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# A Dream Becoming Reality: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Calling to Transform America

Daniel P. Golden, *University of Richmond*



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## A DREAM BECOMING REALITY: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.'S CALLING TO TRANSFORM AMERICA

DANIEL P. GOLDEN

Growing up in Atlanta, Georgia, Martin Luther King, Jr., was already exposed to social segregation daily, but it was not until one life changing day where he finally realized the central issue that would permeate his life. Since a very young age, King had a white playmate with whom he was very close. He did not live in their neighborhood, but his father owned a store across the street from the King's house. They played together almost every day, often creating their own games and going on fun adventures. When it came time for the boys to head to grade school, they both had to attend separate schools. King naturally believed that they would still stay friends considering how convenient

and passionate the friendship was, but the boy's father later insisted that the boys could no longer play together.

Questioning why this had to be the case, King received a life-changing response. His parents decided to sit him down and have a long conversation over dinner. They explained to young Martin how the country was "divided" at the time, demonstrating to King for the first the profound impact of race relations in America.

This conversation marked the first "transformation" that King went through in his life, an intellectual transformation that changed his perception of society. This type of transformation is one that changes a person's fundamental insights about the world (Allison & Goethals, 2017), and King evidently saw a new spectrum of the universe that his younger self never realized. It was at this young age that he had his first "calling", and he probably did not even realize it at the time. When he felt the agony of losing his closest friend, he felt a purpose that he had to fulfill to prevent this hatred and inequality from spreading. The hero's journey is one that almost all real life and fictional heroes experience in some way or another. The journey explores how and why a hero transforms into a new person, and the specific steps they must take to do so. The process of the hero's journey characterizes the manner that King not only changed himself, but also found it in himself to change the world.

#### THE HERO'S JOURNEY: KING'S DEPARTURE

King followed the steps of a hero's journey as described by comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949). The journey begins with a departure, which King experiences at a very early age. He initially departs on this journey through a series of "callings" that prove to himself that he is the one that needs to make a social movement occur. These callings will eventually send him on a quest to transform himself into a better person, and also inspire others to transform themselves into more sympathetic, inclusive individuals.

## MLK and His “Calling”

Callings correlate with heroism in three ways: transcendent summoning, using good selfishness to discover a purpose, and finally pro-social greater good (Dik et al., 2017). King’s young experience of losing a friend triggered a calling in him, as it was the first time Martin was exposed to the real world. He did not like what he saw. This calling was his first signal that he should make a change, even if he was too young to fully comprehend that concept at the time.

King was born with a bright conscience, and he was raised in a very religious household. His dad was a Christian pastor who had never accepted racial segregation. King adapted to that mentality, witnessing his father boycott businesses, walk out of stores for being treated as a “lesser”, and verbally retaliate against people who talked down to him because of his race. A big part of Campbell’s hero journey is the presence of a mentor (Allison & Smith, 2015). In King Junior’s life, his mentor was his father, as he used his father’s values as motivation in pursuing goals that his father admired. Growing up in the midst of the Ku Klux Klan’s reign, King already knew not to accept the dominance of white supremacist groups; he was “called” to oppose them and end the racial injustice that had spread so deeply across the south. He had a “transcendent summoning” (Dik et al., 2017) to non-violently fight back against violent acts of racism, and he saw a meaning and purpose behind what he was being called to do. He pursued his goals for the greater good, demonstrating his ability and willingness to act on a calling from a higher power.

## King’s Heroic Career Path

There may be a direct connection between the selection of career paths and the opportunities those paths give us to become heroes (Dik et al., 2017). King attended Morehouse College at the age of 15, as he skipped two grades in high school. However, after studying hard for several years there, he decided to follow his dad’s footsteps and enter into the ministry. He believed that becoming a minister would best help him preach social justice and serve humanity. This spiritual transformation was one that significantly helped

him achieve his goals. When he was younger he had gone to church just to follow his siblings and family, not recognizing the importance of religion and often doubting certain biblical claims and stories. Now he was finally appreciating the stories behind the eulogies and wanted to preach them. This substantial conversion in his beliefs shows the impact that his spiritual transformation had on his ideological beliefs. His religious transformation also placed him in a great position to gain the public speaking skills, confidence, and spirituality that he would need to place him on the heroic path of a successful civil rights activist. If it were not for his calling to be a minister, he would not have had the essential tools, platform, and courage to speak up about the social, racial, and economic injustices that he so desperately wanted to change.

