

Remembering a Fiery Prophet of the Truth

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I was in my sixth grade class on April 4, 1968, the day Martin Luther King was shot. That day, I wrote to my pen pal in Germany, trying, in my eleven year old way, to express the way hope had been squashed. She wrote back right away, and I can still remember her words, though they were in a language I barely understood: "Ich interesierre mich nicht für politik." I'm not interested in politics.

Forty years later I'm still troubled by those words. Not because she found it so easy to dismiss something that devastated me and everyone I knew. She lived thousands of miles away, in the middle of the Black Forest. Why should she care about the deaths of King or Bobby Kennedy or American soldiers or Vietnamese villagers? No, the reason I'm troubled by her words is that I know I'm just as capable of ignoring uncomfortable situations and unpleasant truths.

The recent flap over Rev. Jeremiah Wright's condemnation of American arrogance ("I don't say God bless America, but God damn America," in one 15 second soundbite) put King in my mind again. The man who could speak so passionately about his dream for America was just as articulate and prophetic when describing the nightmare his country could be.

A few months before he died, King preached these words, echoing things he'd been saying for most of a year: "God didn't call America to engage in a senseless, unjust war.... And we are criminals in that war. We've committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world, and I'm going to continue to say it. And we won't stop it, because of our pride and our arrogance as a nation. But God has a way of even putting nations in their place." King predicted that God might respond, "And if you don't stop your reckless course, I'll rise up and break the backbone of your power." That same year a frustrated King warned, "America's going to hell if she doesn't use her resources to lift the poor."

Martin King followed the example of the Biblical prophets. Having heard Jeremiah Wright preach on several occasions, I would say the problem is not that Rev. Wright is too blunt or unpatriotic, but that the rest of us preachers have become far too accommodating and diplomatic.