

ROBERT PENN WARREN MARTIN LUTHER KING TAPE #1

Mr. WARREN: This is an interview, March 18, with Dr. King. All right, sir, may I just plunge in and state the topic and we'll explore it a little bit?

Mr. KING: All right.

RPW: Do you see your father's role and your own role as historical phases of the same process?

MLK: Yes, I do. I think my father and I have worked together a great deal in the last few years, trying to grapple with the same problem, and he was working in the area of civil rights before I was born and when I was just a kid, and I grew up in the kind of atmosphere that had a real civil rights concern. I do think it's the same problem that we are grappling with - it's the same historical process - and if this is what you mean, I think so.

RPW: That is, there are vast differences, of course, in techniques and opportunities and climates of opinion, all of those million things that are different from one generation to the other. But you see a continuity in the process and not a sharp division between roles - yours and his?

MLK: Yes. I see a continuity. I don't think there's a sharp - there are certain and minor differences, but I don't think there is any sharp difference. I think basically the roles are the same. Now, I grant you that at points my father did not come up under the discipline of the non-violent philosophy. He was not really trained in the non-violent discipline, but even without that the problem was

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about the same, and even though the methods may not have been consciously non-violent they were certainly non-violent in the sense that he never, never advocated violence as a way to solve the problem.

RPW: Yes - yes. Those are phases, then, shall we say, in a process. What is the next phase one might envisage?

MLK: Do you mean the next phase in terms of -

RPW: Beyond the present leadership and present issues and present problems - is there a phase beyond the civil rights issues that now are in the forefront? What is the next phase of, shall we say, for lack of a better phrase, the Negro movement? Do you understand? What is the next phase, say - this - offhand, saying your father, representing one phase, you, another - can we predict another phase? Is that beginning to take shape already?

MLK: Well, I think, if there is a next phase, it will be an extension of the present phase. My feeling is that we will really have to grapple with ways and means to really bring about an integrated society. Non-violent direct action, working through the courts, and working through legislative processes, may be extremely helpful in bringing about a desegregated society, but when we move into the realm of actual integration, which deals with mutual acceptance, a genuine inter-group, inter-personal living, then it seems to me that other methods will have to be used. And I think that the next phase will be the phase that really grapples with the methods that must be used to bring about a thoroughly integrated society.

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RPW: Then that phase is - we can certainly see quite clearly the responsibilities that - to the white man - and obligations - now, what problems, responsibilities and obligations would you say the Negro would have in this relationship - in this third phase?

MLK: Well, I would think this would be the phase - or the responsibilities of the Negro in this phase, would be in the area of what Mahatma Gandhi used to refer to as constructive work, his constructive program, which is a program whereby the individuals work desperately to improve their own conditions and their own standards. I think in this phase, after the Negro emerges in and from the de-segregated society, then a great deal of time must be spent in improving standards which lag behind to a large extent because of segregation, discrimination and the legacy of slavery. But it seems to me that the Negro will have to engage in a sort of operation bootstrap in order to lift these standards. And I think by raising these lagging standards, it will make it much more - well, I would say much less difficult for him to move on into the integrated society.

RPW: Have you followed the controversy between Irving Howe and Ralph Ellison in dissent on a new leader?

MLK: No, I haven't.

RPW: It deals with this question of - say, a man like Ralph, who is outside the picket lines, being called up short by a white liberal saying, you don't belong as an art writer, you ought to be carrying on protest. Ralph's reply was, in short, you, Irving Howe, are

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another kind of Bilbo. You want to put me in my place that you have picked out for me, and not let me be the kind of writer I want to be. That's already the - I'm asking - an aspect of the third phase which is now -

MLK: Yes, I think so. I think that one has to recognize that this - (interruption) - I've forgotten where -

R FW: Well, I still have a question or two, and I think we had come to a point of pause there - two weeks ago, a prominent newspaper man said to me - a Southerner by birth - thank God for Dr. King - he said, he's our only hope. He was worrying about violence. Now, this is very often said by white people. Dr. Kenneth Clark has remarked, in print, that your appeal to many white people is because you lull them to some sense of security, and I hear too that there is some resistance - automatic and emotional resistance on the part of Negroes because they feel that your leadership has somehow given a not - quotes - seal-out, but a sense of a soft line, a rapprochement that flatters the white man's sense of security. Have you encountered this, and how do you think about it? How do you feel about these things, assuming they are true?

MLK: Well, I don't agree with him, naturally. I think first one must understand what I am talking about and what I'm trying to do when I say, love, and that the love ethic must be at the center of this struggle. I am certainly not talking about affection and emotion - I am not talking about what the Greek language would refer to as Eros or - I'm talking about something much deeper, and

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I think there's a misunderstanding -

RPW: How does this misunderstanding be cleared up? I know your writings and I've heard you speak, and things like that. But misunderstandings somehow remains among a large segment of Negroes and among a large segment of whites.

