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“Martin Luther King, Jr. Eulogy”

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ABSTRACT

George A. Roeper laments the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and praises the honorable work that King did in his lifetime.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. EULOGY

by George A. Roeper

Twice it happened that the news of a national tragedy reached me when I was out of the country. The first time I was in Moscow when President Kennedy was assassinated. The second time I was on a little island in Mexico when I heard by phone that Martin Luther King was killed. Both times being cut off from home, isolated in a foreign country and unable to get further information, made my wife and myself feel all the more helpless at a moment when we want to give help to those hardest hit by this tragedy. We felt ashamed to be in a foreign country where a threatening finger is pointed at us Americans, humiliating our people as a country of murderers and killers.

Hearing about these tragedies in a foreign country has special significance. Since I would not listen to news, see no TV, not read a paper, all I could do was to think about the tragedy itself as a fact. I want to tell you about my thoughts.

Martin Luther King was a truly great man. Few people, if anybody at all, have at so young an age received the Nobel Peace Prize: the highest recognition a man can be given for his efforts for peace. To strive for peace was especially difficult for Martin Luther King who saw the need to arouse the American Negro to stand up and ask for justice, for equality, for voting rights, human rights and civil rights. He asked them to fight for their rights yet without violence, to demonstrate vehemently and with passion, yet do it peacefully. [To] arouse the people and yet calm them takes a man of unusual character, will power, intelligence and magnificent leadership. It is all the more a tragedy that a man striving all his life for non-violence had to be the victim of violence. He said just a few days before his death, "I'm committed to non-violence absolutely. I'm just not going to kill anybody, whether it's in Vietnam or here. I'm not going to burn down any buildings". These are simple categorical statements. Few people have the courage to say that and live by it. Most people do not -- those who still believe in shooting, killing and violence. He said again shortly before his death: if his demonstrations succeed, non-violence will once again be the dominant instrument for social change!

Martin Luther King wanted people, white and black, to become friends with each other. He said that the demonstrations against poverty will have Negro and white participation and they will seek to benefit the poor of both races. He wanted to help the white poor just as much.

Martin Luther King did not believe in riots and did not support them. He said: "We are trying to find an alternative that will force people to confront issues without destroying life or property". And he said: "We need this movement. We need it to bring a new kind of togetherness between blacks and whites. We need it to bring allies together and to bring the coalition of conscience together". Martin Luther King was and is the conscience of the people, of all of us and of the whole nation.

At a moment when we are surrounded by violence in Vietnam, by violent riots, Martin Luther King had the courage to say to the enraged Negro, to our nation, to the whole world: "I plan to stand by non-violence because I have found it to be a philosophy of life that regulates not only my dealings in the struggle for racial justice but also my dealings with people, with my own self. I will still be faithful to non-violence".

Martin Luther King was aware that he was walking on thin ice, that his ideal of non-violence might not carry, might not eliminate violence. Yet, he felt driven to present the problems of the poor through non-violent demonstrations at the seat of the government of the wealthiest nation in the history of mankind. If that power refuses to acknowledge its debt to the poor, it will have failed to live up to its promise to insure "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" to its citizens. He said: "If this society fails, I fear that we will learn very shortly that racism is a sickness unto death".

Martin Luther King stands in line with Gandhi who led his nation against England to independence without violence. Gandhi had the same fate: he also got killed. There is still so much bad in man that he cannot stand the good in people.

Again only a few days before brutal violence felled Martin Luther King he spoke words of hope: "We have through massive non-violent action, an opportunity to avoid a national

disaster and create a new spirit of class and racial harmony. We can write another luminous moral chapter in American history. All of us are on trial in this troubled hour, but time still permits us to meet the future with a clear conscience”.

Many will say, King was a great leader of his race. No, he is a great leader of all of us, all Americans and all people in the world. His beliefs are our beliefs, his hopes are our hopes, his personality is a model for all of us. I hope this nation will give the tribute to Martin Luther King that is due him.

The New York Times

April 5th, 1968

‘A Drum Major for Justice’

Every now and then I guess we all think realistically about that day when we will be victimized with what is life’s final common denominator—that something we call death.

We all think about it and every now and then I think about my own death and I think about my own funeral. And I don’t think about it in a morbid sense. And every now and then I ask myself what it is that I would want said and I leave the word to you this morning.

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don’t want a long funeral.

And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy tell him not to talk too long.

And every now and then I wonder what I want him to say.

Tell him not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn’t important.

Tell him not to mention that I have 300 or 400 other awards—that isn't important. Tell him not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others.

I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right and to walk with them. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe the naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. And I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to, say that I was a drum major. Say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness.

And all of the other shallow things will not matter.

I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.

From a sermon delivered at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I would like you to rise and stand one minute in silence in memory to Martin Luther King Jr.