

How God Empowered This Woman to Forgive Her Family's Murderers

On April 4, 1968, my uncle Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. I was 17 years old and was in the midst of the final fitting for my ROTC ball gown.

When the announcement of the shooting appeared on the TV screen, I quickly changed clothes and hurried home. I was inconsolable. Uncle ML was a global leader and hero. Our family had survived the bombing of our home, the incarcerations of Uncle ML and Daddy, brutal beatings, death threats and so much more. We had been taught to love and forgive our enemies. But in that moment, that was the last thing I wanted to do.

Letting Go

"I hate white people," I cried to my father over and over again as he held me in his arms, pleading for me to forgive those who had committed this deep harm, not just to our family but also to the world.

Daddy was always an extremely loving and patient man, and he maintained that patience even in the face of devastating grief. He told me, "White people didn't kill your uncle, Alveda. That was the devil." He refused to allow me to hate.

That he was able to offer this example when he'd just lost the brother he loved so very much was a lesson I will never allow myself to forget. He didn't give up, and he kept teaching me to love and forgive until the day he died, which came much too soon. He was killed just a year after Uncle ML's assassination.

Forgiveness didn't come cheap, nor was it ever easy for us. Not everybody in my family forgave those involved in the events that led to the deaths of Uncle ML and Daddy.

Years after the deaths of his sons, Granddaddy (Daddy King) