

AN INWARD JOURNEY IN THE WELLSPRINGS OF THE BLACK PRAYER TRADITION

*I prayed every day all day long, in a big, open field that was
just being opened up as new ground, for three weeks.*

—Ex-slave¹

Each of us, in his own way, finds the stairs leading to the Holy Place.

—Howard Thurman²

Men always have prayed and men always will pray.

—Martin Luther King Jr.³

The prayer life of Martin Luther King Jr. was rooted in spiritual values and cultural traditions that extended back generations in America and many more in Africa. King's forebears brought the concept and habit of prayer to these shores as early as the 1600s. They prayed for deliverance in countless African languages, as they experienced a common horror in the bellies of slave ships; on the auction blocks; and in the cotton, rice, and tobacco fields in the New World.⁴ The ancestral past was revered largely through prayer, and the art and discipline of prayer became one of the key markers of black faith. King drank from the wellsprings of this black prayer tradition while also enlarging it in

the context of a movement for freedom, justice, and human community.⁵

The foundation for much of King's understanding of prayer was actually laid by slaves on the plantations of the American South. Imbued with a deep sense of the sacred, the slaves never thought of prayer as dogmatic prose or outdated ritual, and they refused to reduce the practice of praying to a mere exercise in exhibitionism or to some meandering attempt to appease God and impress believers. They variously referred to prayer as "talking with God," "ringing up heaven," "kneeling and bowing before the throne of grace," and "taking one's burdens before the Lord," and phrases like "praying in the spirit" and "laying the soul bare before the Lord" were commonly heard in the slave quarters.⁶ This kind of language and thinking about prayer were passed down from generation to generation, thus becoming a critical component of what Lawrence W. Levine calls "the orally transmitted expressive culture" of African Americans.⁷

Undoubtedly, from the time of his birth in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1929, King was exposed to the most pervasive cultural images and conceptions of prayer as forged by slaves. This would not have been unusual in his case, especially in light of the presence of ex-slaves and their immediate descendants throughout the state of Georgia during his childhood. Through his devout parents, Martin Luther King Sr. and Alberta Williams King, and his saintly grandmothers, Delia Lindsay King and Jennie C. Parks Williams, King had his most direct exposure to that prayer tradition that first found expression in the wilderness of slavery.⁸ Thus, it is not surprising that King himself would speak of prayer as conversing with God, crying out to God, taking problems to the Lord, or bowing before the God of the universe.⁹ Clearly, there are echoes here of what the slaves and generations of their descendants had in mind when they sought to define and/or describe prayer and the experience of praying.

King's ancestors never doubted the necessity of prayer as a vital part of daily life. Prayer for them was much more than the heart

and soul of religion, or an essential aspect of spirituality; it was a necessary ingredient in the total experience of living. In other words, the need for vigorous and earnest prayer—as adoration, confession, intercession, petition, and thanksgiving—never faded, because the slaves lived with a profound sense of their own finitude and inadequacy, of the unspeakable sorrow that clouded their daily existence, of their utter dependence on God, and of the need to thank God for the many blessings bestowed on them despite the pain of bondage. Significantly, they emphasized prayer in sermons and tales and often through the prism of song:

Pray for me, pray for me,
 When you go to the altar,
 Please, please don't forget to pray for me.¹⁰

And

Pray all de member, O Lord!
 Pray all de member,
 Yes my Lord!
 Pray a little longer, O Lord!¹¹

And there were these lines, marked by the pulsing rhythms of the heart and the most inspired voicing of faith:

Pray on, pray on;
 Pray on dem light us over;
 Pray on, Pray on, de union break of day.¹²

Though King seldom specifically addressed prayer as an indispensable element in the lives of the slaves, his many reflections on slave religion in general are the best indication of his thoughts on the subject.¹³ King knew that prayer was the channel through which so many of his forebears' wants and needs were met—that prayer, in the most striking ways, helped them to cope with what

would have otherwise been unbearably painful episodes in their collective experiences as a people. King also saw prayer serving essentially the same purpose for blacks who, in his own time, still endured discriminatory policies and practices not far removed from slavery,¹⁴ and his “fervent desire” was that they too would always “place prayer in a practical perspective.”¹⁵ Apparently, this larger black experience, as it unfolded across generations, was the basis for King’s understanding of prayer as the lived theology of his people.¹⁶

