

**Marching for Justice:
Personal Experiences in the Civil Rights Movement, 1963-1966**
by Richard A. Hughes, 2006

I have been asked to prepare this paper about my experiences in the Civil Rights Movement many years ago. As we enter a new millennium, I often think back to this, the most important social movement of the twentieth century, which so influenced our nation as well as my own life. In the last five or six years, or so, when I have tried to understand the meanings of those tumultuous events, nearly everyday I have had a grief attack or a flashback. And so I want the reader to understand it is not easy for me to write on this topic.

I joined the Civil Rights Movement in September, 1963, after enrolling as a theological student at Boston University. My motivating event was the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September the 15th, killing four little girls. This was the 51st church bombing in Birmingham since World War Two. The apparent reason was retaliation by the white power structure for the civil rights campaign led by Martin Luther King, Jr., the previous spring in Birmingham. Dr. King conducted the funeral for the little girls, and he portrayed them as martyrs and heroines in a holy crusade for freedom.

In Boston the churches held memorial services for the little girls. Demonstrations began, symbolizing white guilt over segregation. I joined these demonstrations, and they were my first campaign. The demonstrations came to a climax in the first week of November. On election day, Louise Day Hicks, incumbent chairperson of the Boston School Committee, won reelection by a margin of 125,000 votes. She interpreted her victory as a public repudiation of the NAACP and its charge of *de facto* segregation in the Boston public schools. Her position was manifestly racist; so we mounted a large campaign on the following Friday, protesting white racism in the Boston School Committee. We marched on Beacon Hill for three hours in a downpour of three inches of rain. The press labeled our demonstration a "Penitential Processional," but in fact we were marching for justice in the streets of Boston.

The following weekend I went to New York City, on a travel grant from the labor movement, to attend the AFL-CIO convention at the Americana Hotel. I met Philip Randolph and had a workshop with him on civil rights. Philip Randolph was the founder of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1941 he conceived the idea of a March on Washington to protest segregation in the war production industries. When President Franklin Roosevelt desegregated those industries, Randolph called off the march. However, as is well-known, the March on Washington finally took place August 28, 1963, when Dr. King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. The political effect of the March on Washington was to connect the federal government with the Civil Rights Movement. I also met

Walter Reuther, labor leader and very powerful speaker, who spoke on behalf of civil rights. Thus, in New York City I witnessed a new and unique coalition between the labor and Civil Rights movements.

I returned to Boston, and on the following Friday another shock came out of the South. On November 22, President John Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. On that night I walked alone on the streets of Boston. I had just seen Kennedy there the previous October in an open motorcade, a young, handsome, vibrant man; now he lay dead in Dallas. On that night I began to think in terms of Greek tragedy, how the hero had ascended and been struck down by the reactionary forces of fate. From that night until this night I have kept a tragic consciousness from the Civil Rights Movement. On that night the city was absolutely silent. The fog drifted in from the ocean and swirled around the street lights on Kenmore Square, emitting an eerie and ominous glow. It was a night of great danger.

After the Kennedy assassination, Dr. King said to his wife Coretta that he would die in the same way that Kennedy had died. We have also learned from the civil rights historians that Dr. King was privately enraged; he was incensed that the country was grieving more for Kennedy, a white man, than for the four little girls of Birmingham, who were black. I acknowledge with sincere regret the racial bias of the patterns of grieving at the time; and yet I say to you, the death of Kennedy was an overpowering trauma for the entire Civil Rights Movement.

In the spring semester, 1964 I began my formal study of the philosophy of nonviolence developed by Mahatma Gandhi. I studied with Gandhi's disciple Amiya Chakravarty. Dr. Chakravarty had walked with Gandhi on the great Salt March to the sea of 1930, which led to the downfall of the British Empire in India. From my studies of Gandhi I learned that you never protest injustice in general; rather, you protest specific injustices and seek to correct them in the context of the community. The basic premise of all revolutionary social change is to secure the support and cooperation of the community. To do that, it is necessary to keep the public informed and to respect the adversary. Never demonize the police or armed forces. To achieve a specific justice it may be appropriate to apply a particular tactic, whether a boycott, a public demonstration, or civil disobedience. Whatever tactic is applied must fit the purity of means and ends. Never use violent means to achieve nonviolent ends. When attacked, do not fight back; instead fall down on the ground, roll up like a porcupine, and take the beatings, hoping that the aggressor will be morally transformed and stop. When arrested, do not flee; but go to jail willingly to affirm the integrity of the justice system. This is my philosophy, and I took my nonviolence training in the winter of 1965.

The theory and practice of nonviolence came to our country by way of James Lawson, one of the great, unrecognized pioneers of the Civil Rights Movement. Lawson was a Methodist, a pre-ministerial student at Baldwin-

Wallace College in Ohio. At the time of the Korean War, he refused to register for the draft. He was arrested and sent to federal prison for one year. After his parole, the Methodist Church sent him to India for three years as a missionary. While in India, Lawson discovered Gandhian nonviolence and immersed himself in it. He also learned that in 1936 Gandhi had had a great vision, in which he foresaw one day in the future, in the United States, a black man would rise up, and lead his people to freedom successfully, when Gandhi would have failed. When the news of the 1955-56 Montgomery Bus Boycott reached India, James Lawson realized that Martin Luther King was the man who would lead his people to freedom successfully. Lawson returned home, and in February, 1957, Martin Luther King and James Lawson met at Oberlin College. King recruited Lawson to join the movement. Lawson agreed and settled in Nashville, Tennessee, and he enrolled in Vanderbilt Divinity School, as only the second black student there.

In early September 1958, James Lawson began to teach, for the first time in our country, Gandhian nonviolence at weekly workshops at Clark Memorial Methodist Church, attended by Nashville college students. Lawson taught nonviolence in terms of its deep spirituality. He based nonviolence upon the ethic of love in the New Testament. He taught the technique of self-defense, of falling down on the ground, rolling up like a porcupine, and taking the beatings. Those workshops lasted a year and a half; and on February 13, 1960, Lawson's students conducted the sit-in at Woolworth's Department Store in downtown Nashville. They desegregated the lunch counter. They were brutally beaten, arrested, and filled up the jails; but in the Nashville sit-in pure Gandhian nonviolence took shape in our country. On March 3rd, James Lawson was expelled from Vanderbilt. The next day he was arrested at First Baptist Church. He was bailed out of jail by the faculty, most of whom resigned in protest. Later Lawson finished his degree at Boston University.

In February 1964, I participated in my second campaign, the Boston school sit-out organized by the NAACP. I took part in the planning sessions of the sit-out. On February 26, 20,000 students, both black and white, boycotted the Boston public schools. We taught civil rights at workshops in Freedom House in Roxbury. While this boycott was successful, in the long run the Boston school desegregation struggle was never really resolved. It dragged on for 17 years, until Mrs. Hicks was voted out of office. The motivation of the struggle was the attempt by the NAACP to enforce the ruling of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), in which the U.S. Supreme Court struck down segregation in the public schools. While *Brown* was a great case, it did not lead to fundamental social change. *Brown* created a white racist backlash in the southern states, as evidenced by the fact that they passed Pupil Preference laws to prevent the implementation of *Brown*. Two years ago, I heard Benjamin Hooks, former head of the NAACP, speak on the campus of Lycoming College. When he spoke about *Brown* and discussed his relationship to Martin Luther King, he said, "Oh, I love Martin but...." He never completed his sentences. Let me tell you why. The

NAACP opposed the street marches. The NAACP opposed the public demonstrations. The NAACP was not marching for justice in the streets of Boston or in the cities of the south.