This being the case, King's calling enabled him to acquire Zimbardo's (2007) four traits of heroism to perfection. These traits include performing her heroic actions voluntarily; taking a great risk; pursuing the greater good of society; and doing his heroic work selflessly. Outside factors such as his father's career path impacted King's choice to become a minister, yet he made a choice to become a minister completely voluntarily. The choice to become a minister and go down the civil rights activist path put him at great risk socially. He risked hate and retaliation from white supremacists, and he even endured several direct physical attacks. King did his heroic work for the greater good of our nation, striving to create a unified culture and augmenting the well-being of society (Efthimiou, Allison, & Franco, 2018). Also, he did not anticipate any social gain from this calling, as he selflessly placed himself in great danger both socially and physically.

#### Encounter with "Villainy" and Underdog Status

It is simply an understatement to say that King was an underdog, as nobody expected him to accomplish his ambitious goal of achieving racial equality. Operating in an era in which Jim Crow laws were prevalent in the South, it was considered extremely normal to discriminate in many areas of daily life. The reason we love King's story is not only because of its profound impact on today's society and culture, but also because we are naturally drawn to underdog tales. King is one of the most striking underdog stories in American

history. He was just one guy battling an entire society of racist, narrow-minded discreditors.

We can use as an example King's first direct confrontation with villainy involving the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. In this case, blacks were consistently being relegated to the back of public buses. A few outliers like Rosa Parks objected to such cruelty and inequality, and their defiant actions led to imprisonment. Recognizing the Parks incident as a significant social issue, King stood up to the big bus industry by leading a massive bus boycott for all African Americans in Montgomery. This defiance represented King's moral transformation; he had always supported civil rights but now he took that moral code and elevated it by taking direct action. This was the first time he used his beliefs to take initiative against the evil culture of the South, and it was huge step for both him personally and for society more generally. People loved the underdog element of his fight. The progressives in American admired King for standing up to unjust societal laws and norm, and they wanted King to "balance the scales of justice", which is one of the main reasons why people tend to root for underdogs (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Michniewicz, 2017).

### Initiation and New Transformations

King did not succeed right away; he had to endure many trials and tribulations, experimenting with different tactics and methods of social activism (Campbell, 1949). The Albany Movement of 1961 is one prime example of how King tried different methods of civil disobedience, some of which did not succeed as he had planned. The Freedom Riders rebelled against bus segregation, as the justice systems were simply dismissing cases that deemed transportation segregation as unconstitutional. When King came into town, he protested with the Riders and found himself thrown in jail several times. The movement stalled, and King realized the movement wasn't working as planned. A central element of Campbell's (1949) hero monomyth involves the hero trying out specific ideas and then making adjustments when they are not working. This is an example of learning from a failed trial because King used this experience to better prepare himself for future movements.

## Suffering

Suffering is unpleasant yet offers opportunities to fuel human growth (Allison & Setterberg, 2016). Suffering is often a major turning point in helping people become stronger individuals. There are six benefits from suffering that scholars have identified (Allison and Setterberg, 2016). Martin Luther King, Jr., saw great suffering as a result of discriminatory practices being implemented every hour of every day. Suffering incited a motivational transformation within King, fueling his desire combat the evil that encompassed the South. One benefit of suffering is the idea of redemption, as pain and suffering allow for opportunities for people and society to redeem themselves. Suffering also signifies a crossover point in life, which for King was the point at which he initiated a large social movement. His heart was always in the right place, and he began to gain a truly heroic status when he stood up to unjust social norms. Stimulating compassion, promoting social union, and encouraging humanity were additional benefits to suffering that King realized were largely relevant. He wanted big societal changes to occur not only for the benefit of African-Americans but also for whites to help them find compassion in their hearts that had been missing for centuries.

## The Return and Transformation of Society

The hero's journey began with King transforming himself in personal ways. The journey ends with the hero returning home yet seeing it in a whole different way. Dr. King underwent a self-transformation than enabled him to see the world in a new light, thereby enabling him to change everyone else so that they could also envision a much better world with racial equality. King's newly transformed self was instrumental in helping others transform into better people.

## “I Have a Dream” Transformation

It was early morning, about 8 AM when the trains started dropping into the Washington Union station. Slowly but surely, buses and trains from across the country started showing up with people, both black and white, filing

in front of the Lincoln Memorial on the morning of the historic ‘March on Washington’. One hundred years after profound hero Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation to end slavery and free African Americans, there was still racial segregation as Jim Crow laws ensured that blacks were oppressed and equipped with an “inferior” set of rights. After being discussed for years, Civil Rights activists finally made a large, non-violent rally happen and planned to make a statement about how this country had not lived up to its word of being the “land of the free”. There were several speakers that day, each getting ready to collaboratively participate in one of the biggest civil rights movements in history. Martin Luther King, Jr., was backstage, still talking with other march heads and making last minute changes to the speech he was about to deliver. Being one of the most charismatic speakers in history, one wouldn’t think King would be nervous at all, but this was the first time he had spoken to a crowd this immensely large, and on national TV, with the future of the United States in his hands. King knew what he was getting himself into. He was fully aware that what he was about to deliver to the nation was going to cause extreme pushback and tension, but he simply didn’t care. As with all heroes, he knew he had to do what must be done.

That day, about 250,000 people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial, and most of them could barely see the podium. King was not giving the speech to transform himself; that had already been done. He was giving it so he could both spiritually and morally enlighten the audience in ways they hadn’t experienced before. He was taking everything he had learned and spreading the word to all the white and black people in America, hoping that they would finally see his point, namely, that the current racial structure of the country was unjust and inhumane. King and others had drawn all these people to Washington by setting a common goal. They weren’t just unifying the group of people present in Washington; they were also uniting the already “divided” country as a whole, thus impacting the U.S in the largest way possible. “I have a dream” -- the iconic words you hear every January, in every history class, and in every moral lesson, are a brief, but powerful summation of an extraordinarily heroic legacy.

According to Allison and Goethals (2017), the social influence taxonomy of heroes would classify King’s heroism under the category of a transforming hero, who is an individual that transforms entire societies. King used several speeches and protests in order to make a statement and initiate a lasting influence. The

Selma Marches are a perfect example of a protest he initiated to stop the government from violating black's constitutional rights. Bringing together many African Americans, he non-violently fought to make equality reign in the South. With the help of many others, including the SCLC, King and his team started a substantial movement that would eventually transform the nation into one with fair voting rights, less repression, and a new sense of empowerment and identity.

Was King a Martyr?

King served the people and our nation, clearly not caring about the risks and dangers in which he placed himself. Does this suggest that King is a martyr? A martyr makes supreme self-sacrifice and is someone who willingly takes physical risk and social risk for the greater good (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). King was indeed a martyr. In momentous events such as the Albany movement of 1961 and the "Bloody Sunday" strike for voting rights in 1965, he publicly stated that he would take any punishment the police would give him to simply make a point.

His tragic death indicated why he was not only a martyr, but both a physical and emotional hero. In 1968, a group of black Memphis sanitation workers felt unjustly treated, as the white workers were consistently getting better working conditions and pay. Several black workers had tragically died as a result, leaving survivors in dismay. They staged a rally and strike, and King came to fight for their cause, but before he could get there his plane was delayed by a bomb threat. He gave what would turn out to be his final speech, "I've been to the Mountaintop", in which he stated: "I would like to live a long life, longevity has its place. But I'm not worried about that now." This line illustrates his selflessness, showing that he does not know what the future has in store for him, but it does not matter because he has done his job. He only cares about the future of the African American community, and the country as a whole.

"I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we the people will reach the promised land!" Again, these words vividly display his character as a selfless martyr and reveal his transformation into a new man. King had seen the Promised Land, meaning he had made the

necessary changes needed to see the world in a new way, and he hoped everyone else could see it that way and would continue to carry the message if anything happened to him.

### King's Death and Impact

King arrived in Memphis, Tennessee to help with a protest regarding black sanitation workers. He stayed in a hotel that he had consistently visited during his visits to Memphis, so it had become publicly known where he was, making him a relatively easy target. On April 4, 1968, King was assassinated by James Earl Ray, with the bullet killing him instantly. A great hero was taken from us in the worst way possible. His premature death raises a curious question: Did his dying at such a young age elevate his legacy? In death was he more of a hero than in life?

Allison, Eylon, and their colleagues have argued that the general public tends to exaggerate the heroic features of a human being after they pass away (Allison & Eylon, 2005; Allison et al., 2009; Eylon & Allison, 2005). This "death positivity bias" holds especially true when people die young, as a premature death signifies a tremendous amount of lost potential. In Dr. King's case, his death was a result of massive resistance to his message of racial equality, as well as his resilience and perseverance to achieve his overarching goal. King knew the risk he was taking when he decided to lead a volatile and divisive social movement. This essentially makes him both a physical and emotional hero, a remarkable individual who put himself at physical risk and under social scrutiny. It is reasonable to elevate his heroism to a greater level because he died for his cause, a sacrifice that the vast majority of us are not willing to make.

### Adultery Investigations

Frightened that King was going to rip through social barriers and make significant changes, the FBI investigated King's personal life to find some dirt on him that could blemish his lofty reputation and therefore dethrone his heroic status. Not much was found initially, but eventually the FBI discovered evidence that proved that King had several mistresses with whom he had been cheating on his spouse. Being a minister, having extramarital affairs ran counter to his values, and therefore the FBI could make King out to be a hypocrite for preaching morals that he himself did not follow.

Taxonomies of heroes have been proposed with goal of identifying important hero subtypes (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017; Ritchie, Igou, Kinsella, 2017). We know that King was a transformational hero for his significant contributions in promoting racial equality; however, there are other subtypes that could also describe King. A transposed hero, for example, is a hero who performs some transgression that causes their reputation to become tarnished and destroys their heroic status (Allison & Goethals, 2017). If King were indeed having extra-marital affairs, does it make him a transposed hero? Does it make him make his contributions any less heroic in nature? These questions are left in the eye of the beholder, raising the interesting question of whether it is valid for King to be perceived as a villain. Can everything he did in promoting civil rights be stripped because of an unrelated mistake? Although his controversy can be viewed as a major blemish on his heroic stature, others just see it as a setback he faced on his hero's journey.

#### CONCLUSION

The hero's journey is a roller coaster ride that is suited for some, but too difficult for many others. Whether heroes transform themselves, and whether they transform other individuals, are two questions that are resolved by the hero's willingness and ability to travel the arduous hero's journey. To transform into a hero, people must be able to handle a multitude of snares and dangers that come their way along the journey. King was ready for those obstacles at every turn; he took every challenge and looked it straight in the eye, not frightened of any threat that confronted him.

King evidently transformed his setting, moving around to several different cities to attend to the different issues. He transformed himself by learning from his failures, and he changed society through his drive to accomplish his goal of ending racial discrimination. These transformations are critical, but aren't the defining factors of his heroism. Heroic status is not necessarily something you can achieve. King is naturally looked at as a hero by many based on how he is portrayed in the media and especially based on his transformative social impact. However, it is always up to the individual perceiving the hero to evaluate whether or not someone is heroic. We all have different views and standard

for evaluating heroism, but we can all agree the people who attain that highest level are the glue that is keeping this world together.

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