

*King's Way: An Approach to Conflict*  
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*Introduction*

In this paper I will argue that King's approach to conflict can be best understood as a systematic effort to analyze all angles of a situation before acting on it, reframing the issue from people to principles and using love and nonviolence as a vital way to combat injustice and inequality. King was a powerful thinker. He knew that in order to fully understand a confrontation we must seriously examine all sides of the argument. Only through a willingness to devote the time and consideration required to analyze, engage, and reframe nonviolently is it reasonable to expect that disputants will be able to work together to creatively construct new pathways toward justice community life, leaving all parties satisfied.

In order to adequately confront a disagreement careful thought and consideration of the principles of the argument must be taken into account. King argued, similar to Gandhi (*Gandhi's Way*), that serious and productive analysis ought to focus on (potentially shared) moral principles at stake in any conflict, rather than get distracted by the easy but often superficial tendency to focus on individual personalities or even group characteristics. When it came to the issue of gaining equality for African Americans, for instance, King focused on actively engaging with the controversy surrounding equality itself—for disadvantaged black and white Americans—rather than accepting the common framing of the conflict as black vs. white.

King was analytical and actively engaged in real world conflicts. But King's Way means to actively and deeply engage with allies and adversaries *in particular ways* that King argued would be more likely to produce a fair and lasting agreement. Nonviolent direct action was King's way to fight against inequality by using love instead of violence, even though he faced ruthless opposition from white supremacists and more troublesome opposition from both white liberals and Black Power supporters. All the while he maintained his values of love, nonviolence and justice. King's philosophy of nonviolence was an effort to establish the dream of equality and freedom from the past history of racial double standards. Nonviolent direct action was the only way to get the attention needed for people to accept the concept of the movement and move forward to change. Without nonviolent direct action society would be stuck in a perpetual power struggle that would leave both sides unsatisfied.

*Fighting a Tough Minded Fight*

In order to approach conflict in the way that Martin Luther King would find agreeable you first need to *analyze* the situation. There was a four step process that King used as a general method that regulated his approach to conflict. "First, information is gathered, then goals are formulated, and then negotiations are undertaken for the purpose of social reconstruction. Only when initial negotiations fail does one resort to some form of nonviolent direct action, in order to speed negotiations to a fruitful conclusion" (Moses, 1997: 147-148).

In King's Way what it is meant by gathering information is analyzing the issue—with particular emphasis on the moral principles beneath the superficial aspects of the conflict—and attempting to formulate tactics apt to result in productive negotiations. Similar to Gandhi, King

really understood that behind any conflict there was a deeper, more important issue at hand. “Behind that confrontation there are two views, both that are in some measure true. Every fight is on some level a fight between differing angles of a vision illuminating the same truth” (Juergensmeyer 1984: 1). For example, behind the conflict between blacks and whites there is a deeper struggle that lies with the issue of inequality for all Americans. Instead of focusing on this issue, these two groups are too busy fighting each other to come to any solution to the problem. “Intolerable conditions demand study and analysis, because social transformation must happen better that it be predicted upon informed social intelligence than ignorance” (Moses 1997: 7).

King very often would take a conflict at hand and reframe it, from the people involved to the principles at hand. He would also use that conflict in order to engage both sides to come to the table in order to potentially come to a solution. It is not wise to try and force a victory against your opponent, nor is it wise to ignore the issue hoping that it will go away. Neither forcing nor avoiding are tough minded, according to King, because these skip the difficult steps of analysis and engagement. These approaches will never solve a conflict and will only cause the issue to fester until it boils over resulting in maximum damage. This is why King adopted the concept of nonviolent direct action. We must act, that is engage with our adversaries, because as we saw for Gandhi, ‘the conflict is the crucible,’ it is the active process through which we learn about our adversaries as part of our analysis, formulate goals and do so without violence (Juergensmeyer 1984: 16).

