outlawed barriers to voting by African Americans and authorized the attorney general to supervise federal elections in seven southern states where African Americans were kept off the voting rolls.

He was M.L. to his parents, Martin to his wife and friends, Doc to his aides, Reverend to his male parishioners, Little Lord Jesus to adoring churchwomen, De Lawd to his young critics in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and Martin Luther King, Jr., to the world. At his pulpit or a public rostrum, he seemed too small for his incomparable oratory and international fame as a civil rights leader and spokesman for world peace. He stood only five feet seven, and had round cheeks, a trim mustache, and sad, glistening eyes — eyes that revealed both his inner strength and his vulnerability.

He was born in Atlanta on January 15, 1929, and grew up in the relative comfort of the black middle class. Thus he never suffered the want and privation that plagued the majority of American blacks of his time. His father, a gruff, self-made man, was pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church and an outspoken member of Atlanta's black leadership. M.L. joined his father's church when he was five and came to regard it as his second home. The church defined his world, gave it order and balance, taught him how to "get along with people." Here M.L. knew who he was — "Reverend King's boy," somebody special.

At home, his parents and maternal grandmother reinforced his self-esteem, praising him for his precocious ways, telling him repeatedly that he was *somebody*. By age five, he spoke like an adult and had such a prodigious memory that he could recite whole Biblical passages and entire hymns without a mistake. He was acutely sensitive, too, so much so that he worried about all the blacks he saw in Atlanta's breadlines during the Depression, fearful that their children did not have enough to eat. When his maternal grandmother died, twelve-year-old M.L. thought it was his fault. Without telling anyone, he had slipped away from

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From "Trumpet of Conscience," by Stephen B. Oates. In *American History Illustrated* (April 1988), 18–27, 52. Reprinted through courtesy of Cowles Magazines, publisher of *American History Illustrated*.

home to watch a parade, only to find out when he returned that she had died. He was terrified that God had taken her away as punishment for his "sin." Guilt-stricken, he tried to kill himself by leaping out of his second-story window.

He had a great deal of anger in him. Growing up a black in segregated Atlanta, he felt the full range of southern racial discrimination. He discovered that he had to attend separate, inferior schools, which he sailed through with a modicum of effort, skipping grades as he went. He found out that he — a preacher's boy — could not sit at lunch counters in Atlanta's downtown stores. He had to drink from a "colored" water fountain, relieve himself in a rancid "colored" restroom, and ride a rickety "colored" elevator. If he rode a city bus, he had to sit in the back as though he were contaminated. If he wanted to see a movie in a downtown theater, he had to enter through a side door and sit in the "colored" section in the balcony. He discovered that whites referred to blacks as "boys" and "girls" regardless of age. He saw "WHITES ONLY" signs staring back at him in the windows of barber shops and all the good restaurants and hotels, at the YMCA, the city parks, golf courses, swimming pools, and in the waiting rooms of the train and bus stations. He learned that there were even white and black sections of the city and that he resided in "nigger town."

Segregation caused a tension in the boy, a tension between his parents' injunction ("Remember, you are *somebody*") and a system that constantly demeaned and insulted him. He struggled with the pain and rage he felt when a white woman in a downtown store slapped him and called him "a little nigger" . . . when a bus driver called him "a black son-of-a-bitch" and made him surrender his seat to a white . . . when he stood on the very spot in Atlanta where whites had lynched a black man . . . when he witnessed nightriding Klansmen beating blacks in the streets. How, he asked defiantly, could he heed the Christian injunction and love a race of people who hated him? In retaliation, he determined "to hate every white person."

Yes, he was angry. In sandlot games, he competed so fiercely that friends could not tell whether he was playing or fighting. He had his share of playground combat, too, and could outwrestle any of his peers. He even rebelled against his father, vowing never to become a preacher like him. Yet he liked the way Daddy King stood up to whites: he told them never to call him a boy and vowed to fight this system until he died.

Still, there was another side to M.L., a calmer, sensuous side. He played the violin, enjoyed opera, and relished soul food — fried chicken, cornbread, and collard greens with ham hocks and bacon drippings. By his mid-teens, his voice was the most memorable thing about him. It had changed into a rich and resonant baritone that commanded attention whenever he held forth. A natty dresser, nicknamed "Tweed" because of his fondness for tweed suits, he became a connoisseur of lovely young women. His little brother A.D. remembered how Martin "kept flitting from chick to chick" and was "just about the best jitterbug in town."

At age fifteen, he entered Morehouse College in Atlanta, wanting somehow to help his people. He thought about becoming a lawyer and even practiced giving trial speeches before a mirror in his room. But thanks largely to Morehouse President Benjamin Mays, who showed him that the ministry could be a respectable forum for ideas, even for social protest, King decided to become a Baptist preacher after all. By the time he was ordained in 1947, his resentment toward whites had softened some, thanks to positive contact with white students on an intercollegiate council. But he hated his segregated world more than ever.

Once he had his bachelor's degree, he went north to study at Crozer Seminary near Philadelphia. In this mostly white school, with its polished corridors and quiet solemnity, King continued to ponder the plight of blacks in America. How, by what method and means, were blacks to improve their lot in a white-

dominated country? His study of history, especially of Nat Turner's slave insurrection, convinced him that it was suicidal for a minority to strike back against a heavily armed majority. For him, voluntary segregation was equally unacceptable, as was accommodation to the status quo. King shuddered at such negative approaches to the race problem. How indeed were blacks to combat discrimination in a country ruled by the white majority?

As some other blacks had done, he found his answer in the teachings of Mohandas Gandhi — for young King, the discovery had the force of a conversion experience. Nonviolent resistance, Gandhi taught, meant noncooperation with evil, an idea he got from Henry David Thoreau's essay "On Civil Disobedience." In India, Gandhi gave Thoreau's theory practical application in the form of strikes, boycotts, and protest marches, all conducted nonviolently and all predicated on love for the oppressor and a belief in divine justice. In gaining Indian independence, Gandhi sought not to defeat the British, but to redeem them through love, so as to avoid a legacy of bitterness. Gandhi's term for this — *Satyagraha* — reconciled love and force in a single, powerful concept.

As King discovered from his studies, Gandhi had embraced nonviolence in part to subdue his own violent nature. This was a profound revelation for King, who had felt much hatred in his life, especially toward whites. Now Gandhi showed him a means of harnessing his anger and channeling it into a positive and creative force for social change.

At this juncture, King found mostly theoretical satisfaction in Gandhian nonviolence; he had no plans to become a reformer in the segregated South. Indeed, he seemed destined to a life of the mind, not of social protest. In 1951, he graduated from Crozer and went on to earn a Ph.D. in theology from Boston University, where his adviser pronounced him "a scholar's scholar" of great intellectual potential. By 1955, a year after the school desegregation decision, King had married comely Coretta Scott and assumed the pastorship of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Immensely happy in the world of ideas, he hoped eventually to teach theology at a major university or seminary.

But, as King liked to say, the *Zeitgeist*, or spirit of the age, had other plans for him. In December 1955, Montgomery blacks launched a boycott of the city's segregated buses and chose the articulate twenty-six-year-old minister as their spokesman. As it turned out, he was unusually well prepared to assume the kind of leadership thrust on him. Drawing on Gandhi's teachings and example, plus the tenets of his own Christian faith, King directed a nonviolent boycott designed

A pensive King stands beside a portrait of Mohandas Gandhi, the Indian spiritual and political leader. "As King discovered from his studies, Gandhi had embraced nonviolence in part to subdue his own violent nature. This was a profound revelation for King, who had felt much hatred in his life, especially toward whites. Now Gandhi showed him a means of harnessing his anger and channeling it into a positive and creative force for social change." (Bob Fitch/Black Star)

both to end an injustice and redeem his white adversaries through love. When he exhorted blacks to love their enemies, King did not mean to love them as friends or intimates. No, he said, he meant a disinterested love in all humankind, a love that saw the neighbor in everyone it met, a love that sought to restore the beloved community. Such love not only avoided the internal violence of the spirit, but severed the external chain of hatred that only produced more hatred in an endless spiral. If American blacks could break the chain of hatred, King said, true brotherhood could begin. Then posterity would have to say that there had lived a race of people, of black people, who "injected a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization."

