

*King's Way: Struggle Against Inequalities*  
*Shaina Ahenger*

*Introduction*

“Power is never good unless he who has it is good.” (King 1967: 59) This quotation relates to three central arguments that are at the heart and soul of understanding King's approach to conflict. In this paper I will argue that King's approach to conflict ca

at hand. The second step of the process is to formulate goals which will direct the focus of the movement. Third, negotiations are undertaken for the purpose of social reconstruction. “Only when negotiations fail does one resort to some form of nonviolent direct action in order to speed negotiations to a fruitful conclusion.” (Moses 1997: 148) Throughout the process King works to cultivate an unbiased perspective about the conflict while being deeply engaged as both a persistent advocate of justice and equality and a fellow community member able to hear and understand the concerns of his adversaries. In some instances, his process of nonviolent direct action did not work when first initiated. After seeing false starts within the process, King never hesitated to take a step back to gather more information and formulate new goals. The process would then start over again because the conflict and the circumstances have changed.

Thinking is a form of action for King. Within his nonviolent direct action process, serious and detailed structural analysis was a form of action. This point is significant because it emphasized King’s critical attention to strategy when confronting a crisis, and action based on serious analysis—analysis that did not assume conclusions but honored alternative perspectives—is, for King, more likely to be morally defensible (and politically effective) action. This reveals King as a pragmatic and dialectical thinker rejecting false dichotomies like thought versus action, morality versus rationality, love versus power. This approach allows him to appreciate multiple perspectives and analyze all sides of a conflict to lead a search for underlying a common truth.

“What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic” (King 1967:37). This understanding can allow a proper interpretation of how power and love should be

nonviolence redirects the conflict from an arena where their weakness is salient (blacks lack the power whites have at this time) and into an arena where the lack of black power is linked to white privilege, structural inequality, and festering injustice, transforming a weakness into a strength by highlighting the moral dimension without resorting to violence to do so. Violence, King argues, would likely only enhance the white fear of black Americans. King believed that by using nonviolence groups show a greater respect for humanity, which allows alliances to be formed to create a better society. By creating alliances, both parties can develop a resolution together to overcome the social crisis.

The most important aspect of nonviolence and alliance building is finding the truth through honestly channeling love and ethical values within the conflict. King argues that love enhances rationality and ultimately leads individuals to discover deeper and shared truths that can connect the political and economic search for power with the moral search for truth. King argues that the morality of love is very powerful. He speaks of love from a religious perspective that involves the society as a whole. He is not referring to affectionate love (that alone tends to be „anemic ) but a Christian love that can bring a community together, because it requires individuals to see not his or her own good, but the good of our neighbors. This relationship between power and love highlights where both individuals seek the good of another for the sake of another will have positive results; “it springs from the need of the other person—his need for belonging to the best in the human family.” (Moses 1997:207) This statement seeks to challenge individuals who solely act upon self interest and yet likely share the moral value this form of love places on community and equality and justice. Whites may say they love Black Americans and that they support their fight for justice but if they are unwilling to sacrifice for the least of our bothers, this is not Christian love, according to King.

King questions, for instance, what programs to offer prisoners while they are incarcerated to illustrate the concrete importance of linking love and power. Some believe that they are just prisoners and who cares what they are doing during their day. This is where King believes the love of God is operating in the human heart because even prisoners should be shown compassion to exhibit the best outcome of humanity. Even prisoners are children of god. Whites who seek only extreme punishment are not acting with disinterested love; they are seeking only to protect their own individual self interest in an unproductive way. They were “unwilling to pay a significant price to eradicate the color line.” (King 1967:11) They based their decisions on their fear of Black power and the morbid fear of change to justify punishment that merely (and immorally) protects white privilege.

Neither whites nor black power advocates were acting out of disinterested love in



illustrates King's tough mindedness; which he displays throughout his entire struggle for justice.

King links power to love in his emphasis on struggle and sacrifice as well. Black Americans are struggling to gain any power to achieve their political, economic, social goals of equality. Their frustration with whites and their lack of implementation of laws brings about the black power movement. Both whites and black power advocates are struggling with the concept of power. "Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose." (King 1967: 37) Black Americans are fighting for this kind of power because it is necessary to implement justice and equality for their own racial group; while choosing to fight violently is choosing to leave others out, diminishing the possibility of the kind of robust political alliance necessary to succeed.