The question of *what* slaves actually prayed *for* is equally significant for evaluating the black prayer tradition and King’s place in it. The typical image of slaves praying for conversion, sanctification, and salvation in the afterlife¹⁷ conveys only a part of the story. To be sure, the prayers of slaves focused on the ultimate concerns of life, but never to the neglect of their proximate needs and basic necessities. More specifically, they prayed for food, shelter, garments to cover their bodies, and the gift of life, always thanking and praising God that their beds were not their cooling boards, that their bed covers were not their winding sheets, and that the walls of their cabins were not the walls of their grave. They prayed as they “followed the drinking gourd ‘on the Underground Railroad,’ ” when their families, friends, and loved ones were ripped apart by the slave trade, and whenever they felt the sting of the lash.¹⁸ They thanked God for bringing them through “the seen and the unseen,” and petitioned God for the strength to endure hardship, the will and the courage to struggle against injustice, and deliverance from captivity.¹⁹ King would later mirror this kind of practical approach to praying as he thanked “God for sleep,” for “waking me up this morning,” and for the “miracle” of life.²⁰ Also in the tradition of his forebears, he prayed for family, friends, loved ones, and his people as a whole, for faith and fortitude in the midst of struggle, and for the dawning of freedom and justice.²¹ Obviously, this manner of praying established a pattern that remained essentially unbroken in African American religious

life, from the slaves and their immediate offspring down to and beyond King's generation.

But the forgers of this tradition never limited prayer to a mere expression of profound longings for the fulfillment of basic personal and communal needs. For people facing awful, traumatic experiences and unimaginable sorrow, prayer was a restless yearning for answers to the larger question of *meaning*, the *why* of the black experience. Simply put, prayer was a quest for meaning, as so often evidenced by the rich expressions in the voices and on the faces of those who prayed. Significantly, the slaves persevered in prayer even when answers from God seemed slow and far-fetched. Their prayer accounts bear eloquent and moving testimony to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of seemingly unending cycles of meaninglessness and tragedy. They also display a marvelous capacity on the part of slaves to heal themselves through the activity of praying, a capacity not particularly surprising in a culture in which prayer and healing rituals were coextensive. King's own quest for meaning and healing drew on the resources of this heritage, and it explains why he felt that slave religion had much to teach about how to deal with the tragic events of everyday life.²²

The many contexts in which prayers were uttered, shared, and reshared reveal much about how this tradition developed over time. For enslaved Africans in the antebellum South, the "invisible institution"—clandestine meetings held in the fields, woods, thickets, ravines, and cabins—constituted the most prominent setting for both private and communal prayer.²³ In such settings, the slave preacher was often accorded an important role as prayer leader, and the potent character of prayer was never inconspicuous, as the cries of the heart burst forth in ardent flames of uninhibited expression. Some slaves preferred their own "regular praying place" or "praying ground," where they could, in the words of the spiritual, "steal away to Jesus."²⁴ As a means of keeping "the sound of their voices from penetrating the air," some prayed with their heads in pots, turned upside down, while others huddled behind

thoroughly wetted quilts and rags.²⁵ King undoubtedly learned about such practices through his father and other elders, and they most certainly influenced his view of his own spiritual struggle and of his place in the larger sphere of African American religious culture.²⁶

In the invisible institution, praying came together with preaching, testimony, shouting, and the singing of the spirituals, thus supporting King's view of the merging of the spiritual and artistic in traditional black life.²⁷ But prayer never followed a set of clearly defined liturgical forms or formal, written orders of worship. The informality of prayer became the standard as slaves communicated with God in verbal and nonverbal ways, and the prayers they recited orally were always spontaneous and extemporaneous. The invisible institution became the major wellspring of the black prayer tradition, prefiguring the visible, institutional black churches in that regard. The awesome silence that captured the mood as slaves prayed alone in secret places probably afforded much of the inspiration for spirituals, such as:

Steal away, steal away to Jesus,
Steal away, steal away home.
I aint got long to stay here.²⁸

And:

An' I couldn't hear no body pray, O Lord,
I couldn't hear no body pray, O Lord,
O, 'way down yonder by myself,
I couldn't hear no body pray.
In de valley, I couldn't hear no body pray.
On a my knees, I couldn't hear no body pray.²⁹

King himself wrote about the "secret religious meetings" on the plantations, during which slaves "gained renewed faith"

under the powerful and consolatory words of their preachers.³⁰ As one whose family history extended back to the slave era, King most certainly had some sense of how the experience of praying occurred in such meetings. Information concerning this aspect of the black religious past would have been accessible to him in the writings of scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois,³¹ whom he read closely, and in the “interesting stories” he heard from his maternal grandmother, Jennie C. Parks Williams,³² and other elders in Atlanta. Also, had King attended the average black Baptist church in Atlanta and especially in rural Georgia, which he most certainly did, he would have been exposed to the continuing impact of slave culture as it found expression in the prayer circle. His understanding of prayer as both personal and relational quite possibly benefited from what he learned about the values and traditions of the invisible institution.

