

Dr. King committed a ‘crime of passion’

The nation honors Dr. Martin Luther King today because Dr. King committed a crime. His was a crime of passion — or, more correctly, a crime of *having* passion.

That passion motivated him to battle a system of unjust segregation laws. It motivated him to assault the sensibilities of civic and church leaders. And, in the end, he was executed for committing these “crimes of passion.”

As in every crime, there must be motive, opportunity and intent, and Dr. King’s crime of having passion contained all three elements. He was motivated by a genuine, unadulterated brotherly love for his fellow human beings. He was motivated by a concern for the well-being of the poor and downtrodden. He was motivated by anger toward the simple unfairness, excruciating injustice and outright brutality that was visited upon African-Americans in the southern states.

King had an opportunity born of the suffering of others — those who had been lynched as Emmett Till had been, those who were beaten, firebombed or imprisoned for daring to register black voters, and those who were simply tired, as Rosa Parks was when she boarded that bus in Montgomery.

Dr. King’s opportunity to become the most reviled and revered man of the past century was galvanized by the bravery of a mother who allowed an open-casket funeral and enabled photos of the battered and water-logged body of her son, Emmett Till, to be distributed nationwide.

Four months later, Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus, and Dr. King subsequently led the 27-month boycott of the Montgomery bus system. It led to the downfall of segregation in public transportation, and eventually in other public facilities and housing.

He had the opportunity to write. It was during one of at least 30 incarcerations that Dr. King penned what is now characterized as one of the most important documents in American history, the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” He expressed deep disappointment in both the actions and the inaction of his detractors, but he was both constructive and instructive. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” he wrote. “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” He reiterated his stance on nonviolent protest and stated its purpose — to enforce basic constitutional rights.

Dr. King admitted his crime of having passion by calling himself a “creative extremist.” He was intent on promoting adherence to the moral code and American values stated in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. He insisted that local, provincial regulation would not interfere with “what is best in the American dream.”

Given his motives, opportunities and unshakeable intent, Dr. King certainly committed the crime of having passion. But, for us and for future generations, his passion for “certain inalienable rights,” for equality and for justice, will forever be celebrated on this special day. ■



**Commentary
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