In my opinion the more important case was *Boynton vs. Virginia* (1960), in which the U. S. Supreme Court struck down segregation in the bus stations, on the bases of the 14th Amendment and interstate commerce law. In 1961 James Lawson's students organized themselves as the Freedom Riders. They set out in buses to test the *Boynton* decision; but even though their bus was fire-bombed in Anniston, Alabama, they were marching for justice in the streets of Alabama and Mississippi.

At the end of the academic year I made the decision to spend the entire summer in the South. In American history this is known as "Freedom Summer, 1964." Many northern students were going south to participate in black voter registration drives in Mississippi. I did not go with them; rather I signed on with a program for students in the Methodist church, as did several of my classmates. We were told to assemble in El Paso, Texas, at mid-June, for a nine-day seminar on the ministry. At the end of that seminar we received our assignments. I was assigned to work in the inner-city of Atlanta, Georgia, for the remainder of the summer.

At the end of June, three of us from Boston University – Bruce Roberts, Bob Reber, and I – set out in Bruce's car, with a northern license plate, driving east. When we entered Mississippi, we felt extreme danger and came under surveillance. We were denied restaurant service in Vicksburg. As we drove east, we were closely followed by men in pick-up trucks, with gun racks in the cabs. Unknown to us, on June 21, three civil rights workers from New York had disappeared in Neshoba County and had been murdered. As I think back to our passage across Mississippi, I now believe that we were perceived as three more civil rights workers from the North. I now believe that we were followed by members of the White Knights. The White Knights were the elite commando unit of the Ku Klux Klan, organized in late spring 1964, having an estimated membership of 10,000. By the time we crossed Mississippi, the White Knights had already committed 61 cross burnings, 500 brutal assaults, and six murders; and they had burned down 35 churches. I now believe that if we had stopped, let's say at a church, we would have been murdered. I would have had my head blown off, because I was white. Had I been black, I would have been beheaded, as Jim Cheney was in Neshoba County.

Somehow we made it to Atlanta, and I began my work in the churches. On July 2, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This was a memorial to President Kennedy. However, President Johnson redefined civil rights as a moral issue, whereas Kennedy had defined it as a legal issue. While in Atlanta, I witnessed local reactions to the new civil rights law. For example, three Afro-American theological students tried to desegregate

Pickwick, a fried chicken restaurant in downtown Atlanta owned by Lester Maddox, future governor of Georgia. He drove them off with a gun and threatened to kill them. He later handed out baseball bats to his white customers to beat up any blacks who wished to eat his fried chicken. A student said to me that Lester Maddox was doing, "what we all wished to do." Her comment led me to realize that racism acts out the latent homicidal intent in the unconscious. Racism is homicidal; racists are killers; and in that culture, at that time, that racism was nurtured by the revivalism of the camp meeting tradition.

I struggled with my fellow Methodist clergy over racism in the church and failed to make covenant with them. In a meeting of the Atlanta district one minister stood up in public and boasted his congregation would remain segregated forever. What disturbed me about the boast was its evil, malicious, spiteful quality. There were some exceptions. In some churches blacks were hired to take care of the nurseries; but they could only enter the back doors of the churches and not the front doors.

One minister tried to persuade me by saying, "Martin Luther King hates whites." He was not successful, because on August 2nd Dr. King was scheduled to preach at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist Church on Auburn Avenue. So Bob Reber and I went to Ebenezer to hear Dr. King preach. We walked up the front stairs, and an usher greeted us. I said, "We are students from Boston University, and we have come to worship with you today." He said, "Come down stairs, Dr. King will want to speak with you." He led us downstairs into the basement of Ebenezer, and on that morning we met Martin Luther King, his father "Daddy" King, and his wife Coretta Scott King.

