


to call for measures, like an increased public commitment to education, to foster it. Perhaps a part of him meant for the speech to close on a triumphant note, and I suppose it does. But here, at least, "Honest Abe" is not a particularly effective liar:

It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence, to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate at all times. They presented him the words: *"And this, too, shall pass away."* How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride!—how consoling in the depths of affliction! *"And this, too, shall pass away."* And yet let us hope it is not *quite* true. Let us hope, rather, that by the best cultivation of the physical world, beneath and around us; and the intellectual and moral world within us, we shall secure an individual, social, and political prosperity and happiness, whose course shall be onward and upward, and which, while the earth endures, shall not pass away.

As Ernest Hemingway might have said, it would be pretty to think so.

CHAPTER 4

KING OF AMERICA: THE DREAM OF EQUALITY

 HOMER PLESSY was not a slave. Born in New Orleans on March 17, 1862—six months to the day before Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation—he was the son of Creole parents. Although Plessy and his entire family were light-skinned and "passed" as white, his great-grandmother was of African descent. This meant, according to Louisiana law, that he was legally black. Unlike many African Americans—or "negroes," as they were called in polite circles at the time—Plessy, who grew up to become a shoemaker, had been a free man his entire life. Nobody owned him; nobody could buy or sell him. He could say what he pleased, go where he wanted. He enjoyed a series of constitutionally protected rights as a United States citizen.

Of course, as a negro, there were certain, shall we say, considerations. Nobody owned him, but if he was ever unfortunate enough to go to jail (something statistically more likely for him than for a white man), he might end up on a chain gang performing forced labor. He could say what he pleased, but as surely he understood, some things (particularly those critical of the state of race relations) could only be said at his own risk. He could go where he wanted, assuming he had the means (and obeyed the prevailing rules, like sticking among his own kind). He

enjoyed a series of constitutional rights as a U.S. citizen—IF he could find officials willing (and able) to enforce them.

Fortunately, such considerations were relatively minor for Homer Plessy. No one could really tell his “true” identity, and as long as he was willing to lie now and then, everything would be fine. He was a free man—more free than most negroes.

On June 7, 1892, Plessy took a train ride from New Orleans to Covington, a town on the other side of Lake Pontchartrain. According to a new 1890 law in Louisiana, Plessy was obligated to ride in a separate car designated specifically for negroes, and thus to be segregated from white riders. Plessy ignored the law, ignored it as countless other light-skinned Americans surely evaded similar “Jim Crow” laws that were proliferating throughout the “redeemed” South of the late nineteenth century. Many of these laws were modeled on similar ones enacted by northern states in the decades before the war.

This time, however, Plessy did not get away with passing for white. Actually, he made sure he didn’t: he and a group of collaborators *planned* for his arrest. Those collaborators included a citizens’ committee of Creoles and the lawyer they hired, a northern white “carpetbagger” writer and lawyer named Albion Tourgée who moved to North Carolina briefly after the Civil War and was appalled by southern white racism. (The group also received quiet encouragement from the railroad company, which considered racial segregation economically onerous.) So it was no accident when a cooperating conductor approached Plessy and demanded he move to a white car; a private detective hired for the purpose arrested Plessy when he refused. He was charged by a Louisiana court and pleaded innocent, and a trial was set for the following month.

The trial was presided over by Justice John Howard Ferguson. A Massachusetts native, Ferguson, like Plessy’s attorney Albion Tourgée, came south after the Civil War; unlike Tourgée, he stayed there and married the daughter of a prominent New Orleans attorney. In the weeks between Plessy’s arrest and trial, Ferguson ruled in a similar case, also carefully orchestrated, involving a man riding an interstate train. In that case, Ferguson ruled that the Louisiana law, which called for “equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races,” was unconstitutional. This was because travel between states fell under the federal government’s power to regulate interstate commerce, and a series of post-Civil War constitutional amendments and federal laws had strengthened the legal rights of African Americans. Of particular

importance here was the Fourteenth Amendment, which asserted: “No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny any to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

The Plessy case, however, did not involve interstate travel. Because of this, Ferguson ruled, federal law did not apply, because states had the right to regulate companies operating solely within their borders. When it came to some things—most things—states could do what they pleased without interference from meddling officials from Washington, and keeping the races separate was one of them. Plessy was found guilty.

This outcome had been anticipated. Indeed, Tourgée in particular hoped Plessy would be convicted; from the very beginning his plan was to appeal the case before the United States Supreme Court, which would be forced to strike down such “separate but equal” laws whatever their location or intent because they were so patently unfair. The Plessy team prepared carefully, delaying their case in the hope that the nation’s racial climate (and the ideological makeup of the Supreme Court) would improve. When it became clear dramatic improvements were not forthcoming, they finally made their move, and the case went before the high court in April of 1896.

Plessy v. Ferguson, like many landmark Supreme Court cases, was a complex matter marked by abstruse theory and what many nonlawyers would regard as counterintuitive logic. In the most basic terms, the case was about the nature and meaning of equality, but a large body of legal doctrine had carefully distinguished between different *kinds* of equality: political equality (the rights of citizens in relation to the government), civil equality (the rights of citizens in the public sphere), and social equality (the rights of citizens in their personal dealings with each other). Such distinctions were crucial in the formulation of the Supreme Court’s deliberations and featured prominently in the majority (7–1) decision written by another Massachusetts native, Justice Henry Billings Brown.

One paragraph in particular of Brown’s ruling has long attracted particular attention:

The object of the [Fourteenth] amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of

things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either. Laws permitting, and even requiring, their separation in places where they are liable to be brought into contact do not necessarily imply the inferiority of either race to the other, and have been generally, if not universally, recognized as within the competency of the state legislatures in the exercise of their police power. The most common instance of this is connected with the establishment of separate schools for white and colored children, which has been held to be a valid exercise of the legislative power even by courts of States where the political rights of the colored race have been longest and most earnestly enforced.*

The Court concluded that Plessy's case finally foundered in the idea that segregation itself was the problem. "We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it." If negroes feel inferior, Brown argues, they have only themselves to blame. The government is doing all it can, should—or will. After the case the free Homer Plessy drifted into anonymity, becoming a life insurance collector before his death in 1925.

Plessy v. Ferguson has long been considered among the worst decisions the Supreme Court ever made, one ranking with its *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision of 1857, which ruled that African Americans "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." *Plessy*'s reputation is partly a matter of hindsight—subsequent events would show it legally legitimated a racist state in which African Americans were systematically deprived of political, civil, and social equality for decades to come—but observers at the time (the few that were paying attention, that is) recognized it would have a disastrous impact. "In my opinion, the judgment this day rendered will, in time, prove to be quite as pernicious as the

* Brown is referring to *Roberts v. the City of Boston* (1850), a precedent that established the legitimacy of school segregation. Southern lawmakers were fond of basing their own segregation statutes on antebellum northern ones. Besides the obvious legal utility in cases like this one, it was also politically helpful when northerners began moralizing about "southern" racial problems.

decision made by this tribunal in the *Dred Scott* case," Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan, himself a former slaveholder, wrote in a lone dissent. "The present decision, it may well be apprehended, will not only stimulate aggressions, more or less brutal and irritating, upon the admitted rights of colored citizens, but will encourage the belief that it is possible, by means of state enactments, to defeat the beneficent purposes which the people of the United States had in view when they adopted the recent amendments of the Constitution" (i.e., the Thirteenth, ending slavery, the Fourteenth, guaranteeing African Americans citizenship, and the Fifteenth, granting them the right to vote).

Abraham Lincoln may have made the slaves *free*, but not even he, as he pointed out repeatedly in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, was prepared to make them *equal*. The *Plessy* decision was part of a broader political effort to make two concepts that had been widely considered virtually interchangeable into two that were wholly separate, even antithetical.

Race relations wasn't the only area of American life where such a redefinition was taking place. The acceleration of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century, combined with the growing application of the Darwinian theory of "the survival of the fittest" to human affairs, popularized a notion of freedom as the right of the individual entrepreneur, like John D. Rockefeller, to make as much money as he could without interference that would drag down the progress of the human race as a whole. In this view, freedom meant freedom to dominate and freedom from regulation. Equality, by contrast, was a base "leveling" instinct that restricted freedom by insisting that everyone, even those who were evidently superior, had to play by the same rules, respect the same limits. Any assertion that people should be *more* equal than they theoretically already were smacked of socialism—and socialism, like other "foreign" ideas, was thoroughly beyond the pale. Such logic became the cornerstone of Republican ideology in the closing decades of the nineteenth century—and, for that matter, the closing decades of the twentieth as well.

But nowhere were the language, assumptions, and passion for inequality more entrenched than in race relations, and nowhere was the fear that attended the prospect of a truly egalitarian society more apparent. That might not have been a problem; many societies in world history have durably embraced inequality as the foundation for their social organization. Moreover, there have always been Americans in the South

and elsewhere quite willing to deny the validity of equality entirely, and others who would pay it lip service lest meddling Yankees impose their will with lawsuits—and, once every century or so, with armed troops. But most of us have believed that equality must play a role in everyday American life, even if that role is almost wholly theoretical.

That's because the American Dream depends on it. At some visceral level, virtually all of us need to believe that equality is one of the core values of everyday American life, that its promises extend to everyone. If they don't, then not everybody is eligible for the American Dream—and one of the principal attractions of the American Dream, and its major moral underpinning, is that everyone is eligible: this has been the benchmark, commonsense notion of what equality has meant for quite some time. That the circumstances of everyday life routinely belie this belief is hardly a problem as long as the *principle* of equality is affirmed.

The way we typically square the difference between principle and reality is to cite the concept of equality of *opportunity*. The notion that everyone has the hypothetical possibility of being equal in public life is a standard we consider practical, as opposed to equality of *condition*, which we typically do not. We can accept, even savor, all kinds of inequalities as long as we can imagine different outcomes—that you *can* earn a million dollars (if you're lucky); that there's no obvious external barrier forcibly *preventing* a Latina child from attending an Ivy League university (if her test scores are good enough); that you too can hire jury consultants in your murder trial (if you're rich and/or famous); and so on. This allows us to believe we live in a reasonably fair country that bears some relationship to its founding ideals—in this case, that “all men are created equal,” as usefully ambiguous as the phrase is—and gives us the hope that our own dreams are not impossibly out of reach.

In an insidious way, this commitment to a fuzzily defined equality of opportunity can actually prevent equality from ever being realized, in much the same way a cigarette smoker believes it's *possible* to kick the habit and thus remains free to maintain it a while longer. One is here reminded of 1972 presidential candidate George McGovern, who was surprised and dismayed by the negative reaction to his suggestion that large inheritances be heavily taxed. “They must think they're going to win a lottery,” he mused. Rarely has it been so clear why a candidate lost.

Still, for all the laziness and hypocrisy our attitude toward equality has engendered, even the highly diluted equality of opportunity has

never been wholly without transformative potential to regenerate the American Dream. Indeed, the great irony of *Plessy v. Ferguson* is that the legal basis of the ruling sowed the seeds of its own destruction. The Louisiana lawmakers who crafted the original state railway law knew the federal government would never let them get away with “separate” unless they at least made a *pretense* toward “equal.” This is why most Jim Crow laws meant to deny blacks their constitutional rights never actually *said* African Americans could not vote but instead created standards (like literacy tests, poll taxes, and the like) that were supposedly racially neutral but effectively prevented only African Americans from exercising their rights. Beyond that, most Jim Crow laws didn't even bother with pretense: there was no point to them unless separate could mean *unequal*. Nevertheless, the standard, however flouted, provided the wedge that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—founded in the wake of *Plessy*—used to argue that the separate facilities typically provided for blacks were not in fact equal. This effort resulted in a string of legal victories in the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), in which the NAACP showed that the separate law school facilities provided by an institution in Texas failed to meet the *Plessy* standard. The NAACP advanced simultaneously on another front to show that even where theoretical equality existed, separation itself was inherently unequal. This was the basis of the celebrated *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, which overturned a practice—school segregation—that even *Plessy*'s own lawyers took for granted in making their own case.

The fact that it took almost sixty years to overturn *Plessy*, however, is not exactly a resounding affirmation of the American legal system. Actually, Supreme Court justices themselves would be the first to say that law is an awkward instrument of social policy. (It's only fair to note that it took states like Louisiana decades after the Civil War to get those Jim Crow statutes on the books in the first place.) The most powerful, and meaningful, battles to infuse the spirit of equality have taken place not in the courts but on the streets. In 1892 Homer Plessy rode a train. In 1955, Rosa Parks—who, like Plessy (and, for that matter, Dred Scott) worked with a series of collaborators on a carefully planned scenario—opened a new phase of the struggle by riding a bus.

This historical movement embodied by figures like Parks has come to be known as “the civil rights movement.” That name is accurate in that many of the issues that were fought over in the next fifteen years

involved the ability of African Americans to avail themselves of political rights the law said they already had and to enjoy protection from discrimination that was not necessarily imposed by governments.

The civil rights movement is also sometimes known as "the black freedom movement." This, too, makes sense, in that what was at stake was often the freedom to exercise rights, like voting, or freedom from physical intimidation. Moreover, there have been few terms in the last thirty years that have had more allure in American life than "freedom," particularly among retail marketers and political conservatives.

In an important sense, however, names like "the civil rights Movement" and "the black freedom movement" obscure more than they reveal. In an important sense, this event of "the sixties" (another imprecise term) would perhaps most accurately be called the black *equality* movement. Such a designation would serve as a vivid reminder of what was really at stake in those years—and what has been so depressingly absent in the decades since.

The most famous figure in this struggle for equality was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Then and since, observers have noted that he was one figure among many and that the acts of daring that marked his life were matched by many others in the movement. This is, of course, correct. Yet a belief in King's preeminence in the movement, however inaccurate or even unjust, is not without a logical foundation. For it was he more than anyone else who articulated the moral and cultural basis for equality in American life—not only for African Americans, but for all Americans. The struggle for black equality is one of the great dramas of our national history, and its course and outcome remain an object lesson for those waging parallel struggles for equality in other, almost inevitably entwined, arenas in our national life.

He had a dream, you see. A dream that scares us, a dream that we often try to ignore. But it's one we can't forget, either, and don't entirely want to. That's because in our better moments, it's our dream, too.

Was the vision of a nation of equals flawed at the source by contempt for both the poor and the black? Is America still colonial Virginia writ large? More than a century after Appomattox, the questions linger.

—Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, 1975

In the beginning, there was a kind of rough equality: an equality of death. Native or immigrant, male or female, rich or poor: the odds you would perish in early seventeenth-century North America were frighteningly high. "This month, thirteen of our number die," William Bradford reported of the Pilgrim settlement in March of 1621, the fourth month after arrival in Plymouth. "There sometimes die two or three a day. Of one hundred persons scarce fifty remain: The living scarce able to bury the dead; the well not sufficient to tend the sick." After the initial hardships for early settlers, though, New England proved to offer a relatively good climate for immigrants. The cold winters limited the possibilities for infectious disease; the Indians, who had been decimated by disease before the Puritan migration, were not in a good position to resist the invasion.

The Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland were another story. The bay harbored all kinds of deadly maladies, and the dank summer weather often proved to be too much for Anglo-Saxons from cooler climes. Nor were Indians quite as cooperative there. Virginia's first permanent settlement was established at Jamestown in 1607; nine years later the first tobacco crop, which would prove so central to the colony's economy, was planted. During the ensuing boom of the next few years, about 3,500 people, virtually all of them men, poured into Virginia. And yet, while its population should have been about 4,200, there were only about 1,240 alive in 1622.

The surest way to prosper in Virginia in those days was simply to survive. Most of those who had gone were poor young men from the streets of London with few prospects. They went over as indentured servants; if they made it to the end of their term of service, they literally received a stake in the land to make their own fortunes. Women in Virginia enjoyed a relatively powerful position, since they were relatively scarce and in some cases inherited the property of serial husbands who died before they did, making them very attractive indeed to suitors. Even the minute number of slaves, who began arriving in 1619, could own land, go to court, and have servants of their own. Here was a fluid frontier society of upward mobility, one marked by inequality from the beginning and yet full of possibility and danger for all.

Over the course of the century, however, Virginia and the other southern colonies stabilized, and as they did so the relative egalitarianism of these early years gave way to a growing sense of hierarchy. The governorship of Sir William Berkeley (1642–77) was pivotal in this

regard; under Berkeley's watch the colony became an almost feudal society run in many cases by second sons of noblemen back home who seized opportunities to become lords of manors. The insurrection of Nathaniel Bacon in 1676 was in many ways a protest by relatively lowly "freemen" against the growing inequality of the colony—it was also a race war on the part of those who wanted to subjugate the Indians more decisively than Berkeley felt he needed to—but Bacon's sudden death allowed Berkeley to crush the rebellion. In its wake, wealthy Virginians became more inclined than ever to dispense with potentially troublesome indentured white servants and make the investment in more durable, and reproducible, slaves, whose legal and social privileges were steadily circumscribed. Given Virginia's influence in the South and the colonies as a whole in the century that followed, the die was cast for a colonial culture whose stability rested on a foundation of racial inequality. So did its understanding of freedom: the ambivalence and bad faith of Thomas Jefferson notwithstanding, it is clear the War of Independence was one of *white* independence, and the price of Southern ratification of the Constitution was the perpetration of a system of inequality based on slavery that spread across the South and beyond.

The great—inevitable?—paradox of this inequality is that for its white male citizens, the young United States was also the most egalitarian society the Western world had ever seen. "Among the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in an opening sentence of *Democracy in America* that set the tone for the entire work. Note that Tocqueville speaks of equality of *condition*; the phenomenon he observed was no mere principle or abstraction but an evident reality he experienced as he toured the continent.

That said, we can't necessarily accept Tocqueville at face value. For one thing, he was a member of the French aristocracy (albeit from a family out of favor), and there are few more entertaining passages in all of American historical literature than those where he describes, with evident irritation, the presumptuousness of some of the Americans he dealt with.* Indeed, Tocqueville regarded American equality as posing

* "I have often noticed that in the United States it is not easy to make a man understand that his presence may be dispensed with," Tocqueville observes in the second volume of *Democracy in America*. "Hints will not always suffice to shake him off. I contradict an Amer-

real problems, among them a tendency toward conformity in a culture where the acceptance of one's peers mattered far more than the patronage of one's betters.

It's also a little hard to see how Tocqueville could be so insistent on American equality in a slave society. In part, this may reflect the fact that most of his travels were in the North and Midwest. But Tocqueville was by no means ignorant of slavery and wrote about it with his usual psychological acuity. He recognized the powerful contradiction that equality fosters in the typical American—"he engenders to show that, for his part, he is an exception to the general state of things"—and described how this dynamic played itself out below the Mason-Dixon line: "The Americans of the Southern states have two powerful passions which will always keep them aloof: the first is fear of being assimilated to the Negroes, their former slaves; and the second, the dread of sinking below the whites, their neighbors." Tocqueville also saw the boundaries in the culture of egalitarianism. "If America undergoes great revolutions," he wrote in 1840, "they will be brought about by the presence of the black race on the soil of the United States; that is to say, they will owe their origin not to equality, but to the inequality of condition."

He was, of course, correct. He was correct in another sense as well: "If I were called upon to predict the future, I should say that the abolition of slavery in the South will, in the common course of things, increase the white repugnance for blacks." This was a matter of observation, not theory: "Inhabitants of the North avoid the Negroes with increasing care in proportion as the legal barriers of separation are removed by the legislature; why should not the same result take place in the South?" Tocqueville would have readily understood how it was that so many Jim Crow laws of the post-Civil War era drew their inspiration, even language, from northern laws.

Indeed, even before the Civil War, some African Americans began to realize that freedom and equality were by no means interchangeable and that the former was only a precondition for the latter. Frederick

ican at every word he says, to show him that his conversation bores me; he instantly labors with fresh pertinacity to convince me; I observe a dogged silence, and he thinks I am meditating deeply on the truths that he is uttering; at last I rush from his company, and he supposes that some urgent business hurries me elsewhere. . . . Democratic institutions generally give men a lofty notion of their country and themselves."

Douglass, as true a believer in democracy as black America ever created, seemed to regard the very northern air he breathed as somehow sweeter when he escaped from slavery to freedom in 1838. Douglass had been a caulker working in a Baltimore shipyard (where he was beaten by apprentices) prior to his escape. Upon achieving his freedom, he sought work in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and was "for once made glad by a view of extreme wealth, without being saddened by seeing extreme poverty." Douglass nevertheless encountered blanket discrimination against blacks in the shipyards there. He also found himself subjected to segregated seating on northern railroads, a practice he resisted even when it meant forcible eviction from the cars.

Such experiences fostered disillusionment but did not lead Douglass to give up. Indeed, if anything, they heightened his desire to achieve full citizenship and his anger at the betrayal of the core premises of national identity and the American Dream. Nowhere is this more obvious than in his famous 1852 speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" in which Douglass dismisses self-serving "shouts of liberty and equality" as "hollow mockery." "For revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without rival," he concluded. And yet, despite this barbarity and hypocrisy, Douglass never gave up the pursuit of what he called in an 1883 address "making the nation's life consistent with the nation's creed." At the core of that creed was equality.

Frederick Douglass was in many ways an exceptional figure, but his hopes for his country were by no means unique, particularly among the nearly two hundred thousand black combatants, among others, who served on the northern side during the Civil War. Many of them did so with a clear sense of what was at stake. "We are fighting as hard as the white man is to restore the Union," one such soldier wrote in a letter to the editor of a black newspaper in December of 1864. "Why then should we not have equal rights with a foreigner, who comes to this country to fight for the preservation of the Government?" He then conjured his own Dream of Equality. "If we live to have families, we can sit down by the side of our wives, with our children around us, and relate to them what we have endured and witnessed upon the battlefields, to help us restore this now-broken Union." Another soldier, writing to the same newspaper a month later, evoked a similar vision of the day when he and his fellow soldiers would "surround our cheerful firesides, and relate to our wives and children, parents and friends, what we have witnessed during this struggle for freedom, liberty, and equal

rights." This interracial vision of family and friends savoring the fruits of equality would prove to be a durable dream in black America, one that would be evoked a century later by Martin Luther King in his image of black and white sitting at the table of brotherhood in his most famous address.

Unfortunately, the Dream of Equality receded into the distance in the decades following the Civil War, largely because many white Americans were determined to see it do so. Edward A. Pollard, editor of the *Richmond Examiner* during the war and author of the 1867 manifesto *The Lost Cause*, spoke for many when he observed that the war may have decided "the restoration of the Union and the excision of slavery, but did not decide Negro equality." Indeed, in some quarters that had been decided before the war, and nothing had happened to change it. Democratic congressman Andrew Rogers of New Jersey, who opposed the Fourteenth Amendment, spoke for many whites, North and South, when he asserted that the American government "was made for white men and women" and that not even the Civil War could overturn God's "edict" against "social equality between the black race and white race." By the 1870s the views of people like Pollard and Rogers were in the ascendant again as increasing emphasis was placed on sectional reconciliation and decreasing emphasis was placed on black equality. The election of 1912 brought Woodrow Wilson, the first southern president since the Civil War, into office; in 1913, the federal government passed regulations following the southern practice of creating segregated facilities in government offices.

So: freedom? Yes. Fifty years after the Civil War, it remained a fait accompli, and even many avowed racists claimed, as former Confederate vice president Alexander Stephens did after the war, that "some of the strongest Anti-Slavery men who ever lived were on the side of those who opposed the Centralizing principles which led to the war." For such people, the war was never about slavery. (For some people, it still isn't; it's about "heritage," leading one to wonder what the people who make such an assertion think the South has a distinct heritage of.) In any event, slavery was no more, though to many former slaves the tenant farming system that replaced it was just as bad, even worse, forcing African Americans into unequal relationships with landlords who dictated terms with little or no economic, political, or legal recourse. The freedpeople were at liberty to sign onerous contracts if they chose to and free to starve if they did not.

But equality? No way, said the diehards. Not without another Civil War. Even then.

Yes, my friends. I want equality. Nothing less. I want all that my God-given powers will enable me to get, then why not equality. Now, catch your breath, for I am going to use an adjective: I am going to say I demand social equality. In this republic we shall be less than freemen, if we have a whit less than that which thrift, education, and honor afford other freemen. If equality, political, economic, and social is the boon of other men in this great country of ours, then equality, political, social, and economic is what we demand.

**—John Hope, responding to the arguments of
Booker T. Washington in address before the Colored
Debating Society of Nashville, February 1896**

The half century following the *Plessy* decision was a desert in the history of American race relations. To a great degree, this was because equality was simply not part of the national agenda—not in race relations or anywhere else. This was the age of the Robber Barons, men who relished inequality of condition because they believed in equality of opportunity. Any poor boy could theoretically become as rich as they were (and any poor girl could marry one of them).

To be sure, there were those, white and black, who swam against the tide. But such people knew that they were in a decided minority. The conventional wisdom of the era was expressed by Booker T. Washington in a much-celebrated 1895 speech in which he asserted, "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to human progress." Even before *Plessy*, separate but equal was common sense.

Washington's racial philosophy has sometimes been perceived as naive at best, but he was no patsy. He ran a virtual empire out of his beloved Tuskegee Institute in rural Alabama, and his opinions won him and his followers positions of national power and influence. His emphasis on good work habits and vocational training made vivid sense to generations of African Americans, particularly working-class African Americans, in a way the work of other intellectuals we tend to regard highly today, notably W.E.B. DuBois, did not. He promoted a dream of upward mobility very much like that of Abraham Lincoln, and in prin-

ciple, there was no reason why separate but equal couldn't work as long as African Americans were free to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Indeed, in principle, even now there's no reason why separate but equal couldn't work—except that history shows that in the realm of race relations, it never has. And that's because, as a practical matter, separate but equal was simply a legal fiction whose entire reason for existence was a reality of separate but unequal. Proving this in court was very difficult; some exceptionally smart, dedicated people devoted their entire careers to upholding Jim Crow. But by the 1930s and into the 1940s, painstaking legal work was establishing an irrefutable gap between what we as a people said we believed and what we were actually doing.

This gap was proving increasingly difficult to ignore. The onset of the Great Depression showed that the price of national inequality was very great, even frightening, even for those most committed to the status quo: hopeless people have fewer compunctions about destroying fine things they don't believe they can ever have. The Scottsboro case of the 1930s, in which a group of black boys were wrongly convicted of raping a white woman, galvanized black-white solidarity in the North and drew attention to the gross inequities of the legal system. Above all, World War II raised troubling questions about the difference between a Nazi Germany that persecuted Jews and a United States that persecuted blacks. African Americans fought in that war, as they had in every other, and came back ready to fight still another. "I spent four years in the Army to free a bunch of Dutchmen and Frenchmen, and I'm hanged if I'm going to let the Alabama version of the Germans kick me around when I get home," said one black soldier in 1945. "No sirreee-bob! I went into the Army a nigger; I'm comin' out a man."

But it took another observer—this one, like Tocqueville a century before, a foreigner—to crystallize the untenable size of the gap between ideals and reality. Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal doesn't use the term "American Dream" in his massive two-volume 1944 study *An American Dilemma*, but it looms large over Myrdal's work. What he does talk about is what he calls the national "Creed," which, as he defines it in his introduction, encompasses "liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity for everybody." (Note that "equality" and "fair opportunity" are *not* considered one and the same any more than "liberty" and "justice" are.) The dilemma Myrdal referred to was the conflict between this Creed and the way Americans were actually living their lives.

For Myrdal, inequality lay at the very heart of the American Dilemma:

Liberty, in a sense, was the easiest to reach. It is a vague ideal: everything turns around *whose* liberty is preserved, to *what extent* and in *what direction*. In society liberty for one may mean the suppression of liberty for others. The result of competition may be who got a head start and who is handicapped. In America as everywhere else—and sometimes, perhaps, on the average, a little more ruthlessly—liberty often provided an opportunity for the stronger to rob the weaker. Against this, the egalitarianism of the Creed has been persistently revolting. The struggle is far from ended.

Indeed, as Myrdal himself presciently recognized, a new phase of the struggle was about to begin.

The question was where and how to wage it. In 1950 a young NAACP attorney named Thurgood Marshall convinced his colleagues to strike at the very heart of separate but equal: racially segregated public schools. This was a bold step. The legality of school segregation had been enshrined since 1850 in *Roberts v. the City of Boston*, a precedent that not even Homer Plessy dared challenge. (His lawyers pointed out that integrated train travel posed far less of a problem than the virtually unthinkable integration of schools.) In what became a group of cases collectively titled *Brown v. Board of Education*, the NAACP represented parents and children who were willing to risk ostracism—or worse—in the name of their aspirations. With admirable concision, historian James Patterson has explained what was at stake:

What these and other parents yearned for above all was part of the American Dream: equal opportunities for their children. That is why schools, which later events indicated were among the toughest of all institutions to desegregate, became some of the fiercest battlegrounds in conflicts between the races in postwar America. Like many white people, the parents and students who engaged in these struggles believed in a central creed of Americans: schools offered the ticket to advancement in life. It was a creed that forced schools to the center of racial turmoil for the remainder of the century.

Until 1950 these parents and their allies most often demanded educational quality, not desegregation: a separate-but-equal system of schools was tolerable if it was truly equal. It was only when they became con-

vinced that whites would never grant equality that they began to call for the dismantling of Jim Crow in schools.

In 1954 a unanimous Supreme Court decided in these parents' favor. "In the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate-but-equal' has no place," Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote in his opinion. "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Brown v. Board of Education is a landmark in American history, chiefly because it redressed a fundamental lapse in the American Creed represented by the *Plessy* decision. But there's a difference between revising the Creed and actually living it out, and the decision raised two unanswered questions. The first was whether the nation would really abide by the ruling; a half century later, the answer remains largely no.

The other question was whether separate but equal would continue in other areas of American life. But this argument, unlike *Plessy* or *Brown*, was no polite courtroom drama. Nor was it conducted in the language of legal briefs. This one played out against the rhythms of a lyrical American Dream.

Tell 'em about the dream, Martin.

—Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson to Martin Luther King
at the Lincoln Memorial, August 28, 1963

The American Dream is in many ways a story of omissions, and few omissions have been more glaring than that of the place of women in society. Abigail Adams's instructions to John notwithstanding, the Founding Fathers did not remember the ladies—or women who were not ladies. Frederick Douglass, a stalwart supporter of female suffrage, nevertheless sometimes seemed to regard the word "manhood," with its implication of a human condition that was universally shared, as a virtual synonym for "equality." Inequalities of opportunity and condition have been central features of the American experience for women, and while this has changed to some degree in modern times, the American Dream remains problematic. It has largely been a male dream, though one hopes that it does not have to be—will not always be—so.

But history is not entirely barren in this regard. Despite their neglect and exclusion, at least some women have always pursued the American

Dream, and black women in particular, who have historically been more disadvantaged than most, have played a crucial role in legitimating the Dream by extending its purview across gender as well as racial lines. One thinks here of figures such as Phillis Wheatley, the prodigiously gifted eighteenth-century slave poet who dreamed obliquely of freedom, and Madam C. J. Walker, the nineteenth-century entrepreneur of hair care products whose astounding success embodied the faith in the Dream of Upward Mobility with notable appeal for black Americans. But nowhere was the decisive role of women in the making of the American Dream more obvious than in the birth of the modern civil rights movement.

In March of 1954, two months before the *Brown* decision, the Women's Political Council of Montgomery, Alabama, met with the City Commission. The WPC, which had been founded by African Americans after its members were refused membership in the city's League of Women Voters, remonstrated with the commission about the city's treatment of African Americans on municipal buses. When nothing happened, the group began making plans for an organized protest movement.

A year later, in March of 1955, a high school student named Claudette Colvin was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a crowded Montgomery bus. Knowing that civil rights activists wanted to make a federal case of it, the judge in the case dismissed the segregation and disorderly conduct charges and instead (implausibly) convicted her of assault. The WPC and other Civil Rights leaders decided not to pursue the case because, as an unwed teenage mother, Colvin made for less than a perfectly "respectable" defendant.

Nine months later, Rosa Parks—a figure civil rights historian Taylor Branch has described as "one of those blips of human nature, offsetting a dozen sociopaths"—was herself riding the bus home from her job as a seamstress at the Montgomery Fair department store. Parks was the executive secretary of the local chapter of the NAACP and had recently written a letter appointing the new minister in town, Martin Luther King Jr., to its executive committee. Parks had no intention of causing a scene, but when the bus filled up and the driver ordered her to give up her seat, something in her rose up. "Go on," she said so softly the driver could barely hear her despite the stunned silence that fell over the bus, "and have me arrested." She was, and the civil rights movement was under way in earnest.

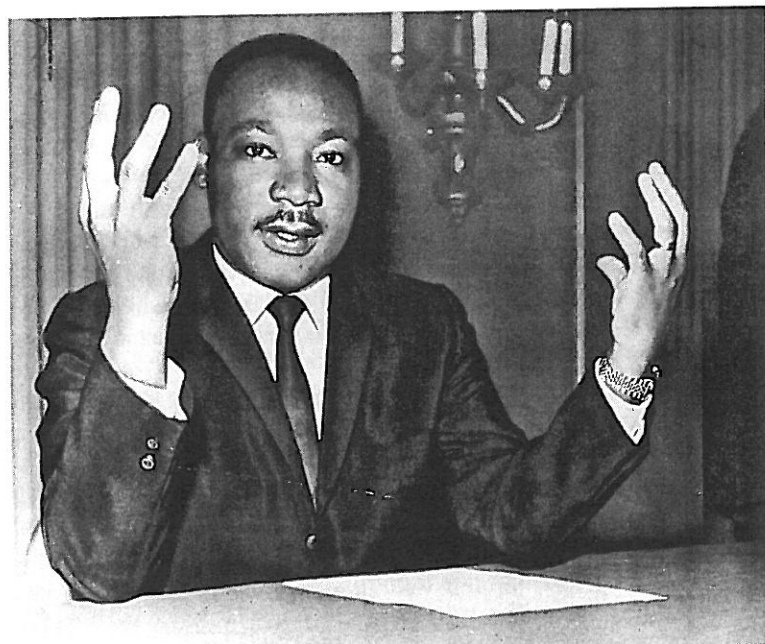
Leadership was provided by the Women's Political Council, which quickly organized a boycott. Meanwhile, Parks's attorney, E. D. Nixon, organized a mass meeting and asked young Reverend King for the use of the basement of his conveniently located church. King agreed but hedged on Nixon's request that King endorse the plan to join the fight in the Parks case and begin a boycott.

Accounts differ as to what actually transpired before and during that meeting in the basement, but when it was over King, who arrived late, had been named president of the new Montgomery Improvement Association. Over the course of the next year, a King-led movement emphasizing community organization and a nonviolent philosophy became front-page news around the country, and King himself a household name. "We do not wish to triumph over the white community," he concluded in an article he wrote early in the boycott. "That would only result in transferring those now on the bottom to the top. But if we can live up to nonviolence in thought and deed, there will emerge an interracial society based on freedom for all." This notion of freedom, King is implicitly suggesting early in his career, is tightly woven with a notion of equality: it is a freedom defined in terms of inclusion ("for all"), not one where some benefit at the expense of others. It is also a notion of freedom that imposes responsibilities. "If the method we use in dealing with equality in the buses can eliminate injustice within ourselves, we shall at the same time be attacking the basis of injustice—man's hostility to man. This can only be done when we challenge the white community to reexamine its assumptions as we are now prepared to reexamine ours."

In many ways, Martin Luther King was an unlikely hero—and an even more unlikely prophet—of the dream of equality. He was born Michael Luther King Jr. on January 15, 1929, the second of three children. By that point, his father had already lived out a distinctively black version of the Dream of Upward Mobility. The son of an abusive Georgia sharecropper, the elder King left home with the help of his mother and educated himself well enough to be admitted to Morehouse College, an all-black institution in Atlanta, and win the hand of Alberta Williams, the daughter of the pastor at a leading black Baptist church in that city. He eventually took over the pastorate of that church and after a trip to Europe in 1934, changed his name, and that of his son, to Martin Luther King. Born into a milieu of privilege and expectation, the boy's destiny seemed chosen.

His gifts were not only material. By the time he was five, young King could sing hymns and recite biblical passages from memory, and he quickly skipped grades, entering Morehouse College when he was fifteen. To some extent, he was spared the petty humiliations of black life, though it was not possible to entirely forget his "place." When he was about fourteen, after delivering an address entitled "The Negro and the Constitution" to a black Elks Club, without notes, a bus driver insisted he give up his seat for two whites. "It was the angriest I have ever been in my life," he later said.

One could argue that even such anger was a luxury for black folks in those years, a callow reaction by someone who simply did not understand how relatively trivial such injustice was (or how dangerous challenging it could be). In any event, King enjoyed an adolescence of



UPLIFTING FIGURE Martin Luther King Jr. at a press conference, November 1964. In shrewdly couching his vision for his country in terms of collective ideals, he redeemed the American Dream by renewing its moral power. (Photo by Dick Marsico from the *World-Telegram & Sun* Collection of the Library of Congress)

notable prerogative, even indulgence, and showed a soft spot for drinking, pool halls—and, especially, romance. He went to Morehouse hoping to become a doctor or lawyer, resistant to paternal pressure to become a minister. Indeed, for all the lightheartedness of his youth, there were also shadows and skepticism toward conventional notions of propriety and success. King was particularly distraught at the death of his grandmother when he was twelve; on at least one occasion he was so overtaken with grief that he jumped out a second-story window. He suffered no physical injury, but scars apparently remained: as he explained in a reminiscence on her death, he shocked his Sunday-school teacher by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He did serve as the assistant pastor at his father's church. But it was only after he was arrested while working at his summer job in Connecticut—he had been voted one of the two laziest tobacco harvesters the year before—that he evaded his father's wrath by announcing his decision to go into the ministry after finishing his bachelor's degree in sociology at Morehouse.

Which is not to say that he would do it on his father's terms. King Senior reluctantly allowed his son to attend Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, where he earned another BA, this one in divinity. It was at Crozer that King fell under the spell of the Social Gospel, a liberal theological movement, and studied the work of figures ranging from Karl Marx to Mohandas Gandhi. He was also influenced by the work of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who in works like *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) emphasized the presence, and inevitability, of evil. Upon the completion of his Crozer degree, King announced his intention to pursue a doctorate in systematic theology at Boston University. Although his father—still planning for his son to take over his pulpit—was even more unhappy with this decision than the one to go to Crozer, he agreed to foot the bill (again) and gave his son a new Chevrolet for finishing at the top of his class.

King originally enrolled in BU's philosophy department to work with the renowned theologian Edgar Brightman, best known for his work on "personalism," which emphasized the human qualities of God. When Brightman died, he transferred to the university's School of Theology. He was perceived as a good student, though we now know he routinely plagiarized his papers as well as his doctoral dissertation and even his subsequent books. He continued to have a busy social life, ardently pursuing and finally marrying Coretta Scott, a student at

the New England Conservatory of Music, in 1953. He would be a habitual adulterer for much of his marriage.

There is little indication that he contemplated a life as an activist. "King left virtually no references to race or politics among his student papers at Boston University," Taylor Branch reports in his massive multivolume biography. "He took some courses from professors who were known crusaders for racial justice," Branch notes, but did most of his work with "sympathetic non-activists." When he finally began his ministerial career, he evaded his father's grasp once again, deciding, after some hesitation, to accept the pulpit at Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1954. He was twenty-five years old, and wholly unsuspecting of the events that would thrust him into international prominence the following year.

The point of this small biographical sketch is to suggest that while Martin Luther King Jr. was a boy raised with great expectations, he did not always meet those expectations and exhibited character flaws that could be attributed to the sense of privilege, even vanity, of his upbringing. He was a boy prince—albeit a prince with a common touch. "He told me, fairly early, that he was not a scholar, and that he wasn't really interested in the academic world," a Boston friend later recalled. "He said, 'I like people too much. I want to work with people.'"

This helps explain what brought King to Montgomery. What it doesn't explain—what no biographer has or probably ever will be able to explain—is how it was that King was transformed into the great leader he became. King himself seemed bemused by the transformation that the Montgomery bus boycott wrought. As he reflected in December of 1956: "If anybody had asked me a year ago to head this movement, I tell you very honestly that I would have run a mile to get away from it. I had no intention of being involved in this way." Once he did, though, something happened. "As I became involved, I realized that choice leaves your own hands. The people expect you to give them leadership. You see them growing as they move into action, and then you no longer have a choice, you can't decide *whether* to stay in or get out of it, you *must* stay in it."

In some sense, King was inaccurate or even misleading to say "you no longer have a choice." Of course "you" *always* have a choice: there were no slaves in the civil rights movement. Millions of Americans managed to calibrate their involvement in countless ways (something that Coretta Scott King must surely, and understandably, have told her

husband throughout a stormy fifteen-year marriage that included four inevitably neglected children). What King really seems to mean here is that he was driven by a kind of inner compulsion, a moral imperative that for him and others overrode strictly personal considerations. He was a free man, but he was exercising his freedom in the most profound way a human being can: choosing to give it up by committing to something, or someone, else.

And for what did King exercise his freedom? To a great extent, the answer is an American Dream of Equality. Toward the end of his 1958 book *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, he made this point, as he often would in the coming years, by invoking the charter of the Dream and noting the gap between what we say and what we do:

Ever since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, America has manifested a schizophrenic personality on the question of race. She has been torn between selves—a self in which she has proudly professed democracy and a self in which she has sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy. The reality of segregation, like slavery, has always had to confront the ideals of democracy and Christianity. Indeed, segregation and discrimination are strange paradoxes in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal.

Slavery, which was now dead, was conquered by freedom. Segregation, which remained alive, could only be conquered by equality.

Over the course of the next five years, King was one figure in an extraordinarily diverse movement that fought a series of (nonviolent) battles for equality across a broad front. In places like Little Rock in 1957 and Birmingham in 1963, civil rights leaders won smashing victories by dramatizing the American dilemma, revealing to white America the jeering, ugly, repressive racism whites themselves found repulsive. In others, such as Albany, Georgia, in 1962, the movement was stymied by wily racists who denied leaders the opportunity to make their case quite as vividly. In still others, like the heroic voting rights campaigns of Bob Moses, the movement waged an excruciatingly slow and violent war of attrition that only bore fruit a decade or more later. Ella Baker taught young people leadership skills and helped launch the pivotal Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, which launched Freedom Rides; Septima Clark, the daughter of a former slave, taught literacy at her "citizenship schools" designed to create informed voters.

King, who raised money, led protests, and founded the Southern Christian Leadership Council to aid such enterprises, was above all the voice of the movement.

One of the key themes in his repertoire was the American Dream, which he invoked again and again in a series of contexts, all of them relating to equality. "I should like to discuss with you some aspects of the American dream," he told the graduates of Lincoln University, a historically black institution in Chester County, Pennsylvania, in June of 1961. "For in a sense, America is essentially a dream, a dream as yet unfulfilled. It is a dream of a land where men of all races, of all nationalities and creeds can live together as brothers." The following month, in a speech to the National Press Club, he sounded a similar, but more pointed, note. "We are simply seeking to bring into full realization the American Dream—a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, *of privilege and property widely distributed*; a dream of a land where men no longer argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character" (emphasis added). That fall, he saluted student protesters against segregation: "In sitting down at lunch counters, they are in reality standing up for the best of the American Dream." King would repeat versions of this line throughout the coming decade, most notably on the last night of his life. And in December, in an address to an AFL-CIO convention, King spoke of "a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few."

The most famous of these invocations was King's celebrated "I Have a Dream" speech, which he delivered at the Lincoln Memorial as part of the March on Washington in August of 1963. "I still have a dream," he said toward the end of the speech, departing from his prepared remarks and improvising freely. "It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." The speech culminated in a rhapsody demanding that freedom ring—a freedom defined by, not against, equality.

In some sense, "I Have a Dream" was the high-water mark for King and his American Dream. The coming years would bring victories—notably the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, two of the most important laws in the history of American egalitarianism—but more defeats. King would encounter more subtle but

intractable resistance when he tried to take the movement to northern cities like Chicago, and the movement itself was increasingly splintered. King himself was a target of criticism. Younger blacks derided him for his imperious manner and imperial style, secretly mocking him as "Da Lawd." Some colleagues, like Ella Baker, chafed at his thoughtless sexism, his difficulty in taking women seriously as peers. Others were dismayed by his gluttonous appetites, sexual and otherwise.

King was increasingly unpopular in white America as well, but for different reasons. The FBI under J. Edgar Hoover hounded him mercilessly, tapping his phone lines and spreading as much innuendo as it could without drawing attention to the bureau's role in spreading it. President Lyndon Johnson, who worked with King far more sympathetically and successfully than John F. Kennedy had, was furious at King for his growing opposition to the Vietnam War, metaphorically comparing that opposition to King raping his daughter. But the disenchantment was more widespread than that. In 1967 King failed to make the Gallup Poll list of the ten most admired Americans for the first time in a decade, a telling indication of moral fatigue.

King himself was increasingly disenchanted. His biographers agree he was a depressed man in the final years of his life, which may explain some of his personal excesses. He was particularly dismayed by the ebbing commitment to nonviolence in the movement, a development he understood even as he lamented it. He was even more dismayed at the depth of resistance to change in white America, which belied their—and his—faith in the Creed. Perhaps as a result, King seemed to speak less of the American Dream after 1963.

What he *didn't* stop speaking about—indeed, what he spoke *more* about, and what may explain his sagging popularity—was equality. It is a kind of poetic justice that he was killed in Memphis while working on behalf of striking sanitation workers, engaged in what was often viewed as the lowliest of professions. At the end of his life, King decided he could no longer be silent about things he had held his tongue about, among them the disproportionate impact of the Vietnam War on African Americans—and the immorality of the war in general. His last major organizing effort, the so-called Poor People's Campaign, explicitly widened its scope to cross racial lines, and not only white-black ones. And he became less inspirational, more explicitly challenging, to his national audience. The opening chapter of his final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (1967), is revealing in this regard:

Negroes have proceeded from a premise that equality means what it says, and they have taken white Americans at their word when they talked of it as an objective. But most whites in America in 1967, including many persons of good-will, proceed from a premise that equality is a loose expression of improvement. White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap—essentially it seeks only to make it less painful and obvious but in most respects to retain it. . . . A good many observers have remarked that if equality could come at once the Negro would not be ready for it. I submit that the white American is even more unprepared.

His irritation at white hypocrisy is apparent in “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” his final Sunday morning sermon. In it, King suggested disgust with the false pieties of the American Dream of Upward Mobility:

In 1863 the Negro was told he was free as a result of the Emancipation Proclamation being signed by Abraham Lincoln. . . . It simply said “You’re free,” and left him there penniless, illiterate, not knowing what to do. And the irony of it all is that at the same time the nation failed to do anything for the black man—through an act of Congress it was giving away millions of acres of land in the West and Midwest*—which meant that it was willing to undergird its white peasants with an economic floor.

But not only did it give the land, it build land-grant colleges to teach them how to farm. Not only that, it provided county agents to further their expertise in farming: not only that, as the years unfolded it provided low interest rates so that they could mechanize their farms. And to this day thousands of these very persons are receiving millions of dollars in federal subsidies not to farm. And these are so often the very people who tell Negroes that they must lift themselves up by their bootstraps. It’s all right to tell a man a man to lift himself up by his bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to tell a bootless man that he ought to lift himself up by his own bootstraps.

Freedom is not enough. Nor is an equality of opportunity that is nothing more than an empty abstraction. For the Dream to live, it has to be more than that.

* King is referring to the Homestead Act.

How much more? Is the solution equality of condition? Not even King went this far, and even if he had, it is abundantly clear the country would never have gone along with him. If anything, such a possibility is even less likely now. There is something in our collective imagination that refuses to accept it. As libertarians are fond of reminding us, equality can restrain freedom, depriving people of the possibilities of achieving their potential, of achieving their dreams (thus the frequent arguments in favor of “gifted and talented” programs in public schools). But even if we cannot, or should not, demand equality of condition, it is clear that the very imprecision, even vagueness, of equality of opportunity demands a vigilance that we tend to resist out of laziness or fear. Equality without freedom may be a totalitarian nightmare. But freedom without equality has been an oppressive reality for much of American history—and that’s the “better” half. To survive in a new century, the American Dream must be more than an excuse to ignore or forget.

The Negroes of this country may never be able to rise to power, but they are very well placed indeed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American Dream.

This has everything to do, of course, with the nature of that dream and the fact that we Americans, of whatever color, do not dare examine it and are far from having made it a reality. There are too many things we do not wish to know about ourselves. People are not, for example, terribly anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?) but they love the idea of being superior.

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

“I didn’t like him much,” Jack tells me.

I’ve been describing my latest book project and my recent reading about Martin Luther King at a dinner party in Providence, Rhode Island, with a small group of septuagenarians hosted by my graduate school mentor, Jack Thomas. But then one of the guests, the kindly widow of another one of my teachers, Bill McGloughlin (himself a much-beloved political activist), mentions that she had actually met King some thirty-five years before when he gave a talk at Brown University. She found him a man of great bearing and dignity, even intimidating. “But I liked him very much,” she says.

Jack had also met King. He had been at Brown at the time of King's visit but described shaking his hand during a different encounter, when he and his wife saw him emerging from the Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston. Whether it was King's manner in that exchange or some preconceived notions of the civil rights leader, he was not impressed. King seemed formal to the point of arrogance, a man far too enamored of the exalted role of the African American preacher to be a convincing leader of the masses.* It's a reaction he regrets in retrospect, one he is now far more inclined to think says more about him than King. More than ever, he's inclined to trust the instincts of women like his now-dead wife (whose idea it had been to shake King's hand) or of Virginia McGloughlin, who is sitting beside him, rather than his own.

Listening to these people talk unself-consciously about a legend, I feel a little like a kid a century earlier eavesdropping on the reminiscences of Civil War veterans describing momentary interactions with Abraham Lincoln. The encounters themselves are trivial, and yet all the more striking, even meaningful, because this triviality somehow conveys an authenticity that you can't get out of a book.

It also makes me wonder: how would I have reacted to meeting Martin Luther King? I can't say for sure. At some visceral level, I suspect my reaction would be something like Jack's. But I'm not sure I'd be wrong to feel the way he did any more than I think he was. In part, this is because King himself would hardly treat a white stranger the same way he would have a member of his congregation (or, for that matter, a black stranger). But this is also a matter of the "two selves" King once alluded to in one of his sermons, selves that loosely correspond to public and private, formal and informal—good and evil.

As any Puritan would have said, the struggle between good and evil is to a great extent one between pride and humility. So did King. In the last sermon he delivered from his pulpit—his father's pulpit, which he finally consented to take over in 1960—King spoke of "the drum-major

* This was not an isolated reaction. Journalist Marshall Frady, who covered King for *Newsweek* in the 1960s, describes him in a recent biography as having "a manner of unrelenting and ponderous gravity in his deacon-sober suits. His round face, black as asphalt, wore a bland gaze of almost Oriental impassiveness, an improbable bourgeois placidness—yet with, I still remember, almost meltingly sweet eyes. But on the whole, he could have been a comfortably prosperous funeral home director, or merely what among other things he indeed was, the Baptist preacher of a big-city church."

instinct," a thirst for individual distinction that competes with a truer desire for equality and justice. As is true of any good sermon, the power of King's words derived from their honesty, their willingness to confront his own weakness as part of a process that asked his listeners to confront theirs. Speculating on his own death, which would occur exactly two months later, King implored the congregation not to remember him for accomplishments like the Nobel Peace Prize he received in 1964. Instead, he said,

I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. . . . I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say, on that day, that I did try, in my life, to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

He tried. It's clear that he came up short, both in meeting his own standards and in realizing the Dream of Equality. May we all dream, and fail, as well as he did.