Beloved Community

Dr. King's Political Theology of Love and its Implications for Our Time

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Alex@LongArcStrategies.com
www.LongArcStrategies.com

Introduction: The Possibility of Justice

"Never forget: Justice is what love looks like in public."
- Cornel West

The stories we tell matter—especially the ones we tell about ourselves. They define and delimit the realm of possibility within which our hope operates and our politics flow. What, we might ask, is *our* story? And what does that story say to us about our hopes for the possibility for justice in a wounded world? Does it believe *actual* justice is possible?

Upon initial examination, it seems not. Yes, we are willing to pursue justice. We are certainly willing to *fight* for it. We will even—when pressed by the force of events—kill

and die for it. But our modern world seems reconciled to the idea that true justice is, in actuality, *impossible*. It is an *ideal*—something we can pursue and approach, but never actually achieve.

After Auschwitz, after Hiroshima, after Rwanda—in what type of *justice* could we possibly believe for our world? After Jim Crow and the 'New Jim Crow'—do we simply need to accept that there will *always be a next Jim Crow*?

The ability to smile in the face of absurdity[i], to recognize the freedom of resistance, and *to choose to act* against hopeless odds is, to be sure, a type of courage—perhaps the definitive essence of it. We can agree that it is certainly far better to roll the boulder of justice up the hill of impossibility than to witness suffering and do nothing at all.

But we should pause before we abandon hope entirely. The role of dreams should not be discounted. Perhaps dreams are not, as we suppose, mere illusions—perhaps they are intimations of possibilities we fail to recognize.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr had a dream. He dreamed a different world was possible—that justice, *in actuality*, was possible. He made a fierce, compelling, and cruciform argument for it. His argument was by and large rejected, even by his friends and colleagues.[ii] And, for our part, we've essentially moved on. We now enjoy the comfort of being able to celebrate Dr. King's memory without needing to stake a claim on whether he was onto something, or whether he was merely dreaming.

But our times are getting dark—and in the growing despair of a young century falling headlong into planetary

ecological collapse, we would do well to reconsider the argument Dr. King laid out in defense of his dream. His argument was about the power of love and the possibility of justice. His dream—as Cornel West tells us never to forget—was that justice is *what love looks like in public.*[iii]

Dr. King did not think of himself as a philosopher. He spoke rather about wanting to be remembered as a "drum major for justice."[iv] He also lamented in his final years that people did not seem to truly understand him.[v] He died with 75% of the country having decided *against* him—including 60% of Black Americans who had as well, in judgment that his conception of *love's* power was "irrelevant" to the pursuit of *real* power.[vi]

From a close engagement with his ideas, however—offered as they were in both thought and deed—we can appreciate just how deeply *philosophical he was* about the issues of love and justice and how his philosophy informed the *methodology* of nonviolent resistance he employed.

In his speeches and writings, we can observe a body of thought about love and justice that we might call a 'political theology of love'. His belief in love, however, was not just in *any kind* of love. It took a specific form, and we can recognize three crucial elements: It was an *action*, it occurred at the level of *community*, and it was *unconditional and universal*. Its application to the realm of political life represented a distinct manifestation and expression of its nature, a manifestation we should perhaps recognize as what 'justice' actually is.

Dr. West's distillation of the essence of King's political theology—'that justice is what love looks like in public'—

encompasses each of these elements and enables us to see them as an organic, operational whole. West's quote also has the profound insight of pointing to *precisely the nuance* that makes King's philosophy of love distinct in its own right from other conceptions with which we are familiar. In particular, it is in creative tension with the ideas held by the theologian King himself most admired: Reinhold Niebuhr.

Reinhold Niebuhr is considered one of the most important theologians and public intellectuals of the 20th century. His fundamental conception of justice was developed as a way to grapple with the reality of the world's horrors—with its predilection to violence and predation—and to figure out how to reconcile the demands of love with the necessity of fierce confrontation with evil. Niebuhr's concept of justice is framed not as an expression of love, but rather—in the context of a tragic world—as its '*approximation*'. For Niebuhr, justice needs to be understood as occupying a separate category from love. Justice occurs at the level of politics, as a form of collective morality—separate from the personal sphere.

The difference between these formulations matters because of the story they tell and what kind of political aims we pursue as a result. We must decide: On one side, with King and West—we understand justice to be love *itself*, expressed in the specific sphere of community. On the other side, with Niebuhr, we understand justice to occupy a separate sphere from love—a second best alternative, which seeks to '*approximate*' the higher ideal of love as best as possible within the constraints of the 'real' world. Justice in Niebuhr's vision takes on *itself* the burden of engaging with injustice, in a world of political conflict, oppression, and war—a task that love is seen as

simply unable to effectively engage with. Justice in this view is willing to do what love cannot: to do what is necessary in confrontation with the brutal reality of violence, terror, and oppression in our world.

We must make a decision about what we believe. Our answer informs our political imagination and the strategies we pursue to bring it to life. Dr. King insisted on a possibility for justice that most others found simply impossible. If we examine the depth of his argument and find it convincing, we *might* just find the courage to enact a vision of justice we have previously ruled out.

In what follows, we will first examine Niebuhr's core argument—as expressed in his many books and writings, but most importantly in his 1932 classic *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. We will then discuss how Dr. King both embraced and differed from Niebuhr, as expressed through his own speeches and writings about love. Finally, we will consider the implications of what King's conception of love and justice might mean for our theories of both, and how it informs our political imagination as we confront the challenges of our time.

Chapter 1:
King's 'Niebuhrian Stratagem of Power'

Moral Man and Immoral Society

In 1932—as intellectuals in Europe and America reeled from the shattered '*Belle Epoque*' optimism in the wake of the First World War and stared headlong into the rise of Fascism and Nazism—a controversial book was published by an American theologian who had previously served as one of the internationally recognized advocates for pacifism. The book was *Moral Man and Immoral Society* by Reinhold Niebuhr.