It is critically important for both sides to be able to understand where the other is coming from in order to come to an amicable resolution in advancing equality for all. This is why King strived for contact between the races (King 1968: 110). If a white man would work with, live beside, eat with or even have a conversation with a black man, he would soon be able to see the struggle blacks have faced for so long and he maybe he could empathize with him. This is why structural problems are so hard to battle. Desegregating neighborhoods, schools, lunch counters and employment would greatly help the races find a rapport with one another, creating a sense of understanding. If both sides can be seen and the focus of the issue is moved from peoples’ differences to the actual problem at hand perhaps some solution can come to light. “It is impossible for white Americans to grasp the depths and dimensions of the Negro’s dilemma without understanding what it means to be a Negro in America” (King 1968: 109).

The way in which King chose to combat inequality with nonviolent direct action used tactics like boycotts, sit ins, marches and giving demonstrations in order to get the most meaningful attention for the movement. It took great intelligence to choose the moral grounds, timing, means and issues that each protest would address. To King thinking was a form of action, analysis was a very important and meaningful action and engaged form of interaction with adversaries treated as potential allies. It was only through great thought and intelligence that King was able to formulate such a unique way to protest the inequality and injustice African Americans suffered on a daily basis.

The reason King felt so strongly about nonviolent direct action was because it was a way for the movement to be heard. This type of action is coercive but only to force the opposition to the table and engage, it does not force them to agree or narrow their choices at the table. Using violent methods will never get lasting and stable and just results, it will perpetuate the violence

that creates the inequality and injustice in the first place. The true meaning in the message, and the true value of King's Way, will be lost in the chaos.

### *Why Fight At All?*

While there are some fights that are better left unfought due to pettiness and unimportance there are most definitely some things worth fighting. Entering a conflict for an honorable reason would be "to side with those fighting principle rather than for power or pride or to have another purpose in mind, not so much defending the truth as to discovering it" (Juergensmeyer 1984: 14). Only by engaging in a disagreement does one really discover the real truth of the argument. Fighting in a productive manner can very well be the means to a constructive end where both sides are happy with the solution. One must actively engage in a conflict if there is going to be any chance of positive result because leaving an issue unaddressed can cause one side to have uncontested power over the other.

"The hard truth is that neither Negro nor white has yet done enough to expect the dawn of a new day. While much has been done, it has been accomplished by too few and on a scale too limited for the breadth of the goal. Freedom is not won by a passive acceptance of suffering. Freedom is won by a struggle against suffering" (King 1968: 20).

King knew that fighting in a productive, nonviolent way there would be less of a chance that the message of his movement would be confused or controlled by others. When violence is used as a form of combating a conflict, it is very often that the violence takes all the attention away from the real issue at hand. Therefore the issue that caused all the fighting will never actually be address and there is no chance for a solution.

The individuals that form the Black Power group were guilty of this particular tactic when it came to opposing inequality. King states that "disappointment produces despair and despair produces bitterness and that bitterness causes blindness. Bitterness has not the capacity to make the distinction between some and all." (King 1968: 26). Those involved with the Black Power movement were very disappointed with the inactivity of the movement and the entire idea of Black Power was becoming more and more attractive to the African American population. Those individuals who supported Black Power were combating inequality with anger and violence.

By using the tactic of destruction and violence, the Black Power movement scared away any whites from listening to King's message of equality. They feared black domination so that even those whites who might have listened to King's movement tuned it out because of the violent tendencies of the Black Power group. King did not agree with the Black Power movement because it was violent and people would not listen and be open minded if they were in fear of what could happen to them. He was very adamant about using a nonviolent way to end inequality. To King this was the only reasonable means to get positive results for both parties. "Like life, racial understanding is not something that we find but something that we create. A productive and happy life is something you make. And so the ability of the blacks and whites to work together, to understand each other, will not be found readymade; it must be created by the fact of contact" (King 1968: 28).

Contrary to how the Black Power supporters chose to fight, white liberals tried to completely ignore the issue and were less willing to engage in the fight. They misunderstand love without power, without fighting and engaging becomes useless, just as the Black Power violence becomes abusive to the cause of creating equality. to deal with the fight. When a party is more dominant than another it is easier for them to force a victory against their weaker opposition. Ignoring a conflict will most definitely get a result in a way that King would approve of.

King had a way of fighting conflict and injustice in a nonviolent manner while also bringing a monumental amount of attention to his message in the process. Many of King's marches were not allowed or respected and were usually broken up by the police. During one of the marches lead by King the group was met by a line of police officers that stood directly in their path, completely blocking the way. As the group stopped in the middle of the road to pray the barricade parted and gave them room to pass, but instead of walking through King turned the entire group around and walked back to where they had come from. King was still able to show his opposition of inequality yet maintained a certain amount of respect for authority. He managed to avoid a riot by turning around and walking away, leaving no opportunity for any heckling from the police in which some of the marchers may have reacted in a hostile way, and possibly causing a violent altercation. Not only did King use marches as a means to combat inequality but he also held demonstrations, gave speeches, organized sit ins and boycotts. These were the means in which King was nonviolent but also directly acted against inequality and injustice. He did not just sit back and wait for something to change, he actively engaged in the fight to spur on change for society.

### *Why are Equality and Courage So Important?*

W.E.B. Du Bois stated that "the problem of the century was going to be the color line. From the racists' point of view, the color line is nothing more than one of life's inevitable outcomes and any attempt to locate or move the color line is an unneeded intrusion in the natural laws of survival" (Moses 1997: 46).

King borrows this concept of the color line and creates a new understanding that focuses more directly on race and class structure. The concept of the color line is renamed the triple structural evils of racism, poverty and violence which King sees as describing a collection of habits characteristic of American society, no matter how intentional or unintentional they may be, perpetuating the inequality of power between blacks and whites, rich and poor (Moses 1997: 47).

King insisted that there were three structural evils that dominated American society; racism, poverty and war. He felt that the struggle against racism could be singled out but that it was more productive to see the connections because poverty and war could not be so isolated from the civil rights struggle. The problem with the concept of the color line is because it is only understood in terms of color prejudice. This was a collective habit, a structure perpetuating collective injustices that needed to be confronted. King really wanted "to appeal to love," but his analysis and engagement led him to see that "love without structural awareness is called sentimental liberalism; white structural awareness without love is called Black Power" (Moses

1997: 50). The best way to think about racial conflict for King is to reframe it from an individual problem or issue to thinking that it is a habit, a widespread set of shared behaviors that needs to be changed. Reframing from a personal issue to a focus on (shared) moral principles, according to King, puts us in a better position to analyze and nonviolently work together to rebuild just communities.

King knew it was fundamentally important to address the poverty issue, by highlighting the fact that white America was in trouble as well, there would be a greater chance that people would listen to his message and potentially give the movement a chance to succeed. King proposed that the only solution to poverty was a guaranteed income. According to him this would solve many problems the United States was facing at that time and is unfortunately still facing today. Lack of education, restricting job opportunities, poor housing (which creates a weakened home life and suppressed initiative), and fragile family relationships are all issues that King felt a guaranteed income would help to nullify. He states that “this proposal is not a civil rights program, in the sense that the term is currently used. The program would benefit all the poor, including the two-thirds of them who are white. I hope that both black and white will act in coalition to effect this change, because their combined strength will be necessary to overcome the fierce oppression we must realistically anticipate” (King 1968: 174). The whole idea behind addressing the issue of poverty was to show that the fight for inequality was not just restricted to the confines of race but it surpassed that, it was an issue of class as well. This was an issue that both blacks and whites could both understand and relate to, causing them to ultimately unite together.

The type of courage required to wage a successful nonviolent campaign is to remember that using nonviolent ways to approach a conflict is not weak. In fact it is the complete opposite, finding a civil way to solving an issue between parties takes a lot of courage to stand up for what you believe in but to also be a big enough person to consider the side other the opposing party. Gandhi said that nonviolence is the litmus test of truth. He feels that violence itself is the same as being untruthful standing for all the same traits such as the obstructive, the destructive, life-negating and alienating tendencies. Nonviolence is the absence of the desire to destroy. Being nonviolent is resolving issues shows that you do not want to harm your opponent and you are concerned about their welfare. Being concerned about the opposition’s welfare shows great courage in that even in the midst of a conflict, you are aware that even your enemy is human and deserves to be treated with a certain amount of dignity and respect.

