Fatherhood of God. He believed in Black and white together but he taught us that if we would be free at last then we must take the initiative in the struggle for our own freedom.

Dr. King is gone but the lessons he taught us remain as his legacy. Racism, poverty and war are still with us. Therefore, we must learn all that we can from the life and teachings of this noble social pedagogue and go on to produce new ideas and to develop unheard of strategies to meet unanticipated situations.

He died.
But we who live
Must do a harder thing
Than dying is.
For we must think
And his ghost
Will drive us on.

11 For an exposition of this theme in the teachings of Dr. King, see Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, Search For the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Valley Forge, Pa. Judson Press, 1974).

12 Adapted from an inscription on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.