

## Radical vein coursed through civil rights leader's messages

By Zack McMillin

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When he walked into the office of Michael Charles Leff for the first time, Frank Thomas found himself greeted by a poster of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"Something told me I was in the right place," Thomas said.

This was in 2004, shortly after Leff moved from Northwestern University in Chicago to Memphis to become chair of the University of Memphis' department of communications.

Leff had invited Thomas, the presiding pastor at Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church since 1999, to talk about the conventions of preaching in black churches.

"I told Leff, 'I can tell you about that,' " Thomas says. "We started working together and he taught me how to be a scholar."

Thus began a partnership between the 66-year-old Leff, a Jewish academic from California renowned for his study of rhetoric, and the 52-year-old Thomas, a black Christian preacher who grew up on Chicago's South Side.

Even as King's place among American icons and figures in history has grown, Thomas and Leff say mass culture's embrace of King has had another effect -- of sanitizing the slain civil rights leader's messages and reducing them into soothing sound bites meant to comfort rather than provoke.

King, assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968, would have turned 79 on Tuesday. To many in Memphis who study King's work, the messages he emphasized in the final year of his life remain vital today.

"He is represented as a national icon," says Leff, "when, in fact, he had a radical strain running through his thinking from the very beginning and it gets prominent toward the end. While he is very much a part of American society, he is also a sharp critic of it, and that critical edge I think is not developed at all in the popular imagination."

Leff will teach an undergraduate class this semester called American Eloquence, which will "attempt to recover King's legacy" and examine "the depth of his social criticism."

In two weeks, Thomas will defend a dissertation at the U of M that focuses on key speeches King gave in the final year of his life.

Thomas believes the oft-repeated line King provided five years before his death -- to not judge his four children by "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" -- has been distorted in the popular understanding of King. Thomas laments that the King who assailed America for possessing "a high-blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds" has been replaced by a moderate proponent of color-blind politics.

Thomas calls his dissertation a protest against that image, and a reminder that King's words remain relevant in 2008.

"What America does is discard the rhetoric of the last year of his life," Thomas says. "America wants to discard from its consciousness anything that suggests America is not a beaming light. What we've done is take the part of King that supports the myth we want to believe and our national myth needs.

"Look at those speeches. Here's King saying, 'That's a myth, y'all. It ain't real.'"

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Inside the classroom at Lindenwood Christian Church, Memphis Theological Seminary professor Paul Dekar is directing a group of graduate students back four decades.

The class, a collaboration between Leff's U of M rhetoric students and MTS divinity students, is digging into the landmark King anti-war speech now known as "Beyond Vietnam." It was delivered at Riverside Church in Manhattan on April 4, 1967 -- one year to the day before King was assassinated in Memphis.

"At this point, in 1967," Dekar is explaining, "overwhelmingly the people are with Bush."

The class erupts in knowing laughter at Dekar's error. He means President Lyndon Johnson, of course, and Dekar is trying to make the point that, in 1967, the war is not yet unpopular, the great marches have not yet occurred.

In the ensuing discussion, students will mirror Dekar's mistake, saying Iraq when they mean Vietnam (and vice versa) and Bush when they mean Johnson. It makes the point: King's critique of American priorities remains fresh four decades later.

King declared: "This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields, physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love.

A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

Earle Fisher, a former basketball player at LeMoyne-Owen College studying to be a minister, insists that what King calls the "giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism" continue to bend American foreign policy.

"I read this thing and I saw Iraq all over it," Fisher says. "I read this and said, 'Is he talking today?'" "

For Fisher, who was born in 1978, the class has been a revelation. Much of what he knew of King came from snippets of the 'I Have A Dream' speech, and, he says, "King seemed a little bit too nice to me."

Close readings of King made Fisher see new dimensions to King -- his optimism about the promise of America mixed with relentless questioning of its priorities and criticism of its flaws. He began to see the difference between notions of pacifism and the militant nonviolence King said he practiced.

"I had the prototypical romanticized view of Dr. King that he was very eloquent but noncontroversial," Fisher says. "I was always like, 'There has to be more to King than just 'I Have A Dream.'"

"I was on a search for a deeper King."

Four years after delivering "I Have a Dream," King had become a full-throated critic of an America he saw emphasizing values he deplored.

"The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit," King charged, "and if we ignore this sobering reality, we will find ourselves organizing 'Clergy and Laymen Concerned' committees for the next generation."

