King's dream

Malcolm X characterized "I Have a Dream" as a feel-good exercise designed for white consumption. But there was nothing soft or accommodating about Martin Luther King's speech.

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Martin Luther King at the March on Washington, 1963

Forty years ago on a sweltering August day in Washington, the Baptist preacher and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the defining speech of his generation and the most famous oration of the 20th century. Writing in the *New York Times* the next day, James Reston promptly recognized King's achievement and predicted, "It will be a long time before [Washington] forgets the melodious and melancholy voice of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. crying out his dreams to the multitude."

That voice has now become an American institution. And as familiarity with the speech fades to annual invocations of the "Dream," fading with it is the civic memory of King's uncompromising critique of the injustice that made the dream necessary.

Critics like Malcolm X unfairly characterized King's performance as a feel-good exercise designed for white consumption. After all, it was only a dream with no policy demands attached. But there was nothing soft or accommodating about the speech. The greater part of it was devoted to the Negro's experience of pain, broken promises, and now rising rage in a country about which Langston Hughes once wrote, "O yes / I say it plain, / America never was America to me."

Within seconds of beginning, King was echoing Hughes, W. E. B. DuBois and other militant intellectuals when he characterized the Negro as an "exile" in his own land. The first half of the address, which King read in a stern and businesslike manner, resembles a bill of particulars with which the Old Testament prophets might have indicted a wayward and unjust nation. He repeatedly intones "We will not be satisfied," a refrain doubtless prompted by the ubiquitous white question of the day, "When will you people be satisfied?" He promises that Negroes will never be satisfied as long as they are victims of police brutality or can't stay in a decent motel along the highway. He closes this portion of the speech by merging his complaints with those of the ancient prophet who condemned the rich for cheating small farmers: "We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

The King of 1963 was the same King who in 1967 and 1968 would accuse the U.S. of genocide at home and abroad, and suggest that blacks might want to skip the upcoming bicentennial celebrations. In the last years of his life, he was discovering not only the resiliency of racism but its uncanny ability to morph, as we would say

today, into economic and military forms.

The reason it is difficult to hear King's own rage in his indictments has to do with the poetic figures in which he clothed them. He was burdened with the preacher's stigmatic habit of casting local injustices in the light of transcendent truths. The issue was never simply police brutality or segregated housing in the raw, but also, as in this speech, "the quicksands of racial injustice" and "the desolate valley of segregation." By assailing the nation's ills in lovely metaphors, his critics claimed, he was softening his prophetic blows. You could enjoy a King speech.

King allowed his rhetoric to call attention to itself for a strategic reason. The beauty of his speeches was meant not to glorify the speaker but to elevate the cause. Aristotle said, "A free man should not talk like a slave." Neither should the aspirations of a movement toward justice and human dignity be clothed in the apparel of the ordinary.

Most speakers today, however, lean more toward identification than elevation. Even the richest of politicians wishes to be known as a man or woman of the people. Newscasters and analysts chatter among themselves like ordinary folks. But there has always been a rhetoric of impressiveness that unabashedly stresses the difference between what the speaker knows and what the audience can grasp. It pulls out all the stops and struts its stuff in order to invest a cause with nobility and make it worth fighting for. That was King's style and his legacy from the African-American church.

About two-thirds of the way into his prepared notes, King let go of his manuscript and took another, more impressive, tack. After a brief pause, his almond eyes darted to heaven and then locked onto the throng, and he began to report what he, the Seer, had been privileged to see on behalf of the people. It was an old and effective preacher's trick. He began to flex his arms and orchestrate his own speech as if he were a conductor who no longer needed the score. If he was recalling Langston Hughes, he didn't explicitly say so: "Let America be America again, / Let it be the dream it used to be." Then he began to preach.

What made his Dream a prophecy was its alarming turn toward a more eschatological view of America than politics as usual. "And all flesh shall see it together," he cried out with Isaiah. It was an alarming speech, at least to King's Bible-toting opponents, because of the utter certainty with which it included them in

something larger and more gracious than their own agenda. The speaker was no longer limiting himself to America but was imagining the kingdom of God. This is what the kingdom will look like, he said that afternoon: like white people and black people from Georgia sitting at table together and acting like kin.

This dream was no Freudian disclosure of personal meaning. No, this was a big dream of world transformation, the kind God gives, and when God gives a dream, it is a fearful thing because it always comes to pass. Which is why 40 years ago the preacher said with such emphasis, “knowing that we will be free one day.”

In the crucible of black-church worship, once the preacher leaves off chiding and exhorting, he tremblingly enters the realm of God’s own freedom. This is the most powerful part of the sermon because the preacher is doing little more than announcing what God is already doing or has pledged to do. In the “Dream” segment this is precisely what King was declaring but on a scale unparalleled in American history. In this realm, God has the freedom to do such a new thing that, with the possible exception of this one marked dreamer, no one else has even imagined it.

Only after we have listened to the prophet’s judgments can we lock arms with one another and embrace his dream. After all these years, his challenge remains the same: Are you ready for a dream this big?

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