Central to the book's thesis was a biting critique of pacifism and the claim that we needed to grapple honestly with the idea that "the selfishness of human communities must be regarded as an inevitability."[i]

Niebuhr did not intend this only as an observation in a historical sense—he was writing as a theologian and philosopher. His understanding of the "selfishness" of social groups was based not only on the obvious examples of violence and oppression we see—which are manifestations of the underlying brokenness of sin in the world—but also more structurally, as an expression of a *fundamental limitation* of what human communities could be expected to achieve—regardless of malice, and even with the best of intentions. While individuals can act in loving mutuality and self-sacrifice with one another, Niebuhr believed this is not something that can effectively occur at the scale of large social groups. The best that groups can do is transparently negotiate their self-interests with one another and pursue justice as a balancing of competing claims. This was what Niebuhr wanted to call 'justice'. Love, on the other hand, was relegated to a separate, inter-personal sphere.

With this as the premise, Niebuhr's book laid out an argument for the categorical distinction between the principles of individual morality and that of social groups. Individuals could love, but groups must pursue a different logic, that of justice. Justice could approximate love as best as possible, but could never achieve its ideal because it was fundamentally expressed as an adjudication of competing interests rather than as a purely *dis*-interested concern for others. "The closest approximation," Neibuhr writes, "to a love in which life supports life in voluntary community is a justice in which life is prevented from destroying life and the interests of the one are guarded against unjust claims by the other."[ii]

The practical implications of this thesis had to do with our need to wrestle with the fact that the tragedy of

navigating a world of predatory violence requires that we use *power* to achieve justice. It also means the willingness to operate at a collective level in ways that we cannot justify on an individual level—including the use of force, coercive power, and even violence. How to reconcile this conflict with our religious ideal of love was what Niebuhr was proposing by distinguishing between individual morality—which could be guided by a love ethic—and group morality, which could pursue justice as its highest ideal. In short, we had to understand that justice sometimes requires violence, even if love could never permit it.

Niebuhr—whose stature ultimately grew to become one of the leading theologians and public intellectuals of the 20th century—was brought to significant notoriety not only by the provocative and rigorously reasoned argument of the book, but also by the way in which it represented an intellectual conversion *against* the pacifist philosophy he had once championed as a theologian, socialist leader, and prominent faculty member at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. After publishing *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in 1932, Niebuhr resigned from the Fellowship of Reconciliation—an international pacifist organization he had helped lead as chairman for multiple terms. He became a prominent critic of its philosophy, advocating instead a theological position of "Christian realism" in which the reality of sin in the world required a tragic engagement with its contradictions—one that demanded the willingness to use coercive power and even violence at a collective level against the forces of oppression.

Well-meaning moralists and pacifists, Niebuhr concluded, are simply *ineffective* in their efforts because they have no

theory about how to "relate the religious ideal of love to the political necessity of coercion."[iii] He cites, with examples, the disastrous influence of the ideas of Leo Tolstoy—the world-famous novelist of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*—whose career culminated with a mystical conversion to an advocacy of world peace through the pure religious ideal of nonresistance, which Tolstoy saw as the true message of the Christian gospel. Tolstoy wrote about this in his famous book of 1894, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*[iv]—which had a profound influence on Gandhi and generations of other activists. As a theologian, Niebuhr critiqued Tolstoy's well-intentioned but ineffective and therefore *immoral* advocacy of passive nonresistance as naïve in the midst of a world that would endure in its sinful state for as long as we remained this side of heaven. The reality of sin, Niebuhr argued, meant that Tolstoy's ideas were demonstrably ineffective against the "brutal will-to-power" of organized political terror in human societies.[v]

Martin Luther King Jr first encountered *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in 1950 during his graduate studies, and it changed the course of his life.

Niebuhr's influence on King

It might seem surprising and contradictory to learn of the major influence that a theologian like Niebuhr—who advocated for the tragic necessity of using violence, and who sought a way to reconcile such violence with his faith—came to have on Martin Luther King Jr. We think of Dr. King—along with Gandhi, who King revered—as certainly one of the most prominent advocates in history of the philosophy of nonviolence. How can we understand this connection?

First, we should appreciate just how deep of a connection there really *was*. While Dr. King's vocal embrace and advocacy of the Gandhian principles of nonviolent resistance are well-known, his encounter with the provocative political theology of Reinhold Niebuhr during his time in graduate school became a permanent and primary influence on his life and work. King cited Niebuhr in all of his major books, invited him to attend the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965, and sent him an inscribed copy of his first book *Stride Toward Freedom* in which he praised Niebuhr's "great prophetic vision" and "unswerving devotion to the ideals of freedom and justice."[vi]

In public, King embraced and promoted the connection between his work and the philosophy of Gandhi. This was out of a deep and genuine commitment, but also, as Taylor Branch reports in *Parting the Waters,* in part as a "product of public relations."[vii] In private, however, King described his use of Gandhian nonviolence as "merely a Niebuhrian stratagem of power"[viii]—a statement which begs for understanding.

King's intention by this phrase was not meant to express a merely pragmatic belief in the power of nonviolence, nor any lack of admiration for Gandhi. Indeed, on a spiritual level what King shares with Gandhi is decisive. But King's pursuit of nonviolence was about a broader political vision he was pursuing, one that went beyond the particular strategy of how to achieve it.

We can trace King's very intentional embrace of nonviolent non-cooperation and civil disobedience to his embrace of Niebuhr's contention for the need to use *power,* including coercive power, to fight injustice. As

Taylor Branch documents, the encounter with Niebuhr changed King's "fundamental outlook on religion" and "affected him more deeply than any modern figure, including Gandhi."[ix] The impact had to do with King's enthusiastic but previously uncritical commitment to the "Social Gospel" message that social problems like poverty, crime, and racial tensions could effectively be addressed through the application of Christian ethics to the reformation of society and its institutions. King's faith and optimism were shaken by Niebuhr's claim that the Social Gospel was incapable of actually *confronting* the evil of the world in any effective way "and was therefore not moral."[x] He was attracted to Niebuhr's insistence and rationale for how power can and should be used in pursuit of justice, especially in confrontation with the evil of the world.

Niebuhr and the Power of Resistance

It should be noted that Niebuhr, though highly critical of the extreme religious pacifism of Tolstoy, thought approvingly of Gandhi's strategy of nonviolent resistance, which he found to be a more politically astute form of social engagement. He didn't believe Gandhi's tactics were sufficient on their own, but were potentially helpful to the cause of justice. The difference was Gandhi's use of what Niebuhr saw as a "type of coercion"[xi]—through strikes, marches and boycotts—which at least grappled with the need to use force in the realm of politics, rather than the pure *non-resistance* of Tolstoy.

For King, Niebuhr's comments about the application of Gandhi's methods to the cause of Black communities in America were convicting. Niebuhr commented about nonviolence as a "particularly strategic instrument for an

oppressed group which is hopelessly in the minority and has no possibility of developing sufficient power to set against its oppressors."[xii] He specifically linked the strategy of Gandhi to the possibility and hope for "the emancipation of the Negro race in America," which "probably waits upon the adequate development of this kind of social and political strategy."[xiii]

Niebuhr stated frankly that it was "hopeless for the Negro to expect complete emancipation from the menial social and economic position into which the white man has forced him, merely by trusting in the moral sense of the white race. It is equally hopeless to attempt emancipation through violent rebellion." The use of coercive power through nonviolent tactics, Niebuhr argued, *could* be effective. He concluded that "there is no problem of political life to which religious imagination can make a larger contribution than this problem of developing non-violent resistance."[xiv]

In this context, we can better understand why King could understand his embrace of Gandhian tactics of nonviolent resistance as a "Niebuhrian strategem of power," as quoted earlier. The application of religious and social activism through nonviolent resistance to the overcoming of racial injustice in America became the core focus of King's adult life.

The Power of Love

But despite the enduring inspiration and admiration King expressed for Niebuhr, we should be cautious not to assume too uncritical of an embrace by King of Niebuhr's full outlook. We can potentially discern the seed of his difference with Niebuhr in the text of Dr. King's first book

–*Stride Toward Freedom*, his account of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956. King sent an inscribed copy of the book to Niebuhr's office shortly after publication. Though Niebuhr was traveling at the time and only received the inscribed copy months after King had sent it, Niebuhr eventually wrote to thank King for sending the copy, mentioning that he had already read it "with great enthusiasm," but was grateful for King's inscription and more importantly the "splendid example which you have given both to your people and to the Christian people of the nation."[xv] The mutual admiration was established, and was to last the rest of both men's lives.

And yet, on page 98 of *Stride Toward Freedom* we find the following statement, in direct engagement of Niebuhr's thesis: "True pacifism is not unrealistic submission to evil power, as Niebuhr contends," wrote King. "*It is rather a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love*."[xvi] (emphasis added)

This belief in the power of love, as we shall explore, represents a crucial way in which King's work both embraced and contrasted with Niebuhr's views. King's philosophical and theological premises are different in important ways from Niebuhr's. As a result, King's use of love's power to *effect* justice is also different in important ways. He most definitely embraced the need to wield power, but King emphasized something that was an underestimated aspect in Niebuhr's thought: the intentional cultivation by a community of *the kind of power that could not only resist, but actually overcome.*

Chapter 2
King's Political Theology of Love

Cosmic Companionship

In response to Niebuhr's portrayal of justice as merely the "approximation" of love in a sinful world, King seems early on to have taken a critical view of this position. As early as 1952, during his years at Boston University, King developed a paper summarizing and ultimately criticizing what he called the "ethical dualism" of love and justice in Niebuhr's thought.[i] In the paper's conclusion, King affirmed as "profound" Niebuhr's analysis of the complexity of justice in a world of sin and suffering, with which he found "very little to disagree." But he saw Niebuhr, as a theologian, neglecting a crucial component of the Christian gospel: the active power of divine love in the world.

"But there is one weakness in Niebuhr's ethical position which runs the whole gamut of his writings," King wrote in the concluding chapter of his paper. "This weakness

lies in the inability of his system to deal adequately" with the "availability" of divine love as an active force in the world, by which, through spiritual development and in community, this divine love can be "concretely conceived in human nature and history."[ii] Niebuhr's position seemed to portray the condition of humanity as if it was *completely* separated and cut off from God—not just impaired by sin but completely alienated by it, as if humanity was forced to engage in the world of politics using human effort and judgment alone. But King, as we know, believed we are *not* alone, and that we do not need to act alone in the face of evil and oppression.

King's theological position was centered around what he calls in this early paper "the availability of the divine Agape." The Greek word for love, 'agape', was to play a crucial role in King's later work, but even at this early stage, King's theology centered around its immanent presence and *availability* to those who seek God's will—and *who enter into community with others to do so*. King closes the paper with a quote that refers to the release of "creative energy into the world" through religious or secular efforts which "in actual fellowship rises above the conflicts of individual and collective egoism."[iii] We would do well to recognize this as a description of exactly what King eventually set out to do.

This idea that we are not alone in our efforts to achieve justice is absolutely central to King's faith. His early critique of Niebuhr in this way helps to inform our understanding of what King later called "cosmic companionship"[iv]—an idea he repeatedly referenced in speeches and writings as the source of his courage and strength in the face of such a daunting task.

King's belief in God's active presence in the world is not a surprising or unique position for someone like him to take, given his background as the son of a preacher and his previous seminary studies. King's theology, however, was more sophisticated than a belief in a supernatural God in the sky, punishing enemies and influencing the world through divine miracles. His theology revolved, rather, around a belief in the fundamental nature of the universe—one that manifested the relational shape of being *embraced from within*. This is what he meant by the "immanence of the divine Agape," and this is also an important part of what he meant by 'cosmic companionship'.

King's belief in the *power* of 'agape', however, must be understood as not just religious belief but also as philosophically independent of his particular faith. He would share later in speeches before diverse audiences that he was "aware of the fact that there are devout believers in nonviolence who find it difficult to believe in a personal God."[v] His core philosophical point, he would stress, was not about whether to attribute this shape of the moral universe to the presence of God, *but rather to affirm it as a characteristic of the cosmos*—something we can affirm about the fundamental nature of reality. He believed the nature of reality had an inherent spiritual curvature that "bends towards justice,"[vi] and that it did so because it emerges from and processually evolves *toward* togetherness. [vii] Segregation in all its forms, therefore, was trying to stand against the truth of the universe itself—but it cannot withstand the contradiction permanently. Such an idea requires a certain kind of faith, to be sure, but it was inclusive of a broad range of positions that did not require a belief in God, personal or not.

To this end, what matters when it comes to King's philosophy of love was the *particular kind of love* he believed in—how it worked, where it could be found, and what it was capable of. This understanding is evident in early form in his paper on Niebuhr, but comes to robust development in his later speeches and writings as a central pillar of not just his faith, *but of his strategy*. King's emphasis was on the availability of love—*agape*—as something we can universally access and wield in the struggle for justice. In his speeches, we can find three characteristics that are crucial to recognize about *agape*: It was an action, it was available to be accessed in and through community, and it was unconditional and universal.

The Unconditional Nonviolence of Agape

In speech after speech through the years, King would stress that "at the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love"—a very particular kind of love, and likely very different from what his audiences might think of when they heard the word. His emphasis was on love understood from the Greek as '*agape*'—which meant 'unconditional love', as opposed to the more familiar senses of romantic love (*eros*) or friendship (*philia*). King would urge his audience to consider the characteristics that made *agape* love an important tool in the fight for justice.

"In speaking of love at this point, we are not referring to some sentimental or affectionate emotion," King began. [viii] "It would be nonsense," he reassured, "to urge men to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense." When we are told to love our enemies, King stressed, we were not

being asked to engage in kindness or affection or friendship. Rather, King was advocating for fierce, determined resistance in direct confrontation with our enemies.

But, he cautioned, this resistance needs to be organized around a "recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated. All humanity is part of a single process."[ix] Unconditional love in confrontation with injustice involves acts of resistance that preserve the ultimate truth that my enemy is a part of the world I inhabit. For King, no action I take, even violence, can completely separate me from my enemy. Hate merely reproduces the enemies it seeks to eliminate. Furthermore, the fundamental relationality of the world entangles me in any violence I undertake and only further inflicts harm upon me.

"To the extent that I harm my brother," King wrote, "no matter what he is doing to me, to that extent I am harming myself." It is ultimately unproductive and does nothing but further increase the amount of hate in the world. King's argument for nonviolence, therefore, was not moralism. It was rooted in this principle of interrelatedness and it cautions against the self-inflicted wound violence incurs upon anyone who uses it.

His contention was that the use of violence could achieve only limited success—that *it could never actually fix the problem, permanently neutralize the threat, or finally achieve the ultimate goal*. "Darkness," King reminds us, "cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."[x] Only love could overcome hate. It was a specific kind of love, and it was deployed in a way that recognized the fact of my fundamental relatedness with my enemy. We are not to think of *agape,* therefore, as some kind of

"weak or passive love," King urged. But rather, we need to think of love as a power of community: "It is love in action. *Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it. *Agape* is willingness to go to any length to restore community." And for King, it was the only force in the universe capable of actually doing so.

King Beyond Religion

One can approach King's point on this matter of nonviolence with reserved admiration for its logic. And one can do so without needing to buy into the actual claim about the cosmos he is making, nor the spiritual belief within which he so often made it. Certainly, many of his peers and colleagues in the civil rights movement took this path. When we do so, however, we lose something important that King thought essential.

If the decision we must make has to do with the credibility of the idea that love has this so-called power, *what argument is King making to justify his point?* If this is just a theological argument that justice is possible because God is omnipotent love, it may have the passion to stir souls—even to stir them to action—but it leaves a secular world cold.

King's theology is different than this. He believes we are called to participate in the actualization of agape in the universe because, *theologically speaking, this is how God will actually, in history, address the problem of sin.* However, this is not King's primary point. Rather, at a philosophical level—beyond religion—we see that King describes justice not as a separate category from love but *as the achievement of love itself at the community level—as beloved community.*

Dr. King's belief in the power of love is not based on mysticism, but rather on a set of *philosophical* convictions about the world in which we live. It is the story he believes about the nature of the universe of which we are a part. He is able to argue for the ontological power of love to enact justice in our world because of *his ontological understanding about our world*.

It is not, therefore, based on our religious convictions that we need to decide in favor or dissent from King's argument; We need to decide what we believe about *ourselves and about the world around us.* To see this, we need to understand why King believes it all has to do with the power of *community*.

Community Power

Dr. King's philosophy of *our interrelatedness within community as the source of power itself*—what we mean by 'solidarity'—is what he believes gives our *agapic* efforts the power to change collective existence at the root level.

King's community-level enactment of agapic love is precisely what Niebuhr's thesis in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* neglects. For Niebuhr, only *individuals* are able to act in love. Communities must settle for the closest approximation of love, which is justice. This is because of the very nature of what it means to *be* and *act* as collectives, versus individually.

Love, for Niebuhr, can occur "only in intimate and personal relations."[xi] In love, "the distinctions between mine and thine disappear,"[xii] and this is effectively destroyed if it engages in the kind of "shrewd and

prudent calculation of comparative rights" that justice requires.

While individuals, for Niebuhr, can pursue a path of mutuality and even sacrificial love with one another, groups cannot. This does not mean that goodwill is impossible between groups, but rather that what we should call justice—as a transparent adjudication of competing interests—is *categorically different* from the kind of unselfish mutuality we would call love.

King rejects this division. He believes that we need to think about both love and justice in a very different way. Love is not merely a personal act—it can occur at the level of community. Justice is not merely the balancing of competing claims in the approximation of a higher ideal. *Rather, justice is a state of affairs at a community level.*

Can a community of people, as a sufficiently coordinated body, come to enact love as a collective act? And more importantly: If they did, would it make a difference? Would it be effective in bringing about justice? For King, the answer is yes on both counts, and it is important that we understand why. As we shall explore in the next section, there are three primary reasons:

First, the interconnectedness of the world as the starting fact of life;
Second, what this interconnectedness means about the possibility for beloved community to occur;
Third, because justice can be pursued as the achievement of beloved community, of love in community form.

Chapter 3
Dr. King's Relational Ontology of Love and Justice

The Network of Mutuality

At the heart of King's *philosophical* claim about the power of love in community is his vision of 'beloved community'. King's emphasis on this—on our ability to love collectively as a result of our fundamental interrelatedness—is crucial to understand how we can embrace's King's political theology of love outside the realm of theology itself. It emanates from the explicitly *relational* ontological framework that King embraced as a description of the cosmos we live in. His famous statement, contained in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* expresses this idea directly: *"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."*[i]

This was not merely soaring rhetoric. It was a philosophically-inflected statement of his belief about the nature of the universe, about the fabric of reality itself–material as well as spiritual. While King was writing directly in this context about the ways in which injustice to one person affects everyone through the network of shared being in which we participate as persons, it is crucial to understand his point *as also working the other way*–positive as well as negative. *Love can affect everyone too,* even our enemies.

It is crucial to remember that the love King is talking about is not affection. It is unconditional regard and concern, lived out in relationship. Love occurs not as a feeling or sentiment, as King consistently stressed–but as an *action* in the embrace of the truth of our interrelatedness. Such an application of love–*as agape, in communal action and engagement with our enemy,* King tells us–can have just as much efficacy on the fabric of reality as the much easier to imagine transmission of negative energy does.

King's point about an "inescapable network of mutuality" is grounded in the academic work with which he engaged as a graduate student, and for which he received his PhD. King's articulation reflects the philosophical schools of the modern era that had been attempting to grapple with what it means, *down to the quantum level*, that the fabric of physical reality is infinitely enmeshed and entangled, and that no base level of individual units of "matter" can be said to exist. Rather, the components of the universe are to be understood as emerging out of relational encounter, in and as energetic response. The shape and contour of boundaries between individuals are not fixed,

but rather form through the particular dynamics of the relationships they come into.[ii]

King wrote and studied about the kind of theological reflections that emerge from this new scientific conceptualization of the universe–that nothing can said to 'be' *prior* to relationship; it is rather *relationality itself which is constitutive of existence.* If this is true even at the base level of matter, then Dr. King would invite us to consider how the quality of the relationships we form might be an important part of how we can change the world, *from within*.

The philosophical and theological implications of this new picture of reality are an important part Dr. King's academic background,[iii] so we should not neglect the profound way his own spirituality came to be expressed in terms that take seriously the idea *that the boundaries between individuals are far more porous than we have previously imagined*–and that the relationality between individual parts and the collective whole is similarly *internal to* each part–making reality such that whatever affects one, *really does affect all*.[iv]

The Ontology of Communal Love

This is the philosophical backdrop of King's statement about the network of mutuality, and it is no coincidence that his belief in a network of mutuality is connected to his belief in the efficacy of love in the world. To embrace relationships, and relational encounter itself, as *constitutive* of the individuals that form opens a pathway of causal efficacy in the world that Niebuhr's philosophical frame does not entertain. For King, it is the basis by which the exercise of community, expressed

solidaristically in love, can be truly said to *change* the world around us.

Turning back to Niebuhr—while it lurks only in the background and is not a subject on which he dwells—there is an important presumption about the intrinsic *separatedness* of individuals from each other that is operating within his argument. "One can view the actions of others only from an external perspective," Niebuhr writes in the conclusion of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. And further: "Only the actions of the self can be viewed from the internal perspective."[v] This separatedness may result from the condition of sin for Niebuhr, and therefore not essentially or permanently so in an eschatological sense. But for now, the implication is that we must deal with others as externally related to us, and that our perspective in the world is confined to the isolated 'I' in a world of 'others'. We can affect the world, therefore, only truly from the outside, and primarily through force.

King's belief in the ontologically entangled nature of reality, however, indicates that the strict separation between individuals is not so complete as Niebuhr describes. If we are related to each other *internally* rather than externally, then what happens at the community level can be understood to involve more than a purely *external* perspective or field of engagement. From King's perspective, if we are fundamentally inter-woven with and through our relationships with one another, then we can focus on developing the methods that directly engage at this relational level. Niebuhr's limitation that we "can view the actions of others only from an external perspective" does not *necessarily* hold. This is important because it means that the categorical distinction between

individual and collective life is not so strict. Niebuhr's description emphasizes only the aspect of us which is separated, but a more mutual relationality in community *is* possible, and in more than a surface way. This fundamentally changes the equation about what individuals are able to do when they embrace their inter-relationality and come together into a community to act as a collective force in the world.

Niebuhr's emphasis, for King, does not sufficiently take into account the ways in which persons can access, experience, and *employ* collective existence—and thus act from the place not of individuality but of *solidarity*. Niebuhr's portrayal does not, therefore, explore the realistic possibility that a group of people can—in intentional spiritual embrace—*act as one body in the world*. King's message, in the end, is a direct challenge to Niebuhr's conception that "There is not enough imagination in any social group to render it amenable to the influence of pure love. Nor is there a possibility of persuading any social group to make a venture in pure love."

King's claim is that this is perhaps too dismissive of what is possible. The ability to actively participate as a participatory agent of the whole—in one's agency as an *interwovenness of whole and part*—points to the possibility of just such an imagination that could take shape among a group of people. And it also evokes the possibility that such an imagination could be awakened in others, even our enemies. If such collective, coordinated, solidaristic action—as an expression of *agape*—is possible and not ruled out by definition, then we can entertain the very important possibility that love can be an action that can be enacted *by communities themselves*—an action that can

occur at a community level, and not just by the individuals within it.

We should keep in mind that this community-level of love is not to be thought of as sentiment or emotion—or even affection. It is a type of unconditional affirmation of the value of each and all, and a willingness to fiercely confront those who violate that value. This is what we ought to mean by the word 'justice'.

Justice is what love looks like in public

The idea that love can be enacted at group-level, by a group acting as a solidaristic agent of love, is precisely the thesis that Niebuhr's theory underestimates. And yet, theologically we should keep in mind that this is precisely what the Christian theological conception of the *Holy Trinity* as a perichoretic union of divine persons—acting inseparably in and as love—is all about. Theologians should be cautious, therefore, about dismissing the possibility of love at the community level. The theological possibility that we are invited to participate in that divine dance of communitarian love is an important part of Dr. King's faith. But the *philosophical* possibility that we can—by virtue of our fundamental interrelatedness at a cosmic level—act as one in community and in loving embrace of other communities is an important part of Dr. King's *politics of solidarity*.

This is the possibility that Dr. King's political theology of love entertains, and this is precisely the kind of action his mass movement of nonviolent resistance to oppression was so focused on cultivating through community organizing and action. This is also why—if we do not need to accept the categorical distinction between individuals and groups in the same strict way Niebuhr did—we no longer need to

adopt wholesale his conclusion that justice should be conceived as something categorically different from love itself. If we can understand love at the *community* level, then we can conceptually reintegrate love and justice back into the same sphere

If justice does not need to belong to a different category from love, then we are free to conceive of justice and love as related to each other in a more organic sense. Rather than mere 'approximation' justice can be seen perhaps as the *manifestation* of love within a specific sphere—in public, as West puts it. Perhaps then we should think of justice as the *achievement* of love at a community level.

This is not to say that King would reject Niebuhr's contention about what we must realistically grapple with in confrontation with oppression and injustice. The application of justice to the challenge of balancing competing claims, adjudicating conflict, and responding to threats remains a legitimate realm of thought and activity—and indeed a space of tragic choices. King suffers no illusions about this. Justice has a domain of activity that must grapple with this, but it is not a domain that *defines* its fundamental essence or meaning.

King's point, emphasized by West, is not to let our understanding of the ultimate meaning of justice be reduced into merely an approximation. We may, in our dealings, have to approximate justice, rather than love. We *may,* in our dealings, have to engage in activities that we determine are necessary and unjustifiable. Niebuhr's point here about tragedy stands. But we also *may* apply love to the situation we face, and work for it at the community level. Others may behave differently, but *we* can choose the only path that will ultimately overcome

evil. To do so, we have to engage in the kind of intentional practices of solidarity that enact what King called 'beloved community'.

Justice, therefore, should not be thought of fundamentally as an approximation. Justice should be thought of as the all too often cruciform shape of love lived out in community. As political philosopher William Connolly reminds us, 'agonism' is a necessary aspect of existing in a pluralistic cosmos, but Catherine Keller points out that the agonism of relationship need not by definition involve *antagonism*: [vi] *Love must embrace the agonism of loving in a world of difference.*

Love and Justice in the Beloved Community

As we move to conclusion, let us affirm that the positions of King and Niebuhr are not to be understood as mutually exclusive. *They* certainly didn't think so. The choice we must make is not so much between them, as it is a choice about what underlying story we believe about love and justice, and how it informs our political vision and the activities we undertake to achieve it.

King pursued in practice something that was underestimated in Niebuhr's theory. He affirmed Niebuhr's insistence on the use of power—but saw love as something that was more than a personal activity and more powerful in the fight against oppression than it seemed. Love as universal solidarity, as unconditional regard for neighbor, as fierce resistance and direct confrontation with hate—this was the kind of love that could be wielded for justice. In fact, according to Dr. King, it was the only thing that could actually achieve it.

King's message is not to lose our sight—through compromised expectations of what is possible in our world—on what we want the word 'justice' to actually mean. Justice is more than the rationalism of a Kantian ethics—it needs to be thought *phenomenologically* as a condition, as a state of affairs in a community in which the unconditional version of love is being experienced by all.

For King, coming from the Biblical tradition, justice is a state of affairs between and among peoples. *Justice is right relation*—it characterizes the health of a community. Justice in the Bible is about whether in one's abundance one forgets, neglects, or refuses to meet the needs of another. The prophet Ezekiel declares: "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49) *This* is the definition of justice King believed in, and it is a standard of justice that we dare not neglect if we are to find a way to live together in peace.

To summarize, King's vision of justice is a state of affairs in a community in which everyone is recognized for their equally infinite value, and in which the needs of those who are suffering, afflicted, or oppressed are heard and responded to. This is justice: beloved community.

For King, the kind of love he insisted on—*as* action, *in* community, and *for* the neighbor—not only has the power to achieve justice, but needs to be understood *as* justice. If we can cultivate the capacity to practice love at a community level, we can achieve the state of affairs we call justice. If justice is not conceived merely as a rational balancing of rights and dues, but rather as a state of

relationship, then we conclude with King that *justice is to be pursued through praxeologies of solidarity, as beloved community.* This is what Cornel West means when he says that we should interpret King's vision to be that 'Justice is what love looks like in public'.

We *must* keep in mind that King was not talking about love in its sentimental form. *Agape* is not affection; *Agape* is unconditional regard and 'neighbor-regarding concern'. Unconditional love *is structurally open* to the incoming of the other who demands hospitality or protection; it responds to those who cry out—in agony or in hate—and responds in a way that *restores community*.

We live in a world that can so easily conceive of 'hate groups' and the power they have to create havoc. Why don't we as easily believe in the power that communities can wield if they cultivate the opposite? King reminds us that love is the *only* thing that can overcome hate—just as light is the only thing that can dispel darkness.

Gandhi once described how challenging it was for people to understand the true power of the methods he was employing in his struggle for freedom for India. It seemed to many, including his fiercest critics as well as his allies, that his insistence on nonviolence would be hopelessly ineffective in confronting the overwhelming might of the British empire. Gandhi's response is striking. He explains that nonviolent resistance is to be conceived as "three-fourths invisible and only one-fourth visible."[vii] "In its visibility it appears ineffective," Gandhi explains. But "the more it is practiced, the more effective and inexhaustible it becomes, and ultimately the whole world stands agape and exclaims, 'A miracle has happened.'" Gandhi believed that the the only way to make what seems impossible

happen is to recognize that “All miracles are due to the silent and effective working of invisible forces.” “Nonviolence,” he urged, “is the most invisible and the most effective.”

Though we celebrate both Gandhi and King as modern saints, this belief in the invisible workings of love is part of what makes their message truly radical at a political level, and so difficult to fully embrace. But this idea need not be understood as mysticism. The world, even in its materiality, is far less linear and mechanistic than we once presumed. Perhaps we need to stop conceiving of ‘The Beloved Community’ as a destination–as some kind of utopia or promised land–*but rather as an intentional practice*. No capital letters, just simply the embodied action of beloved community. Perhaps we need to see it as something that *happens*, something that grows and springs up in our world, amidst its many thorns and thistles. We have only just recently discovered that the largest living organism on our planet–'Pando'–is actually living as *one interconnected root system* of what on the surface appears to be a massive forest of 40,000 individual trees.[viii] In our world, perhaps we need to pursue ‘beloved community’ in the image of this organism, as millions of individual manifestations of something collective that is alive and active beneath the surface. In Latin, *pando* means ‘I spread’. Let us therefore see our task as this: to cultivate our collective capacities in order to spread the embrace of beloved community in our world so that *all* can live free, in the unconditional affirmation of its justice.

Conclusion: Dreaming with King at the End of the World

Can we believe in this story? Do we believe, as radically as King did, that justice is possible in our time? We began with this question and we must end here. What do we see if we dream together with Dr. King about the possibilities for justice in this, our most precarious century?

Our Cruciform Inheritance

We do not understand Dr. King—or why his work was so important at a world historical level—unless we appreciate just how serious he was about the metaphysical power of love and its capacity to enact justice. From the distance of reflective meditation, we must approach his life and work as an embodied *praxeology of love*, in the pursuit of a vision of universal justice. To understand the working logic that drove his hope for the civil rights movement of which he was such

an important part, we must witness the way in which he sought to enact the core ideas of which he spoke so eloquently—ideas which we might consider to form a political theology of love.

What Cornel West calls Dr. King's "prophetic witness"[i] is not merely King's expansive critique of injustice in its social, economic, military, and spiritual dimensions. His witness was a lived-out testament to a *theory of change* at the level of collective existence. Dr. King's methodological commitment to the tactics of nonviolent resistance are upon closer analysis revealed to be grounded in something deeper, something we must consider.

King's understanding of the power of love, of its *causal efficacy* in the world, was rooted in his philosophical understanding and belief in the cosmic relationality of existence itself. It was not just rhetoric, and it was not just religious faith. His understanding of the nature of the universe, of its spiritual curvature, and of love's kinetic energy in mutual encounter has much to teach us, even in a secular world, about the personal and political power that is available in a relational cosmos—a power that can be universally accessed and wielded in the creative struggle for liberation, redemption, and justice.

The purpose of our engagement with Dr. King—with his words and his deeds—is to ask the urgent question about what we might claim as an inheritance from his cruciform life. This inheritance is a gift of utmost value in the years ahead as humanity grapples once more with world-historical transition. The accumulated inequities and inequalities of modern civilization, accelerated by the 'resonance machine'[ii] of technology and global capitalism, have reached a point of acute structural

instability. In light of historical analysis and reflection on the fate of previous empire civilizations, it is no longer hyperbolic or alarmist to take seriously the idea that ours is in a stage of the death process—for as we now can document, previous civilizations were nearly always taken down by ecological crises.[iii] The edifice of what we *currently* recognize as human civilization is set to crumble before the wave of ecological collapse that is now irreversibly[iv] locked into our planetary rhythms. Something different will necessarily emerge.

Ecological Apartheid

Apocalyptic language can be numbing, and thus convenient to dismiss, so let us with more near-term acuity grapple with the fact that there will be a long tail to this decline. The more proximate threat to *us*—by which I mean the likely readers of these words, as well as their children, and their children's children—is not necessarily death by flood, or fire, or famine, but rather by *social unrest and political violence*. We need only reflect on the consequences to the politics of Europe that the inflow in recent years of one million refugees from the Syrian civil war has created—itself the product of a prolonged ecological catastrophe—to be shaken by the social and political violence that can issue from the planetary migration of an estimated *two hundred million* climate refugees that the UN now predicts by the year 2050.[v] The fires and floods will most certainly come, they are already happening. Some will not be able to escape these threats, but the rest will be forced to relocate as increasing parts of our planet become seasonally or permanently uninhabitable, unhospitable to human life.[vi] We have enough historical memory to imagine the social and political conflict such migration will produce.

Those of us with the privilege of age, resources, or geography–who feel less immediate worry, for now, about our vulnerability to climate instability–will have to grapple with the personal choices we will face in the likely emergence in the decades to come of what we should begin to recognize as a socio-political phenomenon of *ecological apartheid*.

Issues of migration in a world of nation states are questions of immigration. These are *political* questions. The politics of the 21st century will need to grapple with an entirely new configuration of the question: *Who is my neighbor?* Our answers to this question will determine the amount of violence we witness or experience. Perhaps more acutely, at the moral level, our answers will determine the amount of violence we *inflict*–whether we recognize it or not.

We are desperately in need of a shared political vision about how we might reimagine how to live, and live *together*. At current, our political visions are most definitely *not* shared. Perhaps in pursuit of such a desperate hope, we might turn back to our prophets, rejected in their time as they most always are. Our prophets are those who spoke and lived the warning *and* the alternative, and who paid the price for it.

Who better to ask, therefore, about how we might prevent, as well as respond, to the threat of political violence in the context of social segregation, than a person like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr who grappled with these issues so fiercely? King's message was rejected in his time because he was so much more advanced *than* his time–but perhaps we might now be ready to hear it.

Ecological Civilization as Beloved Community

We betray Dr. King's legacy and miss the power of his message if we fail to muster the courage to hope. And we have, still, reasons to be hopeful pursuers of an effective response to the urgent crisis of our time. We must understand that our world is in *transition*—It is not necessarily the end, but perhaps, just perhaps, it might find a way to be better?

The thesis of this paper is that we cannot hope to answer this question without understanding what *justice* looks like. This is why we must revisit Dr. King and reconsider his message. We must achieve, in our time, something which seems hopelessly, impossibly far away. If there is hope to be had for a 21st century planetary-wide ecological civilization,[vii] it will only be possible if it is built around an understanding of what justice looks like at the level of collective life, and how it is to be achieved. Dr. King's political theology of love is our most proximate prophetic witness. We must have ears to hear what he was really trying to say.

Dr. King's message is not Tolstoy's exhortation—that 'the Kingdom of God is *within* us'; rather, it is an *invitation:* The beloved community will emerge *through* us.

May it be.

Notes

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[iii] West, Cornel. "The Radical King We Don't Know." *The Radical King*, Beacon Press, 2016, x.
[iv] King, Martin Luther. "The Drum Major Instinct." *The Radical King*, edited by Cornel West, Beacon Press, 2016.
[v] Jr, King Martin Luther, and Cornel West. "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." *The Radical King*, Beacon Press, 2016, p. 205.
[vi] Smiley, Tavis. "Donald Trump and Martin Luther King Have One Thing in Common." *Time*, Time, 1 Dec. 2017, https://time.com/5042070/donald-trump-martin-luther-king-mlk/.
[vii] Niebuhr, Reinhold. Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics. Westminster John Knox Press, 2021, 168.
[viii] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Christianity and Power Politics*. Univ. Microfilms Internat, 1984, 26.
[ix] Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 166.
[x] See Tolstoy, Leo. The Kingdom of God Is within You. Scribner's, 1913.
[xi] Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 166.
[xii] King, Inscription to Reinhold Niebuhr, November 1958 (Christopher Niebuhr Papers). See also Niebuhr's response: "From Reinhold Niebuhr." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 24 May 2021, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/reinhold-niebuhr-1.
[xiii] Branch, Parting the Waters, 85.
[xiv] Ibid., 87.
[xv] Ibid., 81.
[xvi] Ibid., 83.
[xvii] Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 155.
[xviii] Ibid., 156.
[ix] Ibid.
[x] Ibid., 158.
[xi] Letter from Niebuhr to King, Jan 6, 1959. "From Reinhold Niebuhr." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education*

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[xiii] King, Martin Luther. Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story. Souvenir Press, 2021, 98.

[xiv] "'Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism.'" *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 2 June 2021, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/reinhold-niebuhrs-ethical-dualism.

[xv] Ibid.

[xvi] Ibid.

[xvii] "The Christian Way of Life in Human Relations, Address Delivered at the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 24 May 2021, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/christian-way-life-human-relations-address-delivered-general-assembly-national.

[xviii] King, Martin Luther. "The Christian Way of Life in Human Relations". https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/christian-way-life-human-relations-address-delivered-general-assembly-national

[xix] King, Martin Luther. "Where Do We Go from Here?" *The Radical King*, edited by Cornel West, Beacon Press, 2016, 180.

[xx] King, Martin Luther. "The Christian Way of Life in Human Relations". https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/christian-way-life-human-relations-address-delivered-general-assembly-national

[xxi] Washington, A Testament of Hope, 19.

[xxii] Ibid., 20.

[xxiii] Jr, King Martin Luther. "Loving Your Enemies." *The Radical King*, Beacon Press, 2016, 59.

[xxiv] Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 165.

[xxv] Niebuhr, Reinhold, and D. B. Robertson. Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr. Forgotten Books, 2015, 32.

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[xxvii] See Barad, Karen. Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning. Duke University Press, 2007.

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[xxix] See Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality*. Free Press, 2010.

[xxx] Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 168.

[xxxi] See Keller, Catherine. Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public. Columbia University Press, 2018.

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[xxxiv] See Wallace-Wells, David. The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming. Tim Duggan Books, 2020.

[xxxv] "What Is Ecological Civilization?" *Institute for Ecological Civilization*, 3 Feb. 2022, https://ecociv.org/what-is-ecological-civilization/.

About the Author

Alex Forrester is the co-founder of Rising Tide Capital, a nationally recognized nonprofit organization working at the intersection of inclusive economics, social justice, and entrepreneurship. Alex is a recipient of the prestigious Heinz Award and has been recognized with Rising Tide Capital at the White House, United Nations, World Economic Forum, CNN Heroes, and other prominent publications. He received an undergraduate degree in Postmodern Philosophy and Theology from Harvard University, an honorary doctorate from New Jersey City University, and is currently pursuing Masters-level research at Drew Theological Seminary on the role of philosophy and spirituality in aiding the political and economic transformation of our world. He lives in New Jersey with his two sons Noah and James and his beloved wife and partner Alfa Demmellash, with whom he pursues his most important and precious calling: bringing love into the world.

For more information or to contact him, visit
www.RisingTideCapital.org or
www.LongArcStrategies.com