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TRUTH IN LOVE

Martin Luther King, Jr.: America's Self-Evident Truth

By Parris J. Baker
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Thomas Jefferson, considered America's apostle of liberty, was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence.[1] In writing this proclamation justifying the colonies' separation from the sovereign rule of King George III and Great Britain, Jefferson crafted this seminal affirmation that would influence and shape America's quest for freedom for centuries:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Nearly two centuries later, on August 28, 1963, the featured speaker in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., incorporated Jefferson's influential phrase in his iconic and impromptu "I Have a Dream" speech. Elusive to most people and passionately debated by theologians, political and philosophical scholars, and champions for freedom and justice is the meaning of the phrase, *"We hold these truths to be self-evident."* But what are "self-evident truths?" This article examines the philosophy, morality, and spirituality of self-evident truths from the perspectives of two great and controversial Americans, Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Self-evident truth is defined as a statement so obviously true that the statement requires no proof. However, when Jefferson composed those immortal words, it

was abundantly clear or "self-evident" that in the developing America, from any objective measurement (race, class, gender, or ethnicity), "that all men ***were not*** created equal." King would later argue that inequality in America was the self-evident truth.

Jefferson's statement of self-evident truth was based on a metaphysical understanding of truth. Influenced by the work of John Locke, a political philosopher, Jefferson adopted the perspective that as a state or commonwealth, humans were endowed with inalienable rights from their creator, therefore no human agency nor any sort could infringe or invalidate them. Government's role, in the social contract, was to protect the inalienable rights of citizens, to arbitrate disputes, and to enforce the decisions of the majority.

Jefferson possessed some well-defined opinions of Black and indigenous people as being inferior to whites, and the need for racial segregation. Published in his only book, "Notes on the State of Virginia," Jefferson wrote:

> To our reproach it must be said, that though for a century and a half we have had under our eyes the races of black and red men, they have yet been viewed by us as subjects of natural history. I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind... This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people... Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture (pp. 150-151).

Given his published opinion on the inferiority of Black people and the undesirability of miscegenation it has been alleged but not completely confirmed that Jefferson fathered six children with Sally Hemings, an enslaved domestic worked and maid.[2] Jefferson maintained enslaved workers until his death, ironically on July 4, 1826. In 1619, the first recorded enslaved Africans were brought to Point Comfort, Virginia marking the beginning of race-based bondage in America. In 1788, Virginia ratified the U.S. Constitution and became the 10th state in the Union. In the same year, Virginia abolished slave trade, due primarily to its surplus of enslaved laborers. However, by 1800 the institution of slavery, as in most Southern states, was deeply rooted and flourishing in Virginia. So entrenched and embedded was the commerce of slavery in Virginia that on April 17, 1861, Virginia voted to secede from the United States.

Virginia Ordinance of Secession[3]

The people of Virginia, in their ratification of the Constitution of the United States of America, adopted by them in Convention on the twenty-fifth day of June, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-eight, having declared that the powers granted under the said Constitution were derived from the people of the United States, and might be resumed whensoever the same should be perverted to their injury and oppression; and the Federal Government, having perverted said powers, not only to the injury of the people of Virginia, but to the oppression of the Southern Slaveholding States.

Now, therefore, we, the people of Virginia, do declare and ordain that the ordinance adopted by the people of this State in Convention, on the twenty-fifth day of June, eighty-eight, whereby the Constitution of the United States of America was ratified, and all acts of the General Assembly of this State, ratifying or adopting amendments to said Constitution, are hereby repealed and abrogated; that the Union between the State of Virginia and the other States under the Constitution aforesaid, is hereby dissolved, and that the State of Virginia is in the full possession and exercise of all the rights of sovereignty which belong and appertain to a free and independent State. And they do further declare that the said Constitution of the United States of America is no longer binding on any of the citizens of this State.

Born Michael King Jr. on January 15, 1929, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.[4] leaned heavily on the writings of Jefferson, frequently citing both the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence to illustrate the contradictions of the *unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness*. In the opening of his speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, King asserted:

> When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men — yes, Black men as well as white men — would be

> guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.

Later during the same speech, encouraged by Mahalia Jackson to "tell them about the dream, Martin," Dr. King, in full Baptist tradition, moved from expository preaching to extemporaneous preaching:

> And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'

But what was the American dream? For Jefferson, it was an America that experiences racial emigration to other parts of the world but not freedom for Black people in America. The self-evident truth of America, according to King, was a fundamental understanding that the historic reality for most black Americans who actively pursued those three elusive ideals were bombings, burnings, and bloodshed. Undaunted, King also believed and confessed his faith in God and America's capability to make the words of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence a living reality in the lives of all Americans.

The speech in Washington was not the first time Dr. King shared his dream. In September 1962, Prathia Hall, an inspirational orator and the spiritual leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee used the phrase "I Have a Dream" during a prayer vigil. The prayer vigil was held because Mount Olive Baptist Church in Sasser, Georgia had been destroyed, burned to the ground, by the Ku Klux Klan. Hall then followed the phrase, "I have a dream," with petitions for racial justice, freedom, and equality. King, present at the prayer vigil, asked and received permission to use the phrase in his preaching. On November 27, 1962, at the Booker T. Washington High School in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, he preached a very similar "I Have a Dream" speech.

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King moved the speech from the singular, "I have a dream," to evoking the plurality and unity of E Pluribus Unum:

> This is our hope. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true, today's self-evident truth.

In the era of cancel culture and woke culture, disinformation and misinformation, fascism and democracy, White Supremacists and Black Nationalists, MAGA Republicans and Do-Nothing Democrats, the Crazies and the Squad, and Mr. George Floyd and Mr. Tyree Nichols, where is the self-evident truth?

I am convinced that self-evident truth is never quite self-evident but requires the input of all people. Alice Walker[5] asserted, “I believe that the truth of any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together.”[6] King concluded his speech with a unifying crescendo of hope:

> When we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: *Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*

Final Thoughts from Jefferson and King

Thomas Jefferson:

> Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race (p. 145).
>
> Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that … a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take sides with us in such a contest.
> (“Notes on the State of Virginia,” p. 169).

Martin Luther King, Jr.:

> In the final analysis, the rich must not ignore the poor because both rich and poor are tied in a single garment of destiny. All life is interrelated, and all men are interdependent. The agony of the poor diminishes the rich, and the salvation of the poor enlarges the rich. We are inevitably our brothers' keepers because of the interrelated structure of reality.[7]

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright to freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustration, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides – and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will be expressions through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history.[8]

[1] John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Robert Sherman were the other contributor
[2]The Jefferson Monticello, Here.
[3] Here
[4] Michael King, Sr., changed their names to Martin Luther King after touring Germany and learning of the transformative works of Protestant Reformer Martin Luther. Formally changed with Georgia Department of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics July 23, 1957 – Michael is crossed out and Martin Luther is handwritten next to it.
[5] In 1982 Alice Walker was the first African American woman awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for the novel, The Color Purple.
[6] Walker, A. (1983). In search of our mothers' gardens: Women's prose. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanoovich.
[7] King, Jr., M. L. (December 11, 1964). Nobel Lecture: The quest for peace and justice. Here.
[8] King, Jr. M. L. (1963). Why we can't wait. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.

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