I felt no hatred in Martin Luther King. He was warm, courteous, person-centered. He focused on me, a young student. Of course, I was a student at his university, and so he asked about the professors. Some of his teachers were my teachers. "How's Dr. DeWolf, how's Dean Muelder?" Then we talked about racism in the South, and he was pessimistic as to whether it could ever be overcome, due to the segregation deeply rooted in the rural areas. He said he wanted us to come into his home but remembered he had to go to New York City that week. We thanked him for his offer of hospitality, said good-bye, and went upstairs to the sanctuary.

In the worship service "Daddy" King presided. He said Ebenezer had a custom that whenever Dr. King preached, a woman soloist from the choir would sing his favorite hymn, "Precious Lord." "Daddy" King also said: "God must be protecting the life of my son Martin; divine providence must be guiding the life of my son Martin; otherwise Martin would have been killed by now." Dr. King entered the pulpit, wearing a pulpit gown, and he spoke from a manuscript. During the sermon, "Daddy" King sat in a large pulpit chair, kept slapping his knees, and calling out: "Make it plain, Martin." Dr. King spoke in the manner of a philosopher. He quoted Aristotle and discussed the laws of logic; but with

perfect oral rhythms, striking metaphors, and the power of oratory, he lifted the congregation up to such a peak that I thought the Kingdom of God was at hand. Martin Luther King was the greatest preacher I have ever heard in my life. The service lasted two hours; I did not want to leave.

Later that day my host asked me where I had been in the morning. I said I met Martin Luther King. He promptly threw me out of the house; so now I found myself homeless in Atlanta. I had three more weeks to go, and I do not know how I survived. I remember a man, part lay preacher and part building inspector, took me in; and so for the rest of the summer, I learned about building codes and the back alleys of Atlanta. I finally got out of there and returned to school.

In the fall semester, two important developments took place. First, Dr. King received the Nobel Prize for peace. During the previous year and a half, he had been under electronic surveillance by the FBI for the purpose of destroying him. The motivation was the racist hatred of its director J. Edgar Hoover. Now with the awarding of the Nobel Prize the FBI campaign to destroy King was made public. Second, the civil rights leaders realized that the 1964 Civil Rights Law did not provide the right to vote; so a new campaign had to be waged to secure that right. In mid-December 1964, Dr. King selected Selma, Alabama, as the location of the next campaign, and he informed President Johnson of his decision by telephone.

Selma, Alabama, was a small city about 50 miles west of Montgomery, nestled along the Alabama River. At that time Afro-Americans were the majority but only 1.9% of them were registered to vote. Mondays were set aside as black voter registration days, but blacks were prevented from registering, due to absurd literacy tests and intimidation by Sheriff Jim Clark. Selma was ruled by Sheriff Clark. He was a man with a reputation of instant homicidal rage and extreme brutality. The Selma campaign began on January 2, 1965, with speeches and demonstrations.

Dr. King interrupted the campaign and came back to Boston. He preached at Harvard University, and I attended the worship service in the chapel in the Yard. He spoke extemporaneously on the theme of the sin of segregation, with the rhythms and metaphors of the black church. Later at a press conference, he announced that he would return to Boston in April and confront the economic and political structures of racism in the city. He then went back to Selma.

In January, Sheriff Clark publicly beat up Amilia Boynton, black voting registrar, and Annie Lee Cooper, civil rights activist. When he realized he could not maintain control, Clark invited the Alabama State Police to come to Selma and offer assistance. On the day the state troopers entered Selma, under the command of Colonel Al Lingo, everybody got nervous because of the troopers' reputation for extreme brutality.

In mid-February Dr. King developed a new tactic, the night march. A night march was conducted in nearby Marion, Alabama, hometown of Coretta

Scott King. During the march, the lights went out. The troopers became enraged and attacked the marchers. One of them, Jimmy Lee Jackson, age 26, and his mother and grandfather, ran for safety into Mack's café. The troopers burst into the café and shot Jimmy in the stomach at close range. A few days later, as Jimmy lay dying in the hospital, Col. Al Lingo of the state police visited him on his deathbed and issued two warrants for his arrest: on the charge of assault and battery and the charge of attempted murder.

On February 26, 1965 Jimmy Lee Jackson died, and Dr. King decided to lead a march from Selma to Montgomery as a memorial to Jimmy and as a means to present grievances to Governor George Wallace. Sunday, March 7, was the day chosen. The marchers assembled at Brown Street AME Church, known as Brown Chapel, and they marched toward the Alabama River and began to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge. When they reached the peak of the bridge, they stopped and saw before them an army of blue-helmeted Alabama state troopers, some of whom were mounted on horseback. Behind the troopers were Sheriff Clark's posse – a gang of white racists, deputized and armed with table legs and baseball bats. Behind them were other police organizations. On the roadsides were large, jeering, hostile crowds. Clark and Lingo were also on the roadside. The marchers were confronted by Major John Cloud. He told the marchers their march was illegal and that they should return to the church. The marchers knelt down to pray, and Major Cloud gave the command to charge. With whips, clubs, rubber hoses laced with barbed wire, horses, and toxic tear gas, the state troopers attacked the marchers, beating, clubbing them, and committing atrocities on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. That day thereafter was known as Bloody Sunday.

Dr. King was absent from Bloody Sunday, for which he was criticized. We now know the reason. The state police had intended to assassinate him at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Someone tipped him off, and he went to Atlanta. Nevertheless, on that Sunday evening he was overcome with guilt, and he sent out many telegrams to religious leaders all over the country, asking them to come to Selma and march with him to Montgomery on Tuesday, March 9. Many went to Selma.

On Tuesday he led a march from Brown Chapel to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and the marchers were stopped by the state police, who were enforcing a federal injunction against the march, issued by Judge Frank Johnson of Montgomery. Dr. King turned back, for which he was also criticized. However, he never disobeyed federal injunctions. On Tuesday evening several ministers had dinner in restaurants in downtown Selma, and after dinner some of them happened to walk by the Silver Moon, a white racist hang-out. A few were attacked, and one of them – a white, Unitarian minister from Boston, named James Reeb – was brutally bludgeoned into unconsciousness with a “2x4.” With a combination of racism, incompetence, and a flat tire it took four hours to get Reeb to the university hospital in Birmingham. The nation was shocked by the beating of Reverend Reeb. President Johnson flew his wife from Boston to

Birmingham on board Air Force One. On Thursday, March 11, James Reeb died. The murder of James Reeb released an enormous outpouring of grief in the nation; and at the same time, the murder of James Reeb shocked Congress and the President into action. On that weekend they began deliberations on a voting rights bill.

On Monday evening, March 15, President Lyndon Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress in one of his great speeches. He said he would send a voting rights bill to Congress, and he would sign it. He also based the Civil Rights Movement upon the revolutionary traditions of our country.

I did not hear that speech that night. On that night I was a Freedom Rider, riding a bus to Selma for my third campaign. There were 75 students from the Boston area, riding two buses, going south through Richmond and stopping for dinner in Atlanta. After dinner, as we were leaving the restaurant, a man said something to me I will never forget. He said: "You are participating in a great historical endeavor." I agreed then; I agree even more so now. We reboarded the bus and drove west in the night, across Georgia and Alabama, through the heart of the old Confederacy, south of Birmingham, city of the church bombings. On the bus ride that night I contemplated what might happen to me in Selma. I thought I could be brutally beaten, or I could be arrested and put in jail, or I could be killed. On the bus ride that night I struggled to come to terms with those possibilities. In some respects, I think I am still riding that bus.