During the boycott King imparted his philosophy at twice-weekly mass meetings in the black churches, where overflow crowds clapped and cried as his mellifluous voice swept over them. In these mass meetings King discovered his extraordinary power as an orator. His rich religious imagery reached deep into the black psyche, for religion had been the black people's main source of strength and survival since slavery days. His delivery was "like a narrative poem," said a woman journalist who heard him. His voice had such depths of sincerity and empathy that it could "charm your heart right out of your body." Because he appealed to the best in his people, articulating their deepest hurts and aspirations, black folk began to idolize him; he was their Gandhi.

Under his leadership, they stood up to white Montgomery in a remarkable display of solidarity. Pitted against an obdurate city government that blamed the boycott on Communist agitaters and resorted to psychological and legal warfare to break it, the blacks stayed off the buses month after month, and walked or rode in a black-operated carpool. When an elderly woman refused the offer of a ride, King asked her, "But don't your feet hurt?" "Yes," she replied, "my feet is tired but my soul is rested." For King, her irrepressible spirit was proof that "a new Negro" was emerging in the South, a Negro with "a new sense of dignity and destiny."

That "new Negro" menaced white supremacists, especially the Ku Klux Klan, and they persecuted King with a vengeance. They made obscene phone calls to his home, sent him abusive, sickening letters, and once even dynamited the front of his house. Nobody was hurt, but King, fearing a race war, had to dissuade angry blacks from violent retaliation. Finally, on November 13, 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court nullified the Alabama laws that enforced segregated buses, and handed King and his boycotters a resounding moral victory. Their protest had captured the imagination of progressive people all over the world and marked the beginning of a southern black movement that would shake the segregated South to its foundations. At the forefront of that movement was a new organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which King and other black ministers formed in 1957, with King serving as its president and guiding spirit. Operating through the southern black church, SCLC sought to enlist the black masses in the freedom struggle by expanding "the Montgomery way" across the South.

The "Miracle of Montgomery" changed King's life, catapulting him into international prominence as an inspiring new moral voice for civil rights. Across the country, blacks and whites alike wrote him letters of encouragement; *Time* magazine pictured him on its cover; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and scores of church and civic organizations vied for his services as a speaker. "I am really disturbed how fast all this has happened to me," King told his wife. "People will expect me to perform miracles for the rest of my life."

But fame had its evil side, too. When King visited New York in 1958, a deranged black woman stabbed him in the chest with a letter opener. The weapon was lodged so close to King's aorta, the main artery from the heart, that he would have died had he sneezed. To extract the blade, an interracial surgical

team had to remove a rib and part of his breastbone; in a burst of inspiration, the lead surgeon made the incision over King's heart in the shape of a cross.

That he had not died convinced King that God was preparing him for some larger work in the segregated South. To gain perspective on what was happening there, he made a pilgrimage to India to visit Gandhi's shrine and the sites of his "War for Independence." He returned home with an even deeper commitment to nonviolence and a vow to be more humble and ascetic like Gandhi. Yet he was a man of manifold contradictions, this American Gandhi. While renouncing material things and giving nearly all of his extensive honorariums to SCLC, he liked posh hotels and zesty meals with wine, and he was always immaculately dressed in a gray or black suit, white shirt, and tie. While caring passionately for the poor, the downtrodden, and the disinherited, he had a fascination with men of affluence and enjoyed the company of wealthy SCLC benefactors. While trumpeting the glories of nonviolence and redemptive love, he could feel the most terrible anger when whites murdered a black or bombed a black church; he could contemplate giving up, turning America over to the haters of both races, only to dedicate himself anew to his nonviolent faith and his determination to redeem his country.

In 1960, he moved his family to Atlanta so that he could devote himself fulltime to SCLC, which was trying to register black voters for the upcoming federal elections. That same year, southern black students launched the sit-in movement against segregated lunch counters, and King not only helped them form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) but raised money on their behalf. In October he even joined a sit-in protest at an Atlanta department store and went to jail with several students on a trespassing charge. Like Thoreau, King considered jail "a badge of honor." To redeem the nation and arouse the conscience of the opponent, King explained, you go to jail and stay there. "You have broken a law which is out of line with the moral law and you are willing to suffer the consequences by serving the time."

He did not reckon, however, on the tyranny of racist officials, who clamped him in a malevolent state penitentiary, in a cell for hardened criminals. But state authorities released him when Democratic presidential nominee John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert interceded on King's behalf. According to many analysts, the episode won critical black votes for Kennedy and gave him the election in November. For King, the election demonstrated what he had long said: that one of the most significant steps a black could take was the short walk to the voting booth.

The trouble was that most blacks in Dixie, especially in the Deep South, could not vote even if they so desired. For decades, state and local authorities had kept the mass of black folk off the voting rolls by a welter of devious obstacles and outright intimidation. Through 1961 and 1962, King exhorted President Kennedy to sponsor tough new civil rights legislation that would enfranchise southern blacks and end segregated public accommodations as well. When Kennedy shied away from a strong civil rights commitment, King and his lieutenants took matters into their own hands, orchestrating a series of southern demonstrations to show the world the brutality of segregation. At the same time, King stumped the country, drawing on all his powers of oratory to enlist the black masses and win white opinion to his cause.

Everywhere he went his message was the same. *The civil rights issue,* he said, *is an eternal moral issue that will determine the destiny of our nation and our world. As we seek our full rights, we hope to redeem the soul of our country. For it is our country, too, and we will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of America and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands. We do not intend to humiliate the white man, but to win him over through the strength of our love. Ultimately, we are trying to free all of us in America — Negroes from the bonds of seg-*

regation and shame, whites from the bonds of bigotry and fear.

We stand today between two worlds — the dying old order and the emerging new. With men of ill-will greeting this change with cries of violence, of interposition and nullification, some of us may get beaten. Some of us may even get killed. But if you are cut down in a movement designed to save the soul of a nation, no other death could be more redemptive. We must realize that change does not roll in "on the wheels of inevitabilty," but comes through struggle. So "let us be those creative dissenters who will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humaneness."

That message worked like magic among America's long-suffering blacks. Across the South, across America, they rose in unprecedented numbers to march and demonstrate with Martin Luther King. His singular achievement was that he brought the black masses into the freedom struggle for the first time. He rallied the strength of broken men and women, helping them overcome a lifetime of fear and feelings of inferiority. After segregation had taught them all their lives that they were *nobody,* King taught them that they were *somebody*. Because he made them believe in themselves and in "the beauty of chosen suffering," he taught them how to straighten their backs ("a man can't ride you unless your back is bent") and confront those who oppressed them. Through the technique of nonviolent resistance, he furnished them something no previous black leader had been able to provide. He showed them a way of controlling their pent-up anger, as he had controlled his own, and using it to bring about constructive change.

The mass demonstrations King and SCLC choreographed in the South produced the strongest civil rights legislation in American history. This was the goal of King's major southern campaigns from 1963 to 1965. He would single out some notoriously segregated city with white officials prone to violence, mobilize the local blacks with songs, scripture readings, and rousing oratory in black churches, and then lead them on protest marches conspicuous for their grace and moral purpose. Then he and his aides would escalate the marches, increase their demands, even fill up the jails, until they brought about a moment of "creative tension," when whites would either agree to negotiate or resort to violence. If they did the latter, King would thus expose the brutality inherent in segregation and . . . stab the national conscience so [much] that the federal government would be forced to intervene with corrective measures.

The technique succeeded brilliantly in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Here Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor, in full view of reporters and television cameras, turned firehoses and police dogs on the marching protesters. Revolted by such ghastly scenes, stricken by King's own searching eloquence and the bravery of his unarmed followers, Washington eventually produced the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which desegregated public facilities — the thing King had demanded all along from Birmingham. Across the South, the "WHITES ONLY" signs that had hurt and enraged him since boyhood now came down.