In order to achieve their legitimate goals, their slogan should be aimed at attaining black equality through an approach to political, economic, and social power that is grounded in love, equality, and justice. No group can rise to a stable form of power through separatism when they will need to live in the same communities with their adversaries after the revolution is complete. The Irish, Italians, and Jews emphasized their unity as a whole but never missed the opportunity to create alliances with political machines or trade unions to amass a greater strength against their cause. They rejected the false dichotomy of unity and integration and succeeded by seeing the connection as well as the tensions between racial solidarity and American communities.

"Power and morality must go together, implementing, fulfilling and ennobling each other. In the quest for power I cannot by-pass the concern for morality." (King 1969: 59) King argues that nonviolent direct action is the only way to achieve power and maintain a conscience concern for morality. King believes that love and ethical concerns allows black individuals to bring social change to unjust institutions. Nonviolent direct action can therefore "save the white man as well as the Negro." (King 1967:59) By have a tough minded approach against violence; King believed that all Americans can implement love and morality to change the injustices of their time. Being tough minded and having a tender heart grants a correlation to fight for humanity and the common interest between black and white Americans.

### *Why Fight at All?*

The value of fighting is that the conflict brings the underlying tensions to the surface where building a broad-based alliance becomes possible. According to King, (and Gandhi and Jesus) it is necessary to engage in conflict to initiate social change. King believed that using strategic nonviolent direct action, conflict between whites and blacks would reveal the injustices (or the truths) of society. King for instance, chose to allow the student's of Birmingham to participate in the peaceful demonstration, even if it was breaking the law; it was necessary during this time frame. The police were violent as they sprayed the children with fire hoses, watched as their dogs attacked them, even pushed them down, hit them, and swore at them. These demonstrations of extreme hatred were broadcasted on television for all Americans to see the truth and injustices of their social structure.

The real truth can only emerge from a conflict if both parties are willing to engage in the conflict with their adversaries. Both interaction and contact creates a broad-

incarceration. What greater injustice could society perpetuate?" (King 1967:79)

Efforts to eliminate structural inequalities by creating new policies is promising, but implementing them among society against competing perspectives proves to be difficult. King's approach using equality and strategic nonviolent direct action involves every individual burdened with economic disadvantages, the unemployed, sections of labor and welfare recipients. King is not only targeting the whites in power, but structure and agency as well. Whites in power are not only demonstrating racism against blacks but also against whites; any individual in poverty that may be from different racial group or ethnicity. Creating a common goal or interest among adversaries can lead to a broad-based alliance. King argues that "a true alliance is based upon some self interest of each component group and a common interest into which they merge." (King 1967:151)

By using the common goal of equality, it initiates a national crisis. King believed that "

support each other as establishing group identity, pulling economic and political threads together, as well as being open minded toward alliances with different groups. For instance, King advised blacks “to play our role as Negroes we will have to strive for enhanced representation and influence in the labor union.” (King 1967:142) King saw this as a great opportunity to show whites that blacks were important in the nation’s survival because of their economic influence in the work force.

“We must not permit adverse winds to overwhelm us as we journey across life’s mighty Atlantic; we must be sustained by our engines of courage in spite of the winds.” (King 1967:47) King claims that when we confront social structures of injustice, one enters into a zone of suffering; sacrifice is necessary to reveal the injustices of society. King’s supporting argument is that “structures of evil do not crumble by passively waiting. If history teaches anything, it is that evil is recalcitrant and determined, and never voluntarily relinquishes its hold short of an almost fanatical resistance. Evil must be attacked by a counteracting persistence, by the day-to-day assault of the battering rams of justice.”



Actually reading Martin Luther King Jr. s work and hearing him speak connected me to the social problems of his time period. I was able to understand the deep underlying tensions within structure and agency and the significant role institutions had in keeping blacks suppressed. I also became enlightened to the sacrifices he made as an individual. He was a leader chosen by the people and he did not have a cho

Moses, Greg. *Revolution of Conscience*. 1997. New York: The Guilford Press.

*Citizen King*, American Experience, PBS Home Video, 2004.