Prayers offered in the context of family and community provided the foundation for King’s spiritual and artistic bond with his predecessors. Communal prayer took place wherever and whenever slaves and their descendants gathered. Prayer meetings in the slave cabins and praise houses were a common practice.³³ Interestingly enough, public worship in churches, and especially white churches, afforded fewer opportunities for slaves to pray earnestly for the fulfillment of their personal and communal needs, especially since slave owners, overseers, constables, and other law officials were so often present. King knew and occasionally addressed the issue of the restraining effect that white presence had on black religious expression during slavery, but he also understood that the antebellum North, in which people of African descent had more freedom to develop and maintain separate and independent churches, presented a different situation.³⁴ It appears that the slave religious experience in the South and the phenomenon of the black church in the antebellum North came together in King’s consciousness as he sought to grasp the spirit of unity and resistance that grew out of the prayerful struggle for survival and freedom.³⁵

Had King studied slave culture in the upper South, and particularly in the border states of Delaware, Virginia, and Maryland, he would have discovered powerful examples of how the traditions associated with communal prayer carried over among the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of slaves. Slaves in these states actually came together annually with free Africans from the urban South and North for the Big August Quarterly, a religious festival that originated in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1813, and the prayer circle was always a central element in the festivities. Gatherings for the prayer circle in the African churches and on French Street in Wilmington were a common sight, as blacks prayed with all the strength of their voices, flinging their arms convulsively, nodding and bobbing their heads, and leaping to the point of exhaustion. The prayer leaders, forced to the center of the human ring, tended to be the most intense in their movements. Amazingly, the prayer circle frequently provided the impetus for slaves to escape to free territory, so it was never a practice linked only to the ritual life of people of African ancestry.³⁶

In the decades after slavery, the prayer circle continued with all the power of its expression and appeal. At the 1882 gathering, “the most powerful singers and shouters took possession of the center of the floor” at the African Union Church, the focal point of the festival, and the singing gave “way to a short season of equally earnest prayer.” Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, blacks gathered in “small circles,” offering “stirring prayer in the sing-song manner peculiar to the race,” as they also “frantically urged one another to more violent feats of gymnastic devotion, clapping their hands, jumping and shouting, and occasionally groaning.”³⁷ Such practices survived through the first half of the twentieth century,³⁸ thus providing a model for the kind of prayer circle that would become characteristic of civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s. Although there is no evidence to suggest that King knew about the Big August Quarterly festivals, his own involvement in prayer circles would mirror much of the spirit of that tradition.³⁹ The

relationship becomes all the more evident when one realizes that the prayer circle at Big August Quarterly celebrations, like that in King-led civil rights campaigns a century later, was usually linked to efforts to secure freedom for African Americans.⁴⁰

The men and women who forged this tradition believed in the wonders of prayer, and they subscribed to a scriptural understanding that God heard and answered prayer. Describing prayer as “er sincere desire uv de heart,” Henry Baker, born a slave in Alabama, declared that Jesus himself said “Ast whut yuh will en muh father will gib hit untuh yuh.” He went on to assert that “prayah is sumpin dat unlocks de door.”⁴¹ The depth of this conviction was never undermined by the sense that God sometimes takes time in answering the pleas of the person who prays, for it was a common saying in the slave quarters that “He may not come when you want Him but He’s always on time.” The belief that God would answer prayer, fulfill the heart’s desire, and supply needs was the inspiration for spirituals like:

Oh, Jesus is on the main line;
 Tell Him what you want.
 Jesus is on the main line;
 Tell Him what you want.
 Jesus is on the main line;
 Tell Him what you want,
 Call Him up and tell Him what you want.
 If you want religion, tell Him what you want.
 If you want the Holy Ghost, tell Him
 what you want.
 If you’re sick and you can’t get well,
 Tell Him what you want.
 Call Him up and tell Him what you want.⁴²

And there was the spiritual that follows, a statement pulsating with the determination to persevere in faith even when prayer offered few answers to the contradictions of life:

You can't make-a-me doubt Him,
 You can't make-a-me doubt Him,
 You can't make-a-me doubt Him,
 in my heart.
 I know too much about Him,
 I know too much about Him,
 I know too much about Him
 in my heart.⁴³

King would echo this concept of “the on-time God” who turns a listening ear to the cries of his children and “who makes a way out of no way.”⁴⁴ Nurtured in a culture in which his people had long experienced the power of God unleashed in their lives through prayer, and in which the possibilities of prayer were essentially unquestioned, King would turn to prayer for answers that he knew he could not find elsewhere. When he declared the power of God to answer prayer, he was speaking out of a well-established and time-honored tradition.⁴⁵ As an heir of this tradition, he readily understood his elders’ conviction that an indomitable faith constituted a part of that quality which gave efficacy to prayer and the experience of praying.⁴⁶

This belief would become all the more evident after the Civil War and emancipation, even as changes of consciousness occurred in the prayers of ex-slaves and their descendants due to shifting social and political realities.⁴⁷ The Confederate defeat and emancipation fulfilled a prophecy the slaves had been praying for since the nation itself declared freedom from British colonial domination. “God planned dem slave prayers to free us like he did de Israelites, and dey did,” declared former slave Alice Sewall.⁴⁸ The Alabama ex-slave Henry Baker vividly recalled those moments on his plantation when prayers broke out into praise and thanksgiving:

En Marse Harris say, “Yes, Jesse yuh is jes es free es I is en yuh kin go enywhere yuh wanna.” En muh granddaddy come back

en tole us en we all didn't hardly know what tuh do wid ourselves. Some left en some got togedder en had prayer meetin's in de house en prayed en thanked de Lawd fer d'liverance en ol' Ant Roney had a song. Aftuh we got free she sung it en we all he'ped her. We wuz all comin' fom prayer meetin' one night en she wuz shoutin' "Thank God we is all free."⁴⁹

Similar images of newly freed slaves in prayerful celebration undoubtedly captured King's imagination in 1963, a hundred years later, as he, in his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C., spoke of the Emancipation Proclamation as "a momentous decree" that became "a great beacon light of hope" and "a joyous daybreak" to "millions of Negro slaves," ending "the long night of their captivity."⁵⁰ Strangely enough, King's own prayerful spirit, as he celebrated civil rights victories and successful legislative initiatives in his own time, would recall, in some ways at least, the festive mood of his slave ancestors after emancipation.⁵¹

For the former slaves, the habit of praying for deliverance from captivity was largely replaced by prayer that sought God's guidance in the exercise of a new freedom. The ex-slave James L. Bradley of Arkansas reflected the sentiments of countless freed-persons when he prayed for the gift of learning, or that his "dark mind might see the light of knowledge."⁵² The ex-slaves prayed for success in employment, for the security and stability of family life, for economic empowerment and self-sufficiency, for direction in building and maintaining their own churches and homes, and for wisdom in discharging the duties that came with their recently achieved civil and political rights. But the need to pray for freedom never really faded, as the Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and mob violence against African Americans during the Reconstruction period signaled the establishment of yet another form of slavery. Consequently, the black prayer tradition was enlarged but not redefined or transformed, thus explaining why King was able to draw on it repeatedly and in profound ways.

Vital aspects of this tradition reached King through his family and home environment, the fellowship and artistic life of the black church, and the larger black community of Atlanta.⁵³ The seeds of King's emerging prayer life were actually planted from childhood in the King home and at Ebenezer Baptist Church, a congregation led by both his maternal grandfather and father, Adam D. Williams and Martin King Sr., both of whom were well-known Baptist preachers. As children, King Jr., his sister Christine, and his brother A. D. were required to pray at mealtime around the table, before departing for school, and at family prayer meetings on Sunday mornings. The youngsters were trained in the type of prayer life designed to instill and cultivate core Christian values. Here young King owed much to his parents, King Sr. and Alberta King, and to his maternal grandmother, Jennie C. Parks Williams, all of whom shared the King household on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta while he was growing up.⁵⁴