MLK: Well, I don't think it can be cleared up for those who refuse to look at the meaning of it. I've done it - I've said it in print over and over again -

RPW: Yes, you have - yes.

MLK: - but I do not think violence and hatred can solve this problem. I think they will end up creating many more social problems than they solve, and I'm thinking of a very strong love. I'm thinking of love and action, and not something where you say, love your enemies and just leave it at that, but you love your enemies to the point that you're willing to sit in at a lunch counter in order to help them find themselves. You're willing to go to jail - and I don't think anybody could consider this cowardice or even a weak approach. So I think that many of these arguments come from those who have gotten so caught up in bitterness that they cannot see the deep moral issues involved -

RPW: Or the white man causing complacency - refuse to understand it.

MLK: Yes, I think so. I think it's both.

RPW: Let me shove ahead, since we are so pressed, and I have - don't laugh - speaking of bitterness and the kinds of bitterness - let's take the reconstructionists after the Civil War, as a tragic

showing-up of all the kinds of bitterness and unresolved problems - Muirdahl big word, gives what he considers a sketch or what would have been a reasonable reconstruction as you no doubt recall. The first item that he puts on his list would have been compensation to slaveholders by the federal government for the emancipated slaves. Second, expropriation of land held by Southern planters with payment. Then the selling of land to both Negroes and whites who were landless a long term basis and other factors. How do you emotionally respond to this question of paying the Southern slaveholder for the slaves emancipated by the Civil War - during the Civil War? Do you find any emotional resistance to that? How do you respond to that?

MLK: Well, I don't find too much emotional resistance to it. I do feel that the reconstruction period was a tragic period at points because many of the social problems we face today are here because this period was not used properly. It wasn't planned properly, and the future wasn't looked at properly in dealing with the present situations then. I don't know if this would have been a way of solving the problem, but I don't have any emotional resistance to the idea, if - if there was as much concern about seeing that the landless slaves and the penniless slaves had some kind of compensation and something to start with. Maybe this plan would have worked all right because it would have given both a sense of dignity and maybe the bitterness that we now face - still face at many points, wouldn't be there because the start would have been a little better.

RPW: That, undoubtedly, is what Muirhead was driving at - this hypothetical situation. But I have discovered - this question - giving Muirhead, who is an objective foreign commentator - this passage sometimes evokes very violent responses from Negroes who are thoroughly acquainted with history - you know - people of cultivation and decent feelings. But on the first few counts there, would have violent emotional responses.

MLK: Yes. Well, mine is the same way - I'm not saying that I agree that this was a way to solve the problem. But I do feel that after 244 years of slavery, certain patterns had developed in the nation and certain attitudes had developed in the minds of people all over the nation, that everybody had to take some of the responsibility for this committee. And consequently, in solving the problem it seems to me maybe some things would have had to be done which may not have represented everything that we would want to see. But it may have saved us many of the bitter moments that we have now.

RPW: You wouldn't have felt, then, that this somehow would have been a ~~knifing~~ betrayal of your dignity as a Negro human being, to have had this compensation paid - this is all hypothetical, of course - you would not have emotionally responded in that way?

MLK: Well, I would think that the whole system - my revolt or my emotional response is so much over the tragedy of the whole system of slavery, that I wouldn't revolt against that as much as over the fact that slavery existed for all of these years, you see.

RPW: Sure - sure - that question is a question of -

MLK: Yes - yes. But I don't absolutely feel that this was a way to solve the problem. But yet I don't have this strong emotional feeling of bitterness when I hear it suggested, because we had accumulated a social problem which had to be grappled with, and this was merely a suggestion as one of the way that it may have been dealt with and may have saved us some of the problem now. Whether it would have, we don't know.

RPW: We don't know. It's hypothetical. But it would have been possible to implement it - given a war psychology in '65 in the North, is another question.

MLK: Is another - that's right - exactly.

RPW: Let me try something else - another general question. All revolutions, as far as I know in the past, have had the tendency, even the expressed tendency, to move toward a centralized leadership, to move toward a man that has both power and symbolic function. Now, you are stuck, yourself, in a very peculiar role by a series of things - personal qualities and God knows what else, you know - but still there is no - this revolution, if you can call it one - is not following that pattern - though we see a tendency to focus on single leadership. Can a revolution survive without this symbolic focus - even without a little focus on the single leadership?

MLK: I think so.

RPW: You see the question - I mean - I'm not phrasing it well, but you get what I'm driving at.