Although SNCC and others complained that King had a Messiah complex and was trying to monopolize the civil rights movement, his technique worked with equal success in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. Building on a local movement there, King and his staff launched a drive to gain southern blacks the unobstructed right to vote. The violence he exposed in Selma — the beating of black marchers by state troopers and deputized possemen, the killing of a young black deacon and a white Unitarian minister — horrified the country. When King called for support, thousands of ministers, rabbis, priests, nuns, students, lay leaders, and ordinary people — black and white alike — rushed to Selma from all over the country and stood with King in the name of human liberty. Never in the history of the movement had so many people of all faiths and classes come to the southern battleground. The Selma campaign culminated in a dramatic march over the Jefferson Davis Highway to the state capital of Montgomery. Along the way, impoverished local

blacks stared incredulously at the marching, singing, flag waving spectacle moving by. When the column reached one dusty crossroads, an elderly black woman ran out from a group of old folk, kissed King breathlessly, and ran back crying, "I done kissed him! The Martin Luther King! I done kissed the Martin Luther King!"

In Montgomery, first capital and much-heralded "cradle" of the Confederacy, King led an interracial throng of 25,000 — the largest civil rights demonstration the South had ever witnessed — up Dexter Avenue with banners waving overhead. The pageant was as ironic as it was extraordinary, for it was up Dexter Avenue that Jefferson Davis's first inaugural parade had marched, and [it was] in the portico of the capitol [that] Davis had taken his oath of office as president of the slave-based Confederacy. Now, in the spring of 1965, Alabama blacks — most of them descendants of slaves — stood massed at the same statehouse, singing a new rendition of "We Shall Overcome," the anthem of the civil rights movement. They sang, "Deep in my heart, I do believe, We have overcome — *today*."

Then, watched by a cordon of state troopers and the statue of Jefferson Davis himself, King mounted a trailer. His vast audience listened, transfixed, as his words rolled and thundered over the loudspeaker: "My people, my people listen. The battle is in our hands. . . . We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. That day will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man." And that day was not long in coming, King said, whereupon he launched into the immortal refrains of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," crying out, "Our God is marching on! Glory, glory hallelujah!"

Aroused by the events in Alabama, Washington produced the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which outlawed impediments to black voting and empowered the attorney general to supervise federal elections in seven southern states where blacks were kept off the rolls. At the time, political analysts almost unanimously attributed the act to King's Selma campaign. Once federal examiners were supervising voter registration in all troublesome southern areas, blacks were able to get on the rolls and vote by the hundreds of thousands, permanently altering the pattern of southern and national politics.

In the end, the powerful civil rights legislation generated by King and his tramping legions wiped out statutory racism in America and realized at least the social and political promise of emancipation a century before. But King was under no illusion that legislation alone could bring on the brave new America he so ardently championed. Yes, he said, laws and their vigorous enforcement were necessary to regulate destructive habits and actions, and to protect blacks and their rights. But laws could not eliminate the "fears, prejudice, pride, and irrationality" that were barriers to a truly integrated society, to peaceful intergroup and interpersonal living. Such a society could be achieved only when people accepted that inner, invisible law that etched on their hearts the conviction "that all men are brothers and that love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation. True integration will be achieved by true neighbors who are willingly obedient to unenforceable obligations."

Even so, the Selma campaign was the movement's finest hour, and the Voting Rights Act the high point of a broad civil rights coalition that included the federal government, various white groups, and all the other civil rights organizations in addition to SCLC. King himself had best expressed the spirit and aspirations of that coalition when, on August 28, 1963, standing before the Lincoln Memorial, he electrified an interracial crowd of 250,000 with perhaps his greatest speech, "I Have a Dream," in which he described in rhythmic, hypnotic cadences his vision of an integrated America. Because of his achievements and moral vision, he won the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, at thirty-four the youngest recipient in Nobel history.

Still, King paid a high price for his fame and his cause. He suffered from stomachaches and insomnia, and even felt guilty about all the tributes he received, all the popularity he enjoyed. Born in relative material comfort and given a superior education, he did not think he had earned the right to lead the impoverished black masses. He complained, too, that he no longer had a personal self and that sometimes he did not recognize the Martin Luther King people talked about. Lonely, away from home for protracted periods, beset with temptation, he slept with other women, for some of whom he had real feeling. His sexual transgressions only added to his guilt, for he knew he was imperiling his cause and hurting himself and those he loved.

Alas for King, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover found out about the black leader's infidelities. The director already abhorred King, certain that Communist spies influenced him and masterminded his demonstrations. Hoover did not think blacks capable of organizing such things, so Communists had to be behind them and King as well. As it turned out, a lawyer in King's inner circle and a man in SCLC's New York office did have Communist backgrounds, a fact that only reinforced Hoover's suspicions about King. Under Hoover's orders, FBI agents conducted a ruthless crusade to destroy King's reputation and drive him broken and humiliated from public life. Hoover's men tapped King's phones and bugged his hotel rooms; they compiled a prurient monograph about his private life and showed it to various editors, public officials, and religious and civic leaders; they spread the word, Hoover's word, that King was not only a reprobate but a dangerous subversive with Communist associations.

King was scandalized and frightened by the FBI's revelations of his extramarital affairs. Luckily for him, no editor, not even a racist one in the South, would touch the FBI's salacious materials. Public officials such as Robert Kennedy were shocked, but argued that King's personal life did not affect his probity as a civil rights leader. Many blacks, too, declared that what he did in private was his own business. Even so, King vowed to refrain from further affairs — only to succumb again to his own human frailties.

As for the Communist charge, King retorted that he did not need any Russians to tell him when someone was standing on his neck; he could figure that out by himself. To mollify his political friends, however, King did banish from SCLC the two men with Communist backgrounds (later he resumed his ties with the lawyer, a loyal friend, and let Hoover be damned). He also denounced Communism in no uncertain terms. It was, he believed, profoundly and fundamentally evil, an atheistic doctrine no true Christian could ever embrace. He hated the dictatorial Soviet state, too, whose "crippling totalitarianism" subordinated everything — religion, art, music, science, and the individual — to its terrible yoke. True, Communism started with men like Karl Marx who were "aflame with a passion for social justice." Yet King faulted Marx for rejecting God and the spiritual in human life. "The great weakness in Karl Marx is right here," King once told his staff, and he went on to describe his ideal Christian commonwealth in Hegelian terms: "Capitalism fails to realize that life is social. Marxism fails to realize that life is individual. Truth is found neither in the rugged individualism of capitalism nor in the impersonal collectivism of Communism. The kingdom of God is found in a synthesis that combines the truths of these two opposites. Now there is where I leave brother Marx and move on toward the kingdom."

But how to move on after Selma was a perplexing question King never successfully answered. After the devastating Watts riot in August 1965, he took his movement into the racially troubled urban North, seeking to help the suffering black poor in the ghettos. In 1966, over the fierce opposition of some of his own staff, he launched a campaign to end the black slums in Chicago and forestall rioting there. But the campaign foundered because King seemed unable to devise a coherent anti-slum strategy, because Mayor

Richard Daley and his black acolytes opposed him bitterly, and because white America did not seem to care. King did lead open-housing marches into segregated neighborhoods in Chicago, only to encounter furious mobs who waved Nazi banners, threw bottles and bricks, and screamed, "We hate niggers!" "Kill the niggers!" "We want Martin Luther Coon!" King was shocked. "I've been in many demonstrations all across the South," he told reporters, "but I can say that I have never seen — even in Mississippi and Alabama — mobs as hostile and as hate-filled as I've seen in Chicago." Although King prevented a major riot there and wrung important concessions from City Hall, the slums remained, as wretched and seemingly unsolvable as ever.

That same year, angry young militants in SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) renounced King's teachings — they were sick and tired of "De Lawd" telling them to love white people and work for integration. Now they advocated "Black Power," black separatism, even violent resistance to liberate blacks in America. SNCC even banished whites from its ranks and went on to drop "nonviolent" from its name and to lobby against civil rights legislation.

Black Power repelled the older, more conservative black organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League, and fragmented the civil rights movement beyond repair. King, too, argued that black separatism was chimerical, even suicidal, and that nonviolence remained the only workable way for black people. "Darkness cannot drive out darkness," he reasoned: "only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that." If every other black in America turned to violence, King warned, then he would still remain the lone voice preaching that it was wrong. Nor was SCLC going to reject whites as SNCC had done. "There have been too many hymns of hope," King said, "too many anthems of expectation, too many deaths, too many dark days of standing over graves of those who fought for integration for us to turn back now. We must still sing 'Black and White Together, We Shall Overcome.'"

In 1967, King himself broke with the older black organizations over the ever-widening war in Vietnam. He had first objected to American escalation in the summer of 1965, arguing that the Nobel Peace Prize and his role as a Christian minister compelled him to speak out for peace. Two years later, with almost a half-million Americans — a disproportionate number of them poor blacks — fighting in Vietnam, King devoted whole speeches to America's "immoral" war against a tiny country on the other side of the globe. His stance provoked a fusillade of criticism from all directions — from the NAACP, the Urban League, white and black political leaders, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *Time*, and the *New York Times*, all telling him to stick to civil rights. Such criticism hurt him deeply. When he read the *Times*'s editorial against him, he broke down and cried. But he did not back down. "I've fought too long and too hard now against segregated accommodations to end up segregating my moral concerns," he told his critics. "Injustice *any*where is a threat to justice everywhere."

That summer, with the ghettos ablaze with riots, King warned that American cities would explode if funds used for war purposes were not diverted to emergency antipoverty programs. By then, the Johnson administration, determined to gain a military victory in Vietnam, had written King off as an antiwar agitator, and was now cooperating with the FBI in its efforts to defame him.

The fall of 1967 was a terrible time for King, the lowest ebb in his civil rights career. Everybody seemed to be attacking him — young black militants for his stubborn adherence to nonviolence, moderate and conservative blacks, labor leaders, liberal white politicians, the White House, and the FBI for his stand on Vietnam. Two years had passed since King had produced a nonviolent victory, and contributions to SCLC had fallen off sharply. Black spokesman Adam Clayton Powell, who had once called King the

greatest Negro in America, now derided him as Martin Loser King. The incessant attacks began to irritate him, creating such anxiety and depression that his friends worried about his emotional health.

Worse still, the country seemed dangerously polarized. On one side, backlashing whites argued that the ghetto explosions had "cremated" nonviolence and that white people had better arm themselves against black rioters. On the other side, angry blacks urged their people to "kill the Honkies" and burn the cities down. All around King, the country was coming apart in a cacophony of hate and reaction. Had America lost the will and moral power to save itself? he wondered. There was such rage in the ghetto and such bigotry among whites that he feared a race war was about to break out. He felt he had to do something to pull America back from the brink. He and his staff had to mount a new campaign that would halt the drift to violence in the black world and combat stiffening white resistance, a nonviolent action that would "transmute the deep rage of the ghetto into a constructive and creative force."

Out of his deliberations sprang a bold and daring project called the poor people's campaign. The master plan, worked out by February 1968, called for SCLC to bring an interracial army of poor people to Washington, D.C., to dramatize poverty before the federal government. For King, just turned thirty-nine, the time had come to employ civil disobedience against the national government itself. Ultimately, he was projecting a genuine class movement that he hoped would bring about meaningful changes in American society — changes that would redistribute economic and political power and end poverty, racism, "the madness of militarism," and war.

In the midst of his preparations, King went to Memphis, Tennessee, to help black sanitation workers there who were striking for the right to unionize. On the night of April 3, with a storm thundering outside, he told a black audience that he had been to the mountaintop and had seen what lay ahead. "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people *will* get to the promised land."

The next afternoon, when King stepped out on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, an escaped white convict named James Earl Ray, stationed in a nearby building, took aim with a high-powered rifle and blasted King into eternity. Subsequent evidence linked Ray to white men in the St. Louis area who had offered "hit" money for King's life.

For weeks after the shooting, King's stricken country convulsed in grief, contrition, and rage. While there were those who cheered his death, the *New York Times* called it a disaster to the nation, the *London Times* an enormous loss to the world. In Tanzania, Reverend Trevor Huddleston, expelled from South Africa for standing against apartheid, declared King's death the greatest single tragedy since the assassination of Gandhi in 1948, and said it challenged the complacency of the Christian Church all over the globe.

On April 9, with 120 million Americans watching on television, thousands of mourners — black and white alike — gathered in Atlanta for the funeral of a man who had never given up his dream of creating a symphony of brotherhood on these shores. As a black man born and raised in segregation, he had had every reason to hate America and to grow up preaching cynicism and retaliation. Instead, he had loved the country passionately and had sung of her promise and glory more eloquently than anyone of his generation.

They buried him in Atlanta's South View Cemetery, then blooming with dogwood and fresh green boughs of spring. On his crypt, hewn into the marble, were the words of an old Negro spiritual he had often quoted: "Free at Last, Free at Last, Thank God Almighty I'm Free at Last."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., was an angry young man who hated the segregated world of the American

South and the injustices he saw inflicted on African Americans all over the nation. In adulthood, he came to feel that anger offered no solution to the problems that he and other African Americans faced. What made him change his mind? What were the roots of the philosophy that he adopted and used to lead the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s? How did King give African Americans a sense of self-worth and the tools to achieve their aims?

2. What were SNCC and SCLC? How did these organizations differ from each other? In what ways were they alike? What changes took place in SNCC after the mid–1960s? How did Black Power differ from the civil rights movement under King?

3. What were the two major accomplishments of the civil rights movement in the mid–1960s? What specific actions did King and his followers undertake to influence public opinion and effect legislative change, and at what cost?

4. Describe the internal and external difficulties that beset King and the civil rights movement in the late 1960s. How did King defuse charges that he was a Communist? How did he react to the FBI crusade against him? to white and black backlashes? to the attacks on his policies that seemed to come from all sides? What did his support of the anti–Vietnam War movement cost him?

5. Why do you think Americans were receptive to King's pacifist message and nonviolent approach in the 1960s? Do you think similar tactics would be effective against oppression in a country such as the People's Republic of China?

26

The Odyssey of Malcolm X

LAWRENCE B. GOODHEART

While Martin Luther King, Jr., sought to end racial oppression through nonviolent resistance, redemptive love, and racial integration, a second approach — turned 180 degrees — was taking root in black America. This approach called for violent self-defense, black supremacy, and black separation to redress African American grievances. The chief product of this view was Malcolm X, christened Malcolm Little, whose brutal experiences while growing up in the North rivaled those of African Americans who grew up in Dixie. As a Black Muslim, Malcolm was a savage critic of King's philosophy and technique of nonviolence. "The white man pays Reverend Martin Luther King, subsidizes Reverend Martin Luther King, so that Reverend Martin Luther King can continue to teach the Negro to be defenseless," Malcolm charged in 1963. "That's what you mean by nonviolence, be defenseless. Be defenseless in the face of one of the most cruel beasts that has ever taken a people into captivity. That's the American white man."

What was the solution to the racial problem? It was not, Malcolm argued, the turn-the-other-cheek philosophy of "ignorant Negro preachers." It was the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Black Muslims, who held that African Americans have the same right to defend themselves as whites, that Western society is sick and disintegrating, that God is about to eliminate the white man because he has never been a brother to anybody, and that African Americans must separate themselves entirely from this "sinking ship" and concentrate on improving themselves.

Although they offered rival solutions to America's race troubles, King and Malcolm still respected one another. King met Malcolm once in Washington and thought him very articulate, with a great concern for the problems African Americans faced as a race. When

Malcolm, for his part, visited Selma during King's 1965 campaign, he pointed out that "I didn't come to Selma to make his job difficult. I really did come thinking that I could make it easier. If the white people realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King."

By then, Malcolm had moderated his views on the inherent evil of whites — if not on the basic racism of American society. Two and one-half weeks after he visited Selma, this proud and brilliant man was assassinated by African American gunmen in New York City, and King lamented that Malcolm was a victim of the violence in America that had spawned him. Three years later, James Earl Ray murdered King himself in Memphis, Tennessee.

Appealing mainly to the bitter, alienated African Americans of the northern ghetto, Malcolm X never reached most African Americans as King did. As Peter Goldman, author of Malcolm X *(1978), has noted, the established civil rights organizations all shunned Malcolm, and most whites and many African Americans regarded him as "a kind of spiritual outlaw." But his influence increased tremendously after the appearance of his posthumous* Autobiography *(1965), a powerful, compassionate account of African American life in the northern ghetto. Malcolm helped inspire a new consciousness — a bold and assertive racial pride — in the young African Americans of his and later generations. That influence is summed up in the funeral scene in Spike Lee's epochal motion picture,* Malcolm X. *In that scene, Ossie Davis says in his eulogy: "Malcolm was our manhood, our living black manhood. This was his meaning to his people. And in honoring him we honor the best in ourselves."*

In this section, historian Lawrence B. Goodheart tells the odyssey of Malcolm X and offers a psychological interpretation of his personality and significance based on the teachings of Erik H. Erikson. If you are worried that this might be a recondite and theoretical exercise in psychohistory, you can relax. Goodheart uses an Eriksonian concept that is concrete and easy to grasp: namely, that identity is the psychological core of each of us, that the evolution of a person's identity is subject to change, and that such change must be understood within a cultural and historical context. Erikson himself studied two men — Martin Luther, the leader of the Reformation, and Mohandas Gandhi, the father of modern India — whose psychological needs and sense of identity, converging with profound moments in history, allowed them to articulate the aspirations of entire communities. Did that happen to Malcolm X? Goodheart believes that it did, in part. "The shaping of Malcolm's sense of self," Goodheart maintains, stood "as a counterpart to the historic oppression of African-Americans." In other words, Malcolm's lifelong quest for a meaningful African American identity, although only partially fulfilled, mirrored the collective sufferings and aspirations of African Americans.

Goodheart divides Malcolm's search for self into four stages and discusses each with insight and common sense and within a proper historical context. We see and understand

how Malcolm evolved from a young man who was confused about his blackness and tended to accept the white view that he was "a dumb nigger," into a Black Muslim who articulated the rage of the urban ghetto, and finally into a more complete human being who advocated harmony and tolerated diversity. "The best leader," according to Erikson, "is the one who can realize the actual potentials in his nation." Measured by that standard, Goodheart concludes, Malcolm was only partially successful, and you will want to decide for yourselves whether that is a fair assessment. It would be instructive to evaluate Martin Luther King by Erikson's formula. Did King realize "the actual potentials in his nation" more than Malcolm did?

Goodheart's discussion and the portrait of King (selection 25) should provoke lively discussion of the racial philosophies and the lives, careers, and personalities of the two African American leaders. As you compare and contrast them, what do you make of the fact that both men died violent deaths in America?

GLOSSARY

BIMBI Malcolm's mentor in prison who persuaded Malcolm to drop his "thoughtless rebelliousness" and to educate himself.

EL-SHABAZZ, MALIK Malcolm's original Muslim name, taken from the ancient black tribe of Shabazz, regarded by the Muslims as God's "favored people."

GARVEY, MARCUS Flamboyant African American leader who wore a braid-trimmed uniform and preached racial pride; in 1916, he launched a "Back to Africa" movement that reached 1 to 4 million blacks until Garvey's downfall in 1923, when he was convicted and imprisoned for mail fraud.

HALEY, ALEX African American author who collaborated with Malcolm in writing *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.*

LITTLE, EARL Malcolm's father who subscribed to Garvey's teachings and took young Malcolm to Garveyite meetings in Lansing, Michigan; Earl Little was killed by vigilantes when Malcolm was six.

LITTLE, LOUISE Malcolm's mother "favored her dark-skinned children and disparaged Malcolm's lighter color as an unwanted reminder of her white father"; unable to provide for her children during the Depression, she broke down and was confined to a public mental institution.

MUHAMMAD, ELIJAH Leader of the Nation of Islam, or Black Muslims, whom Malcolm idolized until he learned that Muhammad had fathered children by his young secretaries.

MUSLIM MOSQUE, INC. Malcolm's rival organization to the Nation of Islam, founded in 1964.

NATION OF ISLAM (BLACK MUSLIMS) Preached African American separatism, supremacy, and self-reliance and self-improvement, and damned whites as evil devils whom an angry God would soon exterminate.

ORGANIZATION OF AFRO-AMERICAN UNITY (OAAU) Founded by Malcolm in June 1964, OAAU advocated "black control of every aspect of the black community" and adopted an agenda that called for school boycotts; housing improvement; voter registration; programs for

unwed mothers, drug addicts, and troubled children; and (in the words of Peter Goldman) "a black cultural revolution 'to unbrainwash an entire people.' "

MR. OSTROWSKI White English teacher who told young Malcolm that it was unrealistic for a "nigger" like him to aspire to be a lawyer; this episode triggered an "identity crisis" in Malcolm that lasted until he converted to the Nation of Islam.

SHORTY Malcolm's mentor in his days as a hustler and the " 'Harlem jigaboo archtype.' "

The black search for identity in the United States has been well put by the poet Robert Penn Warren: "Alienated from the world to which he is born and from the country of which he is a citizen yet surrounded by the successful values of that world, and country, how can the Negro define himself?" At the heart of the civil rights and black power movements of the 1950s and 1960s was the defining of the individual and collective identities of members of the largest racial minority in the United States. During what recently has been labeled a "Second Reconstruction," critical constitutional, legal, and federal-state relationships were reordered to promote equality under the law regardless of race. At the same time, there was a psychological revolution, a popular transformation of African-American identity from a culturally sanctioned racial inferiority to a black assertion of pride, beauty, and power.

The odyssey of Malcolm X was a search for "a definition of himself and his relationship to his people, his country, and the world," according to sociologist John H. Clarke. When Malcolm stated that "the black man in America has been robbed by the white man of his culture, of his identity, of his soul, of his self," he conflated his own experience with that of his people; his odyssey represented the militant black search for identity in the early 1960s. His individual rage spoke directly to the frustration of other African-Americans, especially urban ghetto residents — the black underclass — for whom the promise of civil rights legislation and racial integration offered little prospect of improving their degraded living conditions.

Public fascination with Malcolm cut across class and racial lines: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) has sold over two million copies and has become established as a modern classic. Together with his extensive speeches, interviews, and recollections by associates, the *Autobiography* as narrated to Alex Haley

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From Lawrence B. Goodheart, "The Odyssey of Malcolm X, *The Historian*, 58 (Autumn 1990), 47–62.

captures the dramatic changes in Malcolm's life. Haley's empathy for Malcolm served to capture the style and substance of the public man. After an initial period of suspicion and distrust, the Malcolm-Haley collaboration developed into what resembled a psychoanalytic session. As Haley patiently prompted him, Malcolm recalled his past. Despite distortion, inaccuracy, and what historian Stephen J. Whitfield calls "impression management," the *Autobiography* is useful for the psychological reality it uncovers.

Psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson defined the psychological core of an individual as identity — "a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity." Yet he was careful to stress that the development of a person's identity over time is subject to change that must be understood within a broad cultural context. His biographies of Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi emphasized the interconnection between the life history of the subject and the historical moment, a linkage that could be momentous when an individual's psychic needs were resolved in a manner that crystallized communal aspirations. Similarly, the shaping of Malcolm's sense of self as a counterpart to the historic oppression of African-Americans constitutes a central theme in his life and lends itself to Eriksonian interpretation. Erikson's categories do not precisely fit Malcolm's life, particularly the months before his murder, when Malcolm was an isolated figure whom the white establishment feared, civil rights organizations shunned, and Black Muslims damned. Malcolm's resolution of his lifelong quest for a meaningful black identity in the United States was thus only partially achieved. Nevertheless the Eriksonian model, if applied selectively, illuminates the common ground where individual action, collective aspirations, and the historic possibility for change converge in the four major stages of Malcolm's identity, appropriately marked by name changes: "surrendered identity," Malcolm Little; "negative identity," Big Red; "fundamentalism," Malik El-Shabazz; and "beyond fundamentalism," El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

Malcolm Little, aged fourteen, upon his arrival in Boston. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

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Surrendered Identity:

Malcolm's "earliest vivid memory" was as a four-year-old in 1929 "being suddenly snatched away into a frightening confusion of pistol shots and shouting and smoke and flames." The Lansing, Michigan, equivalent of the Ku Klux Klan had burned his family's house down. Malcolm's recollection is a violent example of what Erikson termed a surrendered racial identity, historically "the fate of the black citizenry who were kept in their place so as to constitute what slaves meant besides cheap labor — the inferior identity to be superior to." Malcolm's childhood memories reveal a life representative of the collective African-American experience as he became ensnared in the racist perversion, as

Erikson described it, of "light-clean-clever-white" and "dark-dirty-dumb-nigger."

His father, Earl Little — a tall, very dark-skinned man from Georgia with little formal education — used his itinerant Baptist ministry to preach the racial pride of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association. In contrast, his mother, Louise, "looked like a white woman" and was educated. Her shame was her father, an unknown white rapist. The mark of his grandfather was visited on Malcolm; of eight children, he stood apart with his reddish-brown color.

Earl and Louise behaved towards Malcolm in antithetical ways because of his color. Of all his children, Earl took only Malcolm to Garveyite meetings, while Louise told him, "Let the sun shine on you so you can get some color." Earl saw Malcolm's complexion as a blessing in the spirit of the adage that "white is right; if you're brown, stick around; but if you're black, step back." Louise, however, favored her dark-skinned children and disparaged Malcolm's lighter color as an unwanted reminder of her white father. Malcolm's acute analysis of the effect of racism on the African-American psyche may well have developed out of his childhood experience of being alternatively favored and censured for his complexion.

When Malcolm was six years old, vigilantes killed Earl, the fourth of six brothers to be killed by whites, for his Garveyite activities. As an adult, Malcolm's advocacy of the right to aggressive self-defense and his disavowal of nonviolent resistance developed from such memories of black victimization. Widowed, Louise exemplified the plight of impoverished female heads of household during the Great Depression. Racial discrimination, menial women's work, and rampant unemployment meant starvation for the Little family in 1934. As Malcolm remembered it, "We would be so hungry we were dizzy." Unable to provide for her offspring, Louise turned to state relief, a degrading condition that led to her eventual commitment to a public mental institution. Her children, including twelve-year-old Malcolm, became wards of the state.

The difficulties of growing up black in white-dominated communities provided Malcolm with a perspective that later caused him to denigrate the civil rights goal of racial integration as woefully naive and illusionary. Whites so routinely called him "nigger" that he thought it normal. Under the supervision of a white couple who ran his detention home, Malcolm was treated kindly but condescendingly. He remembered, "They didn't give me credit for having the same sensitivity, intellect, and understanding that they would have been ready and willing to recognize in a white boy in my position." He also learned as a part of a growing sexual and racial awareness, through "some kind of psychic message," that he was not to dance with white girls at school parties. Yet he knew that furtive interracial sexual liaisons occurred in town. Malcolm was in white society but was restricted to its margins.

Nevertheless Malcolm performed well through seventh grade; he was elected class president, played basketball, and was a good student. Then his English teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, ended Malcolm's adolescent dreams of becoming a lawyer by saying, "We all here like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer — that's no realistic goal for a nigger." The teacher suggested carpentry as the trade appropriate for Malcolm. The experience, Malcolm later reflected, was "the first major turning point of my life." Even though he believed that he was smarter than nearly all his white classmates he understood that his options were limited. The white man had initiated the black boy into a racial rite of passage. The term "nigger" predestined Malcolm's consignment to the nether world of the racial caste system of the United States.

Negative Identity:

The encounter with Ostrowski marked an identity crisis, a racist preemption of young Malcolm's self-

Big Red, aged fifteen, a ghetto hustler. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

perception. Erikson explained that the adolescent "must detect some meaningful resemblance between what he has come to see in himself and what his sharpened awareness tells him others judge and expect him to be." Knowing that his efforts to aspire to white standards were futile, Malcolm fatalistically responded to Ostrowski's pronouncement. He fled Michigan for a relative's home in the Boston ghetto, a migration route to the urban East traditionally followed by alienated Midwestern youths. During his late teenage years, he immersed himself in the hustling subculture of the Roxbury and Harlem ghettos where the lanky Malcolm was called Big Red.

The *Autobiography*, Malcolm cautioned, was not intended to "titillate" the reader with "how bad, how evil" a hustler Malcolm was but to show that "in every big city ghetto tens of thousands of yesterday's and today's drop-outs hold body and soul together by some form of hustling in the same way [he] did." The ghetto institutionalized racism, not only socially and economically but psychologically as well. High unemployment, deteriorated housing, inadequate health care, blighted schools, drug addiction, and rampant crime turned the American dream into a living nightmare. Historically, the European-American community has often defined its success by comparison with African-American failure and subordination; in effect, Northern ghettos replicate antebellum Southern plantations. Erikson discussed the nature of racial victimization: "The oppressor has a vested interest in the negative identity of the oppressed because that negative identity is a projection of his own unconscious negative identity." Blacks served whites as psychic scapegoats, readily identifiable and culturally sanctioned.

As Big Red, Malcolm embodied what Erikson termed "the evil identity of the dirty, anal-sadistic, phallic-rapist 'nigger.'" Slavemasters of the Old South had projected their own fear of racial revenge for black subjugation and wanton sexual abuse of slave women onto the black males. The exploitation of blacks in the United States created an uneasy dialectic for whites: racial degradation sowed the seeds of racial retaliation. The provocative title of Julius Lester's book, *Look Out, Whitey, Black Power's Gonna Get Your Mama* (1968), and Eldridge Cleaver's justification of the rape of white women as a "political act" in *Soul on Ice* (1968) exemplified the enduring menace of the black male in the white mind.

Barred from emulating dominant cultural ideals, the ghetto hustler of the twentieth century sought self-respect through illicit activities on the margins of society. Sixteen-year-old Malcolm spurned the hard-earned bourgeois respectability of Roxbury's Hill Negroes for the sensual pleasures of the dance-hall crowd at Roseland. Shorty, an older Michigan emigrant, instructed his young protegé in the hustler's craft. As a shoeshine boy, Malcolm not only snapped a polishing cloth but satisfied his customers' needs for alcohol, marijuana, condoms, and prostitutes. He

eventually graduated into numbers running, drug selling, specialty sex, and armed robbery — all part of an underground economy based in the ghetto. Under Shorty's tutelage, Malcolm was metamorphosed into a hipster, the "Harlem jigaboo archetype." He flaunted his zoot suit with its punjab pants, dangling gold chain, and long coat. A wide-brimmed hat and pointed orange shoes completed his defiant caricature of formal dress and rejection of middle-class standards. Using a homemade concoction that included lye, he painfully straightened his kinky hair to make it look "regular," like a white man's hair. It was, he later remembered, his "first really big step toward self-degradation." On one desperate occasion when the winter cold had frozen the water pipes, he had to wash the burning lye off his scalp by dunking his head into a toilet. The image of becoming excrement itself, disgusting black refuse that should be flushed away from the sight of decent people, was not lost on the older Malcolm. Outrageous adornment served to mark Big Red's entry into an underworld and outwardly compensated for his sense of racial inferiority.

This type of negative identity, Erikson wrote, is "a desperate attempt to regain some mastery in a situation in which the available positive identity elements cancel each other out." In the absence of a culturally acceptable identity, the ghetto hustler became a symbol of heightened masculine aggressiveness and sexuality. Armed, angry Big Red used the threat of violence to gain deference, if not actual respect. In successfully resisting military conscription during World War II, he acted out a drama for the examining army psychiatrist: "I want to get sent down South. Organize them nigger soldiers, you dig. Steal us some guns, and kill up crackers!" Big Red had the same unsettling effect on the psychiatrist as Malcolm X's advocacy of militant self-defense later had on white society and black civil rights leaders.

Further, he exploited the imagery of the "big black buck" to affirm his self-worth in a society that at once denigrated and feared him. He abandoned Laura, a sheltered and studious black girl, for Sophia, a blond white woman. Big Red then "paraded" Sophia, who was "a status symbol of the first order" among black men in the ghetto. By attracting a white woman, he had validated himself as the equal of any white man. In turn, Sophia sought the "taboo lust" personified by the ghetto hustler. Each responded eagerly to the culturally forbidden pleasures the other represented. In addition, as a "steerer" to specialty sex assignations in Harlem, Malcolm directed white "johns" to black prostitutes who catered to their clients' racial fantasies about heightened black sexual potency and promiscuity. Malcolm's experiences in the netherworld of interracial sexual liaisons led to disgust with the moral hypocrisy of whites, to the adoption of a puritanical code of conduct, and to a persistent suspicion of women.

Although Big Red defied white society, the hustler's life was short and self-destructive. The common predatory allusions in Malcolm's rhetoric and his lifelong habit of never sitting with his back to a door dated from these combative days on the ghetto streets. Pursued by police, gangsters, and Sophia's irate husband, he felt "everything was building up, closing in. . . . [He] was trapped in so many cross turns." Drug addiction muddled his thought; the ever-present pistol foreshadowed a violent end. "I had gotten to the point," he reflected, "where I was walking on my own coffin." Finally, carelessness led to his arrest. A Massachusetts court sentenced him to ten years incarceration for burglary — an excessive sentence, Malcolm believed, to punish him for his relationship with Sophia. Not quite twenty-one years old, he had "sunk to the very bottom of the American white man's society." Big Red had been walled in.

FUNDAMENTALISM:

Seven years spent in prison forced the young man to turn inward. His incarceration approximated what Erikson defined as a psychosocial moratorium, a period of delaying adult commitments and experiment-

Malik El-Shabazz, a Black Muslim leader. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

ing with roles in a youthful search for a social niche. Although the options offered in the penitentiary were restricted, Malcolm likened prison to an intense college experience, an environment conducive to self-education and self-examination. In 1947, Malcolm came under the influence of an older black convict, Bimbi, the prison's scholar and sage. The respect Bimbi gained with his reasoned arguments made Malcolm realize the futility of his own thoughtless rebelliousness. With Bimbi's encouragement, he took correspondence courses to improve his command of language. In addition, Malcolm became a "fanatic fan" of Jackie Robinson, who had broken baseball's color barrier. Malcolm began to appreciate that there were more effective ways to cope with a racist society than his previous dead-end roles.

In 1948, Malcolm underwent a momentous religious conversion. His brothers and sisters gradually won him over to the teachings of the Nation of Islam, presented as the "natural religion for the black man." Malcolm said, "The first time I heard the Honorable Elijah Muhammad's statement, 'The white man is the devil,' it just clicked." The powerful appeal of Elijah Muhammad to the black underclass derived from the origins of the Nation of Islam in Detroit during the Great Depression. The Nation of Islam preached black supremacy, racial separatism through the formation of an African-American nation, social uplift, and economic self-reliance. Believing that divine wrath would soon destroy the evil white race, Elijah Muhammad became the savior of America's blacks trapped in a white Babylon.

Elijah Muhammad's teachings were a fusion of bourgeois aspirations with the millenniarism of racial redemption. According to the demonology of the Nation of Islam, white devils had been created to spite God and his favored people, the black tribe of Shabazz. This dogma provided an affirmation to blacks by a denigration of whites; the oppressed projected their negative identity onto the oppressor where it could be scorned. Elijah Muhammad had imaginatively inverted the axioms of white racism.

The doctrine of the Nation of Islam represented a fundamentalist world view, which Erikson called "totalism" and defined as "something you can totally identify with or against, a stable reference point against which you can know who you are." The Black Muslim's ideological certainty spurred Malcolm to turn against his past. The sense of being saved gave Malcolm the emotional strength to remake himself. He read voraciously, studied the dictionary, and devoured words to fill an internal void. He joined the prison debating society and learned to use language to expose the white conspiracy against blacks. His extraordinary rapport with audiences of the black underclass derived from the power of rhetoric, a modern example of the oral tradition of African-American culture. In his powerful oratory, words were weapons.

The doctrinal message of the Nation of Islam was

accompanied by the personal regeneration of its downtrodden members, beginning with deletion of the slavemaster's surname; Malcolm Little became Malcolm X. The faithful practiced what Malcolm preached in 1960 to a Harlem street audience of several thousand: "Stop fornication, adultery, and prostitution. Elevate the black woman; respect and protect her. Let us rid ourselves of immoral habits and God will be with us to protect and guide us." Thus was created a gospel of personal cleanliness, hard work, and small business entrepreneurship that acculturated drug addicts, ex-convicts, prostitutes, and others of the ghetto underclass into bourgeois behavior patterns.

After his release from prison in 1952, Malcolm increasingly served as the principal spokesman for the reclusive, asthmatic prophet, whom he revered as his personal redeemer: "He had rescued me when I was a convict; Mr. Muhammad had trained me in his home, as if I was his son." There was, however, an ambivalence in their emotionally charged relationship, which resembled that of father and son. The older man, prodded by envious leaders in the Chicago headquarters, resented Malcolm's growing prominence, while the dynamic young man had matured beyond the simple fundamentalism of his withdrawn mentor. By 1959, the mass media had discovered the electrifying presence of Minister Malcolm X and the alarming doctrine of the sect they called the Black Muslims, as exhibited in a CBS television documentary, *The Hate That Hate Produced.*

Malcolm's espousal of the Muslim doctrine of racial separation, black superiority, and the right of violent self-defense clashed with the emerging mainstream civil rights movement represented by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The image of white racists assaulting defenseless blacks who proposed "to love their enemy" and "to turn the other cheek" perpetuated in his mind the stereotype of the passive Negro, the Uncle Tom. He later explained, "Any time you know you're within the law, within your legal rights, within your moral rights, in accord with justice, then die for what you believe in. But don't die alone. Let your dying be reciprocal. This is what is meant by equality."

By the early 1960s, Malcolm was clearly frustrated with Elijah Muhammad's policy of inaction, premised on the chiliastic dogma that the chosen people needed only to await Armageddon for their redemption from racial oppression.* He admitted to a journalist that "the rest of us have not seen Allah: we don't have this divine patience, and we are not going to wait on God," and that "the younger Black Muslims want to see some action." Added to the jealousy, ideological differences, and organizational rivalry was a sexual scandal. Malcolm confronted Elijah Muhammad in 1963 about a long-standing rumor that he had fathered a number of children with his young secretaries. Elijah Muhammad admitted his adultery but excused it as part of his divine fulfillment of Old Testament practices. Malcolm, who had read his own brother Reginald out of the Muslims for a similar sexual infraction, was emotionally shattered. In his words, "My faith had been shaken in a way that I can never fully describe." The exposure of Elijah Muhammad's low moral character finally broke the fundamentalist hold that he had over Malcolm.

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Beyond Fundamentalism:

The schism became formal in December 1963 when Elijah Muhammad suspended Malcolm for ninety days from speaking in public. The ostensible reason for the ban was Malcolm's unauthorized comment to the press that President Kennedy's assassination was a case of "chickens coming home to roost" — a controversial remark about endemic violence in Ameri-

*chiliastic dogma: the doctrine that Christ will return to earth to reign a thousand years. — Ed.

can society. Malcolm submitted to his leader's orders until he learned that Elijah Muhammad had secretly called for his execution. The "spiritual and psychological crisis" of Elijah Muhammad's betrayal escalated into a question of survival. As Malcolm recalled, "The first direct death-order was how, finally, I began to arrive at my psychological divorce from the Nation of Islam."

The following March, Malcolm announced his break with the Nation of Islam and the creation of a rival organization, Muslim Mosque, Inc. The narrow sectarianism of the Nation of Islam had transformed the hustler but had constrained him in an ideological strait jacket. "I was a zombie then — like all Muslims — I was hypnotized," he remembered, "pointed in a certain direction and told to march." After that realization, Malcolm sought to think and act anew. From an Eriksonian perspective, the schism provided the occasion to restructure his identity from a "totalism" characterized by absolutes and conformity to a "wholeness" able to tolerate tension and diversity. He spent nearly half his last year in Africa and the Middle East, seeking solutions in the Old World to problems in the New. As a result, he abandoned Elijah Muhammad's caricature of Islam and embraced Sunni orthodoxy; he also changed his understanding of racism from a crude demonology to a sophisticated cultural analysis.

Malcolm noted: "Around 1963, if anyone had noticed, I spoke less and less of religion. I taught social doctrine to Muslims, and current events, and politics." Although he supported Elijah Muhammad's goal of a separate black nation, he was immediately concerned that "twenty-two million of our people who are still here in America need better food, clothing, housing, education and jobs *right now*." He further modified Elijah Muhammad's doctrines by stressing the power of the black ballot in the 1964 presidential election and by extending the olive branch to other black leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. However, Malcolm's advocacy of the right of self-defense still prevented any alliance with the middle-class civil rights organizations. In addition, he placed the African-American struggle in the worldwide context of colonial liberation movements and demanded a United Nations' investigation of the violation of black human rights in the United States.

Having established a tentative political credo for Muslim Mosque, Inc., Malcolm sought to anchor the new organization within the Islamic faith. In April 1964, he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Uncertain if he would even be accepted as a legitimate Muslim, he was overwhelmed by the gracious treatment accorded him. He wrote:

> There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white.

The pilgrimage experience led to "a radical alteration in [his] whole outlook about 'white men.'" The prefix El-Hajj, added to his name in honor of the hegira [Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina, 622 A.D.], marked a "spiritual rebirth." Shortly after his return to the United States, he announced, "I'm a human being first and foremost and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole."

Denouncing Elijah Muhammad's demonology, Malcolm argued, "The white man is not inherently evil but America's racist society influences him to act evilly." He abandoned what Erikson labeled a "pseudo-species mentality," one that ignores or denigrates the humanity of others. In Erikson's words, "Nobody can really find his most adult identity by denying it to others." The challenge therefore was to change the psychology of racism and the system that nourished it, not to fantasize devils.

In June 1964, Malcolm founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), which captured his affinity for pan-Africanism. A subsequent eighteen-week trip to Africa and the Middle East fur-

ther broadened his outlook. As he told an African summit meeting, "Our problems are your problems. It is not a Negro problem, nor an American problem. This is a world problem; a problem for humanity." Malcolm dropped the phrase black nationalism in describing the OAAU program because of its racial exclusiveness. Malcolm's desire to forge a broader African-American identity was in keeping with Erikson's observation that "the alternative to an exclusive totalism is the wholeness of a more inclusive identity."

Much of Malcolm's thought was provisional. As he told an audience in November 1964, "I don't profess to have a political, economic or social solution to a problem as complicated as the one which our people face in the States, but I am one of those who is willing to try any means necessary to bring an end to the injustices our people suffer." While skirting doctrinaire commitment, he indicted "the American system," including U.S. foreign policy in the Congo and Vietnam as he linked the government's opposition to revolutionary nationalism abroad with racial oppression at home.

During the three months remaining in his life after his return to the United States, there was further modification of his views. In contrast to his earlier distrust of women, he linked national progress in Africa with the emancipation of women. He no longer supported a black state in North America or condemned racial integration and intermarriage. He endorsed black voter registration and political involvement but emphasized that civil rights legislation had not defused the "social dynamite" in the ghetto. He correctly predicted, "1965 will be the longest, hottest, bloodiest summer of the entire black revolution."

Malcolm's remarkable evolution of thought left him alienated. Black Muslims stalked him, the FBI monitored his activities, and the "Red Squad" of the New York City police infiltrated his bodyguards. "They won't let me turn the corner," he complained of his critics. After being unexpectedly barred from France where he was to address African students, he returned to New York only to experience a firebombing of his home in the early morning of 14 February 1965. Suspecting CIA involvement, he fatalistically told a reporter on February 18, "I live like a man who's already dead." Three days later he was shot down in a hail of gunfire from assassins in the audience as he spoke to an OAAU rally at the Audubon Hall in Harlem. A jury found three Black Muslims guilty of the murder, but speculation remains about the guilt of two of the convicted men and about the complicity of the New York City police and the FBI.

In an Eriksonian perspective, Malcolm's overall significance lay in the congruence of his life and a pivotal moment in time. Yet, such a broad generalization needs qualification where the fit between model and subject is imperfect. Erikson's concepts of "surrendered identity," "negative identity," and "fundamentalism" are more precise in describing Malcolm's earlier stages of development than is the final category, "beyond fundamentalism," because Malcolm spent the final months of his life in a state of flux: he admitted to a reporter shortly before his murder, "I won't deny I don't know where I'm at." In assessing Malcolm's legacy, it is essential to come to terms with what he accomplished and what was left unfinished during the fifty weeks that remained of his life after the break with the Nation of Islam.

Malcolm's success in articulating black rage was the source of both his strength and his weakness. The militant black identity Malcolm embodied meant the end of psychic inferiority and demanded a radical readjustment of racial relations. He taught that "a person who is fighting racism is well within his rights to fight against it by any means necessary until it is eliminated." As Erikson observed, "Revolutions have to be shocking in order to really unhinge existing identities." Malcolm's scathing indictment of racial hypocrisy and injustice made him a riveting public figure. The night of his death, his widow lamented, "He was honest — too honest for his own good."

Malcolm's candor and charisma were, however, difficult to institutionalize. The major failure of his career was that after his schism with the Nation of

Islam, his evolving conception of a new black identity and the social programs needed to facilitate its emergence were not incorporated into a viable organization. The program of the OAAU was inchoate, its administration in disarray, its membership limited, and its funds minimal. Malcolm's extensive foreign travel and hectic personal schedule left little time for organizational duties. His militant posture barred cooperation with well established groups such as SCLC, NAACP, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins [head of the NAACP], and James Farmer [head of CORE] could best use Malcolm as a foil, who, by comparison, made their civil rights programs look more palatable. Malcolm told a Harlem street rally, "They charge us with being extremists but if it was not for the extremists the white man would ignore the moderates."

In Erikson's estimation, "The best leader is the one who can realize the actual potentials in his nation, and most of all the more inclusive identities which are ready to be realized in the world." Malcolm met Erikson's prescription only in part. His spiritual enlightenment in Mecca and abandonment of the goal of black nationalism significantly broadened his world view. "I am not a racist," he said repeatedly after his break with Elijah Muhammad. "I do not subscribe to any of the tenets of racism." He also stressed the inclusive identity of the black diaspora, pan-Africanism, and ultimately human solidarity.

Malcolm was most effective as a moral critic and an exemplar of a new black identity. "When we stop always saying yes to Mr. Charlie and turning the hate against ourselves," he explained, "we will begin to be free." He lacked the systematic program — not to mention white liberal support — that the middle-class leadership of the civil rights movement had gained. A month before his death, he acknowledged, "I would be hard pressed to give a specific definition of the overall philosophy which I think is necessary for the liberation of the black people of this country." Nevertheless, he captured to a degree unattained by anyone else the frustration of the ghetto underclass whose degraded position remains largely unchanged since the Second Reconstruction. Two days before his death, Malcolm gave what in effect was his epitaph: "It's a time for martyrs now. And if I'm to be one, it will be in the cause of brotherhood. That's the only thing that can save this country."

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think of Erik Erikson's psychological model and Lawrence Goodheart's use of it in this selection? Explain your reaction.

2. Discuss Malcolm X's evolving racial feelings about himself in particular and about whites and African Americans in general. How were they influenced by his childhood experiences, his life in the ghetto, and his experiences with the Islamic movement? What effect did education have on his views?

3. According to Goodheart, "the shaping of Malcolm's sense of self as a counterpart to the historic oppression of African-Americans constitutes a central theme in his life." In what way do you think his personal feelings reflected those of a larger community? Compare his appeal with that of Martin Luther King, Jr., about whom you read in the last selection. Why do you think Malcolm X has a continued appeal, and for whom does he have that appeal? What does that say about developments in racial relations in the United States since Malcolm X's death?

4. What is Goodheart's final analysis of Malcolm X and the successes and failures of his career?

5. Compare Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., their personalities, their backgrounds, and their personal reactions over time to racial discrimination. Compare their two approaches to dealing with racial injustice in America. Which was the more effective and why? Did they help or hurt each other?