Prayer meetings at Ebenezer Church, where the immediate offspring of ex-slaves could be found, were equally significant for King, affording a context in which he could learn the artistic side and intricacies of the prayer ritual. The dynamic, prayer-filled sermons of his father, affectionately called "Daddy King," were most certainly a source of both enlightenment and inspiration for King Jr.⁵⁵ It was in this setting that prayer intersected with preaching, singing, testimony, and shouting, thus recalling the religious culture of the slaves. The larger black community of Atlanta reinforced what King learned about prayer at home and at Ebenezer, for there were many in black congregations throughout Atlanta who modeled the kind of praying for which the slaves were known. It was in this larger black culture that King found precedent for his own prayer life. Steeped in the interrelated environs of home, church, and the larger black community, he was not likely to misuse prayer or to view it as simply some sacred indulgence or overly pious act inspired only by memory, habit, and tradition.⁵⁶

King's own unique contributions to the black prayer tradition merit special attention if his rightful place in that tradition is to be

fully understood. Significantly, King gave voice to vital aspects of the tradition as it unfolded among his slave ancestors while also remaining true to its genius and integrity. He reclaimed the language of freedom and deliverance in slave prayers as he prayed for the strength and wisdom needed for the continuing journey through the Egypt of slavery, the wilderness of segregation, toward the promised land of freedom, justice, and equality of opportunity.⁵⁷ King also honored that tradition by blending this-worldly and otherworldly concerns in his prayers, by stressing the idea of prayer as “talking with God,” by highlighting the necessity of prayer, by extolling the wonders and possibilities of prayer, and by embracing a scriptural view that God answers prayer.⁵⁸ In short, folk praying and the black prayer tradition continued to live through King. In his prayers and prayer life, he echoed the heart desires, hopes, and dreams of his forebears.

King also expanded the black prayer tradition by making it useful in and relevant to a mass movement of nonviolent direct action.⁵⁹ Although prayer had always been a central ingredient for blacks involved in movements for social change, King and his followers were the first to make such a creative use of prayer in a church-centered, nonviolent crusade for freedom, justice, human dignity, and peace.⁶⁰ This was partly evident in the ways the prayer circle and the picket line were united in King-led civil rights campaigns. By infusing prayer into his nonviolent movement, King gave new meaning to prayer as creative energy and to the image of the black church as creative minority.⁶¹

King's contribution was equally evident in the diversity that characterized folk praying during civil rights crusades. In his “Message from Jail” (1962) in Albany, Georgia, which, unlike the Birmingham Jail letter, has been virtually ignored, King alludes to the importance of what he calls “prayer marches.”⁶² In other writings and speeches, he makes mention of “prayer vigils,” “pilgrimages of prayer,” “prayer campaigns,” and “prayer rallies,” all of which reflect his diversified and creative approach to praying and the prayer life.⁶³ This was clearly one of King's most

innovative contributions to the spiritual side of the civil rights movement.

It should also be noted that many white people of different faith traditions had their first exposure to the traditions associated with folk praying through the movement King led.⁶⁴ The majority of whites who marched with King were unfamiliar with black church traditions as a whole, and white Protestants, Catholics, and Jews actually observed and participated with him in the prayer circle, prayer vigils, and prayer pilgrimages. This was especially the case with the so-called coalition of conscience in 1965 in Selma, Alabama, where some four hundred white religious leaders participated in the great march for voting rights. At the beginning of the march, the participants kneeled in a circle and Ralph D. Abernathy, King's assistant, offered a stirring prayer. In such settings, black prayer, for perhaps the only time in history, became a public and communal exercise involving blacks and whites of different faiths. By word and example, King actually pioneered in making prayer an engaging factor in advancing the spirit of inter-religious dialogue and cooperation in the interest of justice, a contribution unprecedented for preachers and pastors in black church traditions.⁶⁵ King spoke to the historic significance of the occasion, calling it "the greatest and warmest expression of religious unity" in the "nation's history," and he delighted in the fact that this movement had occurred not in Rome but in the little town of Selma.⁶⁶

The black prayer tradition explains why King approached life in a prayerful attitude. Although he was embarrassed as a boy by certain practices usually associated with praying in black churches, such as the shouting and stamping, he ultimately overcame this feeling and embraced the most vital aspects of that prayer tradition in its wholeness.⁶⁷ Undoubtedly, King's prayer life was intricately interwoven into the long history of people of African descent in the United States, and for him both the imperative to pray and the passion for praying emerged out of a deep consciousness of and identification with that history. The extent

to which King embodied the genius of the black prayer tradition will become increasingly clear in the next chapter, which examines both his attitude toward prayer and his habit of praying while he was a student at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University.⁶⁸



Martin Luther King engaged in a prayer circle with bystanders; Chicago, 1965. Credit: John Tweedle from A Lasting Impression, University of South Carolina Press.