We arrived in Selma in the morning, and the bus drove into the parking lot of Brown Chapel. Other Freedom Riders were already there, singing "What Side Are You On, Boys?" Brown Chapel was our headquarters, but we slept on the floor at the Baptist Church on Sylvan Street. At Brown Chapel we participated in mass meetings. The mass meeting was the central ritual of the Civil Rights Movement. Part pep rally, part revival meeting, it featured preaching and singing. There were two main themes of the mass meetings: exodus from slavery, from the Old Testament; and love of the enemy, from the New Testament. The street marches symbolized the exodus motif, the nonviolence the love of enemy motif. There was a third theme in the Selma mass meetings, namely the Holy Communion, the sacrament of redemptive suffering. We took the Holy Communion because we fully expected the state police to attack. We expected to die in Selma, Alabama.

We conducted several marches from Brown Chapel, going downtown to the court house, demanding the right to vote and confronting Sheriff Jim Clark. Clark was wearing military fatigues, carrying his billy club, and standing on top of the 16 green marble steps of the Dallas County Court House. He was surrounded by his large entourage: the state police, heavily armed, sitting on motorcycles with their radios blaring racist language; Clark's posse armed with table legs and baseball bats; and, of course, the crowds, always the crowds –

hostile, jeering white racist crowds. My flashbacks are mainly of the crowds. After 40 years, I can still see the lines of hatred etched on their faces.

We marched black and white. My partner in the marches and mass meetings was a young girl named Lila Solomon. She was 12 years old. She had been arrested and put in jail seven times, as had her friends. The black children of Selma had long prison records. What do you suppose happened to Lila and her friends in jail? They were brutally beaten with baseball bats by the state police and burned with electric cattle prods. This unjust suffering remains with me, this horror of Selma. I remembered the boasts of the racist Methodist preachers in Atlanta, and I made this connection: Racism is evil, because it leads to the torture of the children.

I visited Lila's family in their home; I visited the families of other children. I made pastoral calls in Selma. In every home I visited, in the living rooms I saw the same object. I saw a large colored painting of President Kennedy, illumined by a lamp and presented in the manner of a shrine. The death of Kennedy was deeply grieved by the Afro-American peoples of the South.

After one week, we returned to Boston. In the following week the great march from Selma to Montgomery took place. The murders continued, and on August 6 President Lyndon Johnson signed the 1965 Voting Rights Act into law. I am proud to say: "We wrote that legislation in the streets. We signed that law in the streets. We were marching for justice in the unpaved, dirt streets of Selma, Alabama."

In the fall semester 1965, tensions were building up on our campus over the Vietnam War. On Bloody Sunday President Johnson had dispatched 1000 marines to Danang, South Vietnam to protect the airbase there. By the fall 1965, he had increased the armed forces to 300,000, to commence the land war, even though he had known since November 25, 1963, that the situation in Vietnam was hopeless. In a telephone conversation with Dr. King, President Johnson said, "I hear you're not with me on Vietnam." Indeed, King was not. Dr. King opposed the Vietnam War for two reasons. It was immoral, and it was draining away the resources from the War on Poverty of the Johnson administration.

I agreed with Dr. King on the war, and I joined the anti-war protests on our campus in the academic year 1965-1966. These were my fourth campaign. We marched against the war, in spite of heavy-handed FBI intimidation and in spite of hostile crowds, chanting "bomb Hanoi." I protested the Vietnam War because I belonged to the Civil Rights Movement, and my loyalties were to Gandhi and King. I did not join the anti-war movement. There were two movements, and they were different. I was troubled by the tactics of the anti-war movement. Burning the draft cards or draft records, demonizing the police or armed forces, refusing to go to jail when arrested, fleeing into the underground or going to Canada – these were tactics that violated the means-end purity of the nonviolent tradition.

What troubled me the most was the fact that the anti-war movement lacked a theology of death. It lacked the resources to deal with tragic suffering, particularly child death. The Civil Rights Movement produced 16 martyrs, not counting Dr. King, and some of them were children. One task of the movement was to demonstrate and declare that unearned suffering is redemptive. Let us recall that Dr. King was a Baptist minister, and his approach to the entire movement was based on a pastoral theology.

I received my ministerial degree in May, 1966, and in the following academic year I studied in Europe. In the fall and winter terms I studied the reforms of Vatican II and the Christian-Marxist dialogue at the University of Geneva. In the spring term I studied French at the University of Paris, and I read the literature of Marxism. While in Paris, I witnessed the rise to dominance of the Communist Party. In the literature and discussions of Marxism, the Civil Rights Movement was totally neglected. The reason was, of course, that the Civil Rights Movement had made Marxism obsolete as an agent of social change. Likewise in the universities, Gandhi and King were not discussed. Therefore, the philosophy of nonviolence did not motivate the student uprisings of 1968, when the barricades went up on the Boulevard Saint Germaine.

While I was in Paris, Dr. King gave an important speech at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967. Some consider this his greatest speech. In that speech he publicly repudiated the American war policy in Vietnam. He portrayed the United States as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.” Dr. King’s anti-war speech was widely condemned: on the one hand, by the Johnson administration, thus shattering the old coalition between the federal government and the movement; on the other hand, by other civil rights leaders, thus leading to the break-up of the movement. The most outspoken critic of King’s anti-war speech was Benjamin Hooks of the NAACP.

I returned to Boston in the summer 1967 to continue my doctoral program at the university, and I served a parish in the inner city for three years. In the parish ministry I worked with the War on Poverty program of the Johnson administration, and I confronted racism in my congregation. The racism of my parishioners was, however, unique. It was a resentment of the poor. They believed they had been cut off from economic opportunity, and they had been socially marginalized as a minority group, even though they were white. They felt they deserved attention from the federal government. Thus, in the parish ministry I witnessed the collapse of the older coalition between labor and civil rights. From that time to the present the problem of urban poverty has not been addressed.

On Sunday evening, April 4, 1968, I was at home, listening to the radio. Shortly after 6pm, an announcement was made: “Martin Luther King has been shot in Memphis, Tennessee.” He had gone to Memphis at the invitation of James Lawson to participate in the garbage collectors’ strike. An hour later a second

announcement was made: “Martin Luther King has died.” When the King assassination became known, the inner cities erupted in riots of violent rage; and across the land our cities burned in the fires of the night.

At home I was seized and overcome with grief. In my grief I remembered what “Daddy” King had said in Atlanta four years earlier – “how God is protecting the life of my son Martin, how divine providence is guiding the life of my son Martin.” In my grief I asked, was God no longer protecting Martin, was divine providence no longer guiding the life of Martin? I turned away from providential thinking and moved toward a tragic theology. My feelings were reaffirmed in June, 1968, with the assassination of Robert Kennedy. Two years later I came to Lycoming College, bearing a tragic consciousness, shaped by three assassinations, four campaigns, and “Freedom Summer 1964.” In the 35 years that I have been teaching, I have never lost the sorrow of the night Dr. King died.

May we continue in the legacy of Martin Luther King. Dr. King demonstrated that the ethic of love, seemingly harmless and otherworldly, may be applied to the political arena, without compromise, without exception, and achieve fundamental social change. Dr. King demonstrated that violence is not decisive in history. Violence does not lead to fundamental social change. Violence does not promote justice. Justice comes from the love of God, at work in the world, marching in the streets and riding in the buses, in spite of the tragic fate of racism.

Let us also remember the pioneers of the Civil Rights Movement: Philip Randolph, James Lawson, the Freedom Riders. More importantly, let us never forget the children, the children of Birmingham who suffered the attacks of the German shepherds and fire hoses released by the police, the children of Selma who were beaten and burned by the state police – Lila and her friends. It was the children, these children of African descent, who redeemed this nation.

editor’s postscript: *The Chronicle* expresses deep appreciation to Dr. Hughes for his willingness to share this very personal story about his intersection with history. May it be a poignant reminder that we are all, whether we wish to admit it or not, constantly intersecting with what will become the history in the minds and hearts of our children and grandchildren.