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What I Think Of Dr. Martin King

By JACKIE ROBINSON

The telephone rang.

Before the rich, deep voice identified the caller, I knew that he was my dear friend, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

He was calling with regard to the open letter which I wrote him in this column; a letter expressing my confusion and distress over his stand on Viet Nam. I had invited him to prepare a reply which I would have been happy to publish. Characteristic of Martin, he did not rush to accept this offer, simply to justify himself in the eyes of those who had read my open letter.

He is a man who is not defeated by criticism, particularly when he is speaking from conviction. I believe that he speaks from conviction one hundred percent of the time. The reason he was calling me was that he was concerned that I, as a friend, understand his philosophy and his motivation.

We had a long — and for me — a most enlightening conversation.

I had understood that, as a man of God, Martin had been compelled from within to speak out against war and for peace.

I understood that, as a leader who is not merely a civil rights leader, he would have been untrue to himself had he not taken a stand for a principle in which he so deeply believed.

I understood that, as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, it was logical that he have as much concern for waging peace as some people have for waging war.

I realized that the Martin King who suffered and risked life for nonviolence in Montgomery, in Birmingham, in Selma — and yes, in the North — that same Martin King is the man who now cries out for nonviolence in Viet Nam.

All these things I had understood.

I understood also how Martin felt as a father whose daughter once said to her mother: 'Mommy, I don't want to be blown up.' I understood how he felt as the husband of a wonderful woman who, for many years, unheralded, has been working in the world peace movement.

Did Not Understand Some

But there were other things I did not understand. Was he really advocating a marriage of the civil rights and peace movements — and, if so, would such a marriage be a disastrous alliance? Why did he seem to confine his criticism to the deeds of the U.S. and to ignore the deeds of the Viet Cong? What was the background of his knowledge to assess the war situation? Was he really convinced that the President is not doing all in his power to bring the war to a halt?

These — and other questions — we discussed. I would be foolish to attempt to give you, second-hand, the brilliant arguments he advanced. I have not given up the hope that he will — in spite of that back-breaking schedule of his — find time to do a guest column or two in this space — to express them himself.

But there is one central point I want to make. It is a truth which my friend, Martin King understands absolutely. And I want to make sure that you do.

I am no hypocrite. So I will not say that I have changed all the opinions I had which seemed to differ from what I understood to be Dr. King's opinions. But I am proud to say that this man is, in my opinion, the finest leader the Negro people have and one of the most magnificent leaders the world has today. I respect him because, no matter how I may disagree with him, I know that he is a sincere man. I know that he has the capacity to make the hard decision of saying precisely what he thinks, whether it is a popular thing to say or not.

He is still my leader — a man to whose defense I would come at any time he might need me. That is a personal commitment and a public pledge.

So I had to write this column because I would not want bigots and those who secretly hate Dr. King to find comfort in my disagreeing with him. Let there be no doubt in any man's mind where I stand on the subject of Martin Luther King, Jr. If ever a man was placed on this earth by divine force, to help solve the doubts and ease the hurts and dispel the fears of mortal man, I believe that man is Dr. King.



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