

**Calling: A Journal for Leaders Who Nurture Vocation**  
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**LEADERSHIP AS A VOCATION**

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**The World Needs People Who Have Come Alive**

One day, a graduate student asked Howard Thurman, the noted 20<sup>th</sup>-century African American theologian and mystic, "What can I do for the world?" Thurman responded, "Don't ask what you can do for the world; ask rather, what makes you come alive and go do it....*because what the world needs are people who have come alive.*"

When Coretta Scott King passed on January 31 of this year, I, like many, experienced a sad, melancholy, "throw up your hands" set of emotions. The emotions were similar to those I felt as a young child growing up in Atlanta, when, in 1968, news spread that civil rights icon Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. had been assassinated. Through my young child eyes I witnessed the home-going celebration of Dr. King then—like those among the thousands in the crowd—and as I witnessed a similar celebration of civil rights leader Coretta Scott King recently, I wondered: *What made them come alive? What were the motivations that drove them to activism during the black freedom movement?* Together they had made a commitment to help raise the consciousness of a nation to the racial, socio-political, and later economic injustices suffered by African Americans and other people of color. Mrs. King was clear in her autobiography, "My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr." that the work she embraced *with* her husband had been part of a larger destiny and calling.

Dr. King had been one of the key architects of the Civil Rights Movement, aided and supported by men and many women like Fannie Lou Hammer, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, and his wife, Coretta Scott King. In their partnership and marriage, this husband and wife team forged commitments that helped to unveil the continuing injustices in this nation. Though they would be tested many times, including the bombing of their home and wiretaps by the federal government, their efforts, and those of others, ultimately moved us closer to certain freedoms and opportunities we enjoy today. They were both "called" to do freedom work.

Callings are normally understood to be addressed to individuals, but with respect to Martin and Coretta, calling is *coupled*. How can one understand the powerful witness of Dr. Martin King, Jr. without the presence, poise and participation of Coretta? They both were called to serve their time with courage and commitment that spoke to the specific issues of segregation and the hopes and aspirations of people who had been despised, marginalized and rendered invisible.

To know one's self, one's uniqueness in respect to gifts, talents, and skills is to have a clue to *who one is* and *what one's purpose* is in the world. Vocation here refers to "purpose." It is derived from the Latin verb *vocare*, "to call." What one is called to do is predicated on a number of factors with respect to natural endowments and social configurations, but the ultimate choice rests upon what one comes to understand about one's self in the midst of a number of claims presented to the self in the course of life. In this respect, what is commonly referred to as *fate*, the family and social environment which one inherits, may provide the contexts for discovery of vocation, but ultimately one's destiny is determined by what one does with the inner will, desires and signals which come from a healthy sense of self or a morally anchored and "faithful" character.

Born in rural Alabama and raised on a farm by her parents, Coretta walked several miles to school daily while white students passed by in busses. In her early childhood, she experienced the indignities of a segregated society and took those experiences with her to college where she became an activist in the freedom movement. She would later move to Boston to attend graduate school and pursue a music career. It was there that she met and later married Martin Luther King, Jr.

Coretta Scott King speaks of her work out of this center and purpose anchored by these experiences. For example, the opening in 1981 of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change (what many would consider her legacy along with her work in establishing Dr. King's birthday—January 15—as a federal holiday) was the direct result of her understanding of the need to forge ahead and to preserve the work of Dr. King. The Center not only housed the King archives and library but was a place for training young people in the strategies of nonviolent social action, which had been such a key element in the success of the civil rights movement. Her vision included an understanding of the need to train and equip emerging leaders to continue the work.

Vocation goes beyond career choices and asks the moral questions, "What end does my career seek? How does my choice of work contribute to integration, wholeness, and harmony in society and the world?" Like Mrs. King, I grew up in the south—a generation removed from those directly involved in the Civil Rights Movement. My generation is one that directly benefited from the hopes and dreams of those freedom fighters and activists. I chose education and the nurture of young people as my life's work. I would like to think I took seriously the question that Thurman posed of his student and that Mrs. King's life exemplified—a question explored by people who identified for themselves what made them come alive, and went on to do it.