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MLK: Yes, I think I do. I think a revolution can survive without this single centralized leadership, but I do think there must be centralized leadership in the sense that, - say in our struggle, all of the leaders coordinate their efforts, cooperate, and at least evince a degree of unity. Now, I think if we say if all of the major leaders in the struggle were at war with each other, then I think it would be very difficult to make this social revolution the kind of powerful revolution that it has proved to be. But the fact is that we have had on the whole a unified leadership, although it hasn't been just one person. And I think there can be a collective leadership. Maybe some symbolize the struggle a little more than others, but I think it's absolutely necessary for the leadership to be united in order to make the revolution effective.

RPW: There 's a problem that many people now talk about, from now on as more and more activity occurs in big centers like Harlem and Detroit and Chicago - desperate wondering as to whether any leadership now visible or imaginable can control the random explosion that might come at any time - the random violence. It's being stored up and we know it's stored up. Is that the big central problem you all are facing now?

MLK: Well, I think it's a real problem, and I think the only answer to this problem is the degree to which a nation is able to go - I should say, the speed in which we move toward the solution

of the problem. The more progress we have in race relations, and the more we move toward the goal of an integrated society, the more we lift the hopes, so to speak, of the masses of people. And it seems to me that this will lessen the possibility of sporadic violence. On the other hand, if we get set-backs, and if something happens where the civil rights bill is watered down, for instance, if the Negro feels that he can do nothing but move from one ghetto to another and one slum to another - the despair and the disappointment would be so great that it will be very difficult to keep the struggle disciplined and non-violent. So I think it will depend on the rate of progress and the speed and a recognition on the part of the white leadership of the need to go on and get this problem solved and solved in a hurry, and the need for massive action programs to do it.

RPW: Let me read a quotation from Mr. _____ about the schools and the boycotts. I would rather see it - the public school system - destroyed than not conform to - then another quote - to his time table of integration - and, quoting - may be in its right course anyway - the public school system.

MLK: Maybe it's - I didn't get the last -

RPW: Maybe the public school system has run its course anyway - over - he'd rather see it destroyed than not conform to his prescribed time table.

MLK: And you're asking whether I -

RPW: How do you respond to that statement?

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MLK: Well, I don't think the public school system has run its course - far from it. And I don't think that we should think in terms of the destruction of the system. I tend to feel that we can rectify the system by constantly bringing this issue to the forefront of the conscience of the nation of our communities. I think the school board idea is a very good one - I think it's one of the creative ways to dramatize an intolerable condition. But I wouldn't go to the point of saying that I would like to see the school system destroyed. I think what he is probably getting at is that as long as you have inferior and segregated school systems, you aren't getting a quality education for anybody, whether it's Negro or white. I agree with the Supreme Court at this point, that separate facilities are inherently unequal, and somehow the segregated gets a false sense of inferiority because of these very separate facilities, so that - I would say that the real need is to fight hard to get the system rectified and not to destroy the public school.

RPW: Let's take a case like this - I don't at all say this with any intent, you see - it's just a question of the kind of problem - let's take Washington, D.C., or New York City if things go as they're now going - the concentration of Negro population in the cities - and almost - the vast majority of public school students then being Negroes - how can you integrate, say, Washington, D.C., if you have 95 percent or ninety percent of the school children in the public schools are Negro. Where do you get

the whites to integrate them with?

MLK: Well, you have two problems there. One is the fact that this problem will never be ultimately solved until the housing problem is solved. As long as that is residential segregation and as long as the whites in the central city run to the suburbs and leave these core areas, you do have a real problem. Now, the only way that it can be dealt with in the transition while we are trying to solve the problem of housing discrimination through various means, is to transfer students from one district to another - the bussing system.

RPW: Suppose they don't have it - suppose Washington, D.C. as a total unit has only, say, 85 percent of its Negro students in the eighth grade or the twelfth grade or whatever it should be - where do you get the white students to bus in? Can you go to Virginia or West Virginia to get them?

MLK: Well, in a case like that, you do have a real problem. I think it's - I guess a Washington situation is almost unique, because many of these people live in Virginia and Maryland. They're even in other states. And that makes the problem even more difficult.

RPW: What about New York, where it's moving - the problem is becoming that way in New York.

MLK: Yes, but on the whole people are still in New York City - I mean, they're - sometimes they're in, say, Westchester County - they may be in the Queens - some area of the Queens - but still, I could see it working a little better in a situation like that.

RPW: A little better. But the problem is, we are dealing with - as a principle - you can see situations where insoluble transfer - then what do you do?

MLK: Well, I agree that the problem will not be ultimately solved if there are these insoluble situations where we have to - we have to see that problem solved and the run of history when we get housing integration on a broad level. And I think that this is an area where we must work as hard, you know, to solve the problem of residential segregation, ~~xxx~~ as we do to integrate the schools. However, wherever schools can be integrated through the bussing method, and where it won't be just a terrible inconvenience, I think it ought to be done. Because I think the inconveniences of a segregated education are much greater than the inconveniences of bussing students so that they can get an integrated, quality education.

RPW: Are you referring to white and Negro students both - of inconvenience - both are being shortchanged, as it were?

MLK: That's right - oh, yes - yes - exactly.

RPW: It's not just the Negro being given a chance to be with a white child or going to a better school, it's a question of the white child's own relationship to himself and to Negroes too?

MLK: That's right. In other words, my - I feel that when a white child goes to school only with white children, unconsciously that child grows up in many instances devoid of a world perspective. There is an unconscious provincialism, and it can develop into an

unconscious superiority complex, just as the Negro develops an unconscious inferiority, and it seems to me that one must - that our society must come to see that this whole question of integration is not merely a matter of quantity, have the same this and that in terms of a building or a desk or this - but it's a matter of quality. If I can't communicate with a man, I'm not equal to him. It's not only a matter of mathematics, it's a matter of psychology and philosophy.

RPW: Well, he's not equal to you either if he can't communicate with you.

MLK: Exactly. It's the same thing.

RPW: It cuts both ways.

MLK: It cuts both ways - exactly.

RPW: Let me ask a question that lies behind all this I think - at least for some people it lies behind it. DuBoise many years ago spoke about this - wrote about this - the split, or the possible split in the Negro psyche - the Negro pulls on one hand toward the mystique of an African heritage or at least the special Negro cultural heritage here - or to the mystique of blackness, - to all of this. On the other hand, he pulls toward Western European,

Christian, American cultural heritage. Would the penalty there, or the price, or what, of being absorbed away from the other cultural heritage - even having the blood integrity lost entirely is possible. Is there a sense of some betrayal, somehow, hidden in here. Is this a problem that has presented itself to you as a real problem, as a real issue, or not?

MLK: Well, it's a real issue, and I think that it has made for a good deal of frustration in the Negro community, and people have tried to solve it through various methods. One has been to try to reject psychologically the - anything that reminds you of your heritage - you know. And this is particularly true of the Negro middle class - the desire to reject anything that reminds you of Africa or anything that really anything that reminds you of the masses of Negroes. And then trying to identify with the white majority, the white middle class. And so often what happens is that this individual finds himself caught out in the middle with no cultural roots because he's rejected by so many of the white middle class and he is out here, right in the middle, with no cultural roots, and he ends up as E. Franklin Fraser says in a book unconsciously hating himself and he tries to compensate for this through conspicuous consumption. So there is no doubt about the fact that this has been a problem, but I don't think it has to be. I think one can live in American society with a certain cultural heritage, whether it's an African heritage, or other European - what have you - and still absorb a great deal of this culture. There's always cultural assimilation. This is not an unusual thing. It's a very natural thing. And I think that we've got to come to see this. The Negro is an American. We know nothing about Africa, although our roots are there in terms of our ^{forebears.} ~~ancestors~~. But I mean as far as the average Negro today, he knows nothing about Africa. I think he's got to face the fact that he is an American,

his culture is basically American, and one becomes adjusted to this when he realizes what he is. He's got to know what he is. Our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America.

RPW: Some anthropologists and sociologists say that the American Negro is more like the old American, the old in England, or the old Southerner, like any other kind of American. Does this make sense to you?

MLK: I think so. I think that it's probably quite correct.

RPW: Did you read Faulkner's "Intruder in the Dust" - that novel - fifteen years ago?

MLK: No, I didn't. I know of the novel very well, but I didn't read it.

RPW: He has a passage there where he talks of somehow in a very cryptic way, of a homogeneity in the South involving both the Southern white man and the Southern Negro, as having some homogeneity against - some rapport against an outside order of society.

MLK: I'm not sure I understand what you mean.

RPW: Well, nobody is quite sure what he means. Somehow - let's put the question another way. A young lady at Howard, who is a very brilliant girl, and stands high in the law school and has been on picket lines and in jails too - she's given to a lot of things - said to me a few months ago, she had great hope for settlement in the South because of a common history between the white man and the Negro. She said, being on the land over this period of time has given some human recognition, even

the possibility of a rapprochement understanding in the end. And she said, I'm frightened by Harlem or Detroit - I don't see the possibility of the human communication. She was raised on a farm in Virginia, she said - she didn't ~~xxx~~ say involved here. Now, she is not in a sense soft, you see - she's been in jail, you see. Does this make any sense?

MLK: Well, I think there may be some truth here. I feel, for instance, that in the South you have a sort of a contact between Negroes and whites, ~~xxx~~ an individual contact, that you don't have in the North, for instance. Now, this now is mainly a paternalistic thing, you know, it's a law of servantry -

RFW: Or a billy club -

MLK: Yes -

(end of tape)