King predicts, "We will be marching ... and attending rallies without end, unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy."

As King was transferring his assault on desegregation to concerns about poverty, he saw Vietnam derailing the Great Society programs, especially those aimed at poverty.

"I watched this program broken and eviscerated," King said, "as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube."

For Thomas, it is not just mere coincidence that King was killed one year later, to the day. The pastor's dissertation asserts that the "Beyond Vietnam" speech created the atmosphere that led to

King's assassination. As Thomas sees it, King's decision to protest the escalation in Vietnam further inflamed those who already hated him, particularly J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI.

Without President Johnson's tacit protection, the FBI would intensify its surveillance of King and its propaganda war against him.

"King becomes the most hounded and harassed citizen in the history of the country," Thomas says.

Thomas believes King knew this would happen -- his advisers had warned him -- but made the speech, anyway.

"He abandons the pragmatic," Thomas says, "and gets out on the moral trajectory. The pragmatic and the moral are clashing, and he chooses to walk the moral road."

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The second landmark speech treated in Thomas' dissertation came five months later, in Atlanta, at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference on Aug. 16. Its title: "Where Do We Go From Here?"

"We caused the sagging walls of segregation to come tumbling down," King declares.

And yet: "In spite of a decade of significant progress, the problem is far from solved. The deep rumbling of discontent in our cities is indicative of the fact that the plant of freedom has grown only a bud and not a flower."

For Thomas, the speech shows that King heeded his staff's worries about the direct attacks on American values from "Beyond Vietnam." While the SCLC address remains a critique of an American structure that "will keep people in slavery for 244 years" and "exploit them and poor people generally economically," its rhetoric is less strident.

"So he goes from saying a revolution in values to a restructuring of American priorities, which is the staff's attempt to say, 'You out there and we got to pull you back,' " Thomas says. "He tries to pull back, but he can't. The language shifts, but he's not really pulling back."

For the rest of his life, King's speeches and writings will focus heavily on the economic components of inequality.

The SCLC will spend most of its time trying to knit together all the poor of America -- not just black people -- for a march on Washington in 1968 they will call the Poor People's Campaign.

King's rhetoric has shifted from legalistic appeals to a challenge of economic structures: "If our nation can spend \$35 billion a year to fight an unjust, evil war in Vietnam and \$20 billion to put a man on the moon, it can spend billions of dollars to put God's children on their own two feet right here on earth."

King roots the social critique in familiar themes: nonviolence, agape love and Christ-centered values. He stresses the futility of riots. He calls on black people to "stand up amid a system that oppresses us and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values."

But "Where Do We Go From Here" represents a significant pivot, according to Leff of the U of M.

"In that speech and all of his later discourse, this issue of freedom and equality is connected to economic problems," Leff says. "Whereas you look at 'I Have A Dream' or 'Letter From A Birmingham Jail,' the economic side is either not there or very much marginalized.

"He shifts gears from talking about segregation as a political, legal issue to talking about inequality having this economic dimension to it that is crucial."

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In the final three weeks of his life, King gave two speeches in Memphis.

It is the "Mountaintop" speech, given on April 3, 1968, the night before his assassination, that inevitably draws the most attention -- in large part because the 39-year-old King appears to presage his own murder.

His first Memphis speech that year, on March 18, is oft-ignored, but in many ways provides a more powerful message in support of the sanitation workers strike and in condemnation of those opposed to their struggle.

Michael Honey, a history professor at Washington State University who lived in Memphis in the '70s, devotes an entire chapter to the speech in "Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign."

"In his inimitable way," Honey writes, "King combined scriptural teachings and the black Social Gospel with a direct political attack on the American power structure. He politicized issues of wealth and poverty that ministers usually left at the level of generalities."

In Memphis, in the sanitation workers, King recognized in their fight with an obstinate mayor, Henry Loeb, the larger issues of economic and social justice.

"You're commanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor," King told a Mason Temple crowd police estimated at 9,000 but movement organizers figured at 15,000.

"The person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician," King said. "All labor has dignity."

King declared it "a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages," and made it clear that their cause started the movement down a new path.

"With Selma and the voting rights bill, one era of our struggle came to a close and a new era came into being," King said. "Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality."

He raised their cause from skirmishes over union recognition and dues checkoffs to issues as important as any the movement had confronted.

"Do you know that most poor people in our country are working every day? They are making wages so low they cannot begin to function in the mainstream of economic life of our nation," King says in words that could be lifted and applied to living wage movements 40 years later.

And he grounded the speech, once again, in the Christian gospel, comparing the sanitation workers to the beggar Lazarus and the power structure shunning them to Dives, the rich man who ignored Lazarus.

"Dives finally went to Hell because he wanted to be a conscientious objector in the war against poverty," King says. "And I come here to say that America is going to Hell, if we don't use her wealth."

For the Rev. Kenneth T. Whalum Jr., the April 3 "Mountaintop" speech also contains overlooked elements that remain relevant for the black community.

"The only thing we ever hear is, 'I may not get there with you,' " says Whalum, the senior pastor at New Olivet Baptist Church. "But he said a whole truckload of things."

In a series of podcasts for his Keeping It Real Ministries, Whalum urges other pastors to hear what King was saying about black economic empowerment.

"Dr. King said some other very important stuff before he got to the end of the mountaintop," Whalum says. "He laid out an agenda for us to follow."

Whalum considers black economic empowerment the "new Civil Rights Movement," and New Olivet has long sponsored what it calls Bust A Move Mondays, where the church patronizes a black-owned business.

"Do everything you can to make sure the black community attains a level of economic empowerment," Whalum says, "so we can create wealth and maintain wealth and pass it down from generation to generation."

But King was also continuing to connect the cause of the striking sanitation workers with the Poor People's Campaign.

"The issue is injustice," he said. "The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers."

As he once "supbneaed" the conscience of America to defeat Jim Crow and segregation, King tries to draft those with means into a new cause: "Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness," he says.

In his invocation of the Good Samaritan this "man of another race" who stops on the dangerous Jericho Road to help a suffering stranger -- King connects one of Jesus' most popular parables to the strike.

"The question is not, 'If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?' " King says. "The question is, 'If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?'"

From there, King makes the transition into the more famous closing of the speech, where he seems to ponder his own death.

"I've seen the promised land," King thundered. "I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"

In his dissertation, Thomas imagines King being less concerned about death than he is with directing listeners to keep moving toward the promised land -- to continue comforting those less fortunate souls assaulted along life's perilous roads.

"King is looking for witnesses to get involved in the work," Thomas says. "He wants you to get involved and make social change."

Read closely, Thomas urges, and remember that King was intent on beginning a new phase of the movement, one that focused on the poor of all races and challenged those American priorities King considered anti-Christian materialism, militarism, inequality, greed, hate, racism.

"The man is asking me the question, 'Am I going to do anything?'" Thomas says. "I close the dissertation with that: I am going to do something."

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It's all there, Thomas believes. And it is why, when he looks at Memphis and America 40 years later, the words Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in the final year of his life remain alive and relevant.

It is why Thomas, the black preacher, has spent so much time writing a dissertation that he will soon deliver to Michael Leff, the white Jewish scholar.

"This is my stand to say this is who the man was and what the man was about and not just 'I Have A Dream,' " Thomas says.

For Leff, the association with Thomas and Memphis Theological Seminary has deepened his understanding of King and has turned him into something of a disciple, himself.

He was pleased that the U of M based its freshmen-orientation classes around a compilation of King's writings and speeches, and he wants to expose more Memphis students to King.

"What King did produce shows changes and developments over time and reflects a complexity that never appears in terms of the popular representation," Leff says. "It's too bad our students don't have a better understanding of that."

Leff often listens to King's sermons at home, and sometimes he feels like he's sitting in a pew, ready to call out an Amen.

"Oh, I've had that experience, you know, that I should not be liking this, I should be viewing it as a scholar and getting some distance," Leff says.

One morning this fall, when a sermon finished, Leff's wife ducked her head into his office and remarked, "It was very nice to spend the morning with Martin Luther King."

"There is that power there," Leff says. "And it doesn't really matter what religion you are. It's like to listen to one of Bach's masses, you can be moved without being a Christian or a believer. King's sermons have that kind of power to them."

It would seem that King has enlisted another witness.

"I have found something very comforting and important in the way he can bring these Biblical themes to the fore in a way that is understandable and relevant."

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## **The CA Poll**

**Question: With regards to the Civil Rights movement, do you think significant progress, little progress or no progress has been made?**

Significant: 51% total / 60% white voters / 40% black voters

Little: 39% total / 31% white / 48% black

None: 5% total / 3% white / 8% black

Don't know: 4% total / 5% white / 3% black

Declined to answer: 1% total / 1% white / 1% black