### *Love Your Neighbor as Yourself: A Call to Show Love Despite Opposition*

The approach to love despite all of the violent opposition may not be effective with all who listen, particularly when this approach concerns the African Americans and their ability to love the white man. “Since the white man’s personality is greatly distorted by segregation and his soul is greatly scarred, he needs the love of the Negro. The Negro must love the white man, because the white man needs his love to remove his tensions, insecurities, and fears” (King, 1958: 105). It would be significantly difficult for a black man to love the white man that had for so long oppressed him. Surely there were many blacks that were angry when King proposed this as a way to end the cycle of fear and lead them to equality. Showing love to an individual who

has only shown hate to you would be a daunting task for anyone and it is imaginable that this concept was highly popular amongst the black community. But to King, having Christian roots taught him that the ability to love and to show love was a much more powerful approach than that of violent retaliation. White love is a part of this challenge. Loving your neighbor is not just a call to African Americans, but to white Americans as well. This notion of love is asking to set aside prejudice and discrimination and to be accepting despite the past cultural norms that whites have lived by since the creation of our country.

King was a Christian preacher and knew that there was a higher law that had hope, love and choice. "Following the method of Jesus, who was once pressed by a certain teacher of the Law to define the term neighbor, King tosses the idea into the street. Whoever you meet there, on the dangerous road to Jericho- that is your neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan becomes a paradigm for the Good American" (Moses, 1997: 186). Throughout the Bible, Jesus preached the message of loving your neighbor and treating them as to how you would like to be treated despite how they might treat you. "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28). King being a follower of Jesus' ability to love proposes that the call to love as a theory of justice is serious; he speaks to both Black Power advocates and white liberals stressing how important it is to love. Loving is a way to awaken the perception of injustice and gathers the strength needed for liberation. Equality would be a problematic concept to comprehend without the understanding how important love is. "Viewed by the lights of love, nonviolent direct action is guerrilla theater of a special kind. Here the suffering body is offered up as an extraordinary plea for compassion. Whether in Gandhi style hunger strikes, or public civil rights confrontations, nonviolent actions seek to establish new ground upon which reason and logic may proceed toward justice. Such actions provoke reflection on the consequences of an uncaring future, and hasten new awakenings of spirit" (Moses 1997: 187). If the message is not clouded by the distractions that violence can bring the target audience will hear it, thus giving a chance for equality to become a realistic dream.

Jesus taught that loving one's enemy means actively seeking to do good to the kind of person one would tend to feel hostility towards. The clearest teaching here is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The parable is about a Jew coming upon a beaten Samaritan man who was left for dead on the side of a road. The Samaritans are the Jews' worst enemy and the Jewish man chooses to help him despite the fact they are enemies. By saying to love your enemy, Jesus is really saying to show compassion and kindness toward *all* people, most especially those who in some sense are one's enemy. This is a good lesson for everyone, not just Black Power enthusiasts or racist whites but to all people.

### *Conclusion*

When I first started this course I had a very surface level of understanding what Martin Luther King stood for, what his approach to conflict was and how he implemented his concept of nonviolent direct action. I never gave much thought about these ideas much past what I had learned in grade school and what was briefly discussed in high school. I always knew that he was a big part of America's history and a huge part of why blacks have more liberties and freedoms today but I never thought much past that. Coming away from this course I realize how

little I knew and how much deeper of a man and leader Martin Luther King was. Nonviolent direct action played a huge role in the great lengths that the African Americans have come to today; I do not believe they ever would have gotten that close without King's methods and insight. I learned that no solution to a problem will come if one responds with hate and violence. You need to be able to see both sides of the issue if you want to truly see the real conflict at hand. Not only did King pave the way for blacks to be looked at as equals in the eyes of white liberals but I feel that his methods could potentially help in the future. Only if we forget our past do we make the same mistakes in the future, hopefully our country will not forget what King did and make the same mistakes we did in the past. I think this course is something that all students should take. It taught me a great life lesson that I believe everyone is aware of but does not really give the time to think about it or implement it into their own lives. From now on whenever I come across a conflict with another I will be careful to view both sides before trying to come to a solution. I believe if everyone was taught this vital piece of wisdom there would be a lot less violence and the world would truly be a better place.

#### The Bible

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