

ONE DREAM OR TWO?



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Topic: "Choose a noteworthy African-American figure, past or present, who embodies the ideals espoused by American civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Describe the person's life and importance and why you think he/she exemplifies Dr. King's ideals."

One Dream or Two?

Reverend Valentino Lassiter, summed up the importance of Reverend Joseph Lowery when he declared that, “we cannot think of the history of this country, we cannot think of the history of struggle, we cannot think of any type of civil rights movement, anything related to justice, without thinking of Joseph Echols Lowery.” This is a man who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. So, as we celebrate the life and legacy of American civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., let us pause and look at a man who totally embodies the ideals espoused by Dr. King.

In the words of David Garrow, a civil rights historian, “he is the best surviving link to [King] with Mrs. King gone, with [Ralph] Abernathy gone.” I ask the question, “can any of us disagree with the statement?” Obviously not, and I will tell you why. For more than fifty years Rev. Lowery has been a staunch advocate of nonviolent resistance. He was a decisive figure in the desegregation of the United States. After achieving integration he focused his attention to other compelling issues, such as black voter registration, AIDS education, workers’ rights, and affirmative action. Thus, he is referred to as the “dean of the civil rights movement.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was distinguished, courageous, educated, inspirational and passionate. Rev. Joseph Lowery mirrors the very image of Dr. King as he shares the very same traits. One cannot speak of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Joseph Lowery without noting their contributions to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC was inspired by the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Rev. Lowery and other black southern ministers met in Atlanta at the now famous Ebenezer Baptist Church in hopes of building an organization that would provide the civil rights movement with continued directorship. Under the prestigious leadership of Dr. King and Rev. Lowery, the SCLC marched toward the goal of equality for

American blacks. Ultimately, that march for equality inspired many nations around the world. Rev. Lowery served as the SCLC president from 1977–1997.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Joseph Lowery also served in the capacity of preacher. While maintaining a successful church ministry, he drafted new members to the SCLC where the organization dealt largely with issues affecting black Americans, such as, police brutality, the burning of black churches, and the global human-rights struggle. In everything that he did he elucidated the dream of Dr. King. Even within his church ministry his mission was always about helping the less fortunate, especially his black brothers and sisters. While pasturing at the Cascade United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Georgia he spearheaded the construction of two hundred and forty (240) low-and moderate income housing units. This my brothers and sisters is a testimony that has totally embodied Dr. King's dream. It has been noted by Dr. King's biographers that, "Dr . King regarded Lowery very highly and often sought out his counsel."

In all of his activities he has managed to stay close to the spiritual source of his strength, a vision he held with Martin Luther King, Jr. Rev. Lowery told Ebony magazine, "Among the many memories [of King] I cherish are the discussions we shared about the nature of Christian ministry.....Martin saw the role of minister as advocate, interpreter, and servant. Human rights and the 'movement' were not peripheral aspects of ministry for us, but represented commitment to the Kingdom of God which we interpreted as a kingdom of justice, equity, and peace." That in a nutshell sums up the life of these two remarkable men, how they saw the world and their role within the world. Their life have been a beacon of hope for many people around the world and should also be a beacon for people every where. No matter who we are, what we do, or where we go – our goal is to ultimately 'serve' the people.

Life was not easy for either Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Rev. Joseph Lowery. Their struggles for civil rights were enormous as it cost Dr. King his life. Yet, the struggles of blacks continue. Rev. Lowery at one point lost his property and had to pay three million dollars as part of a libel suit against him and other civil rights leaders by the State of Alabama. The United States Supreme Court later ordered the court decision to be reversed. So, as we go about our daily lives it gives us cause to reflect and be grateful for their lives as it is a part of our life today. Without their fight, black Americans and blacks around the world would probably still be segregated and treated harshly. The American people know that Rev. Joseph Lowery is truly a civil rights icon and showed him honor at the “International Civil Rights Walk of Fame” at the Martin Luther King Jr. National Site, located in Atlanta, Georgia. According to the National Park Service, “the Walk of Fame was created to recognize courageous soldiers of justice who sacrificed and struggled to make equality a reality for all.” Giving honor to whom honor is due.

Like Martin Luther King, Jr., this man was a “Drum Major for Justice.” Throughout his life, Rev. Lowery continue the fight of Dr. King and many others. He has led peace delegations to the Middle East and Central America. His efforts to combat injustice and promote equal opportunities has led to the extension of provisions to the Voting Rights Act of 2007; the desegregation of public accommodations in Nashville, Tennessee and the hiring of Alabama’s first black police officer. Rev. Lowery is a breathing testament to the nation’s journey from the rule of Jim Crow (*“The Jim Crow laws were state and local laws in the United States enacted between 1876 and 1965. They mandated de jure racial segregation in all public facilities, with a supposedly separate but equal” status for black Americans. In reality, this led to treatment and accommodations that were usually inferior to those provided for white Americans, systematizing*

a number of economic, educational and social disadvantages.”) to the presidency of America’s first black President Barack Obama.

“God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,” how can we ever forget that prayer? Rev. Joseph Lowery was one of the two pastors chosen to pray at the inauguration of President Obama. He concluded his benediction by saying, “Lord, in the memory of all the saints who from their labors rest, and in the joy of a new beginning, we ask you to work for that day when black will not be asked to get [in] back, when brown can stick around; and when white will embrace what is right...” It was an inspirational way to begin a historic presidency in the United States of America. This prayer drew much criticism for being “divisive”, or “racialist”, from many commentators. However, if I recall correctly I saw a smile on President Obama’s face as there was on the faces of many blacks. He will stand as one of the few Americans with the authority to place the young president's narrative in the context of civil rights history.

Reverend Lowery raised his voice to speak the truth to power at the funeral of Coretta Scott King. With a full church and a national television audience looking on, Joseph Lowery had the courage to challenge then President George Bush on his policies leading to the War in Iraq. He said, “We know now that there were no weapons of mass destruction over there, but Coretta knew and we knew that there are weapons of misdirection right down here.” This statement reminded many of Martin Luther King’s opposition to the War in Vietnam. This is a man who is not afraid to voice his honest opinion. It was not one speech that put an end to segregation in the United States. It was not one march, one demonstration, one sit-in and it definitely was not one man. One man had the courage to lead a movement, but many men made the movement possible. It was multiple attempts on various accounts that finally got the message out there. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had an exceeding amount of patience during the civil rights

movement. Right there beside him was Rev. Lowery working and toiling for one common goal – equality for black Americans. He knew that things would not change overnight. If we can recall Dr. King’s “I have a dream” speech, "I have a 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.'" Both men were patient with their startups and let them grow in increments each and every day. This shows that anyone can have dreams, it just takes some time, courage, dedication and hard work to achieve goals and for dreams to become reality.

Now he is a retired soldier in the army of the Lord and on this earthly battlefield. Yet, his involvement in the battle for equality continues. Reverend Joseph E. Lowery will be remembered for his continued involvement in the civil rights movement. He will be remembered as the man who shared the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. With his dedication and passion over the years one may ask the question, “was it just one dream or two?”

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