

Martin's many masks

By [Debra Dean Murphy](#)

January 20, 2014

In his role as prophet to the nation, Martin Luther King, Jr. drew on the ancient wisdom of both the Greeks and Hebrews. From Aristotle he learned that the character of an orator is of prime importance, but not in the ways we moderns might imagine. It wasn't personal morality that was the prized dimension of skillful oratory so much as it was the proper execution of a *persona* ("mask" in Latin). "Person" in this sense—literally, "that which is sounded through" (*per-sonar*)—is not an essence or ego or the irreducible human self. Rather, it's a role one plays.

This strikes us—shaped as we are by our culture's rhetoric of "always be yourself"—as not only odd but deeply deceptive. We want our public speakers—politicians and preachers, especially—to be transparent, accessible, down-to-earth, one of us. To claim that they are wearing masks is to suggest that they are perpetrating a fraud, pulling one over on us. Facades in public discourse, we think, reasonably, are precisely the problem.

But this misses Aristotle's point and King's perceptiveness regarding the role of public speech—namely, that an orator's powers are not tied primarily to his or her own moral character (though character is not unimportant), but to inhabiting a role that persuades, moves, exposes, inspires, transforms. As [Richard Lischer](#) notes, "orators have more in common with actors than the orators—or the preachers—like to admit."

King also drew on Israel's prophetic tradition as he "adopted a series of biblical personae, masks, that captured the several roles he understood himself to be playing in American life" (Lischer). These personae (Jeremiah's sensitivity, Amos's eloquence)—much more than King's own personality—authorized and legitimized his work, locating it in broader, deeper streams of tradition which could speak powerfully and persuasively to the present moment.

It's instructive, I think, to consider these qualities in King's oratory in light of current trends in American preaching and speech-making. We live in the age of

authenticity—or we’d like to think we do. We want our leaders to be “real”—what you see is what you get. Politicians campaign on this all the time: “I’m one of you.” “I’m not really a politician”—they often say, all evidence to the contrary. “I’m a father, mother, concerned citizen, you fill in the blank.” “I’m one of you.”

Martin Luther King still has no peers in the skill and art that counteract all of this, and we’ve not really heeded the lesson he taught us: namely, that the moral power of a great sermon or speech is not derived from an “authentic self” (for we have no access to such a thing), but from a role inhabited, a part well-played, a mask worn well, such that people are moved and a nation is changed.

Finally, it is precisely in King’s *humanness*, including his moral frailty, that his prophetic witness derived much of its moral force. His personal failings shouldn’t be dismissed or ignored, especially as they hurt other people in his life. But neither were they disqualifications, as his detractors would have it. Martin Luther King, Jr. and a long line of saints and martyrs have been instruments of healing and transformation *in and through* their fallibility as human beings.

And they have borne witness to peaceableness in the midst of violence, to subversive love in the face of all-consuming hatred. And in death—in bodies brutalized by systems propped up by fear—they summon us to our own subversive witness against the powers.

Originally posted at [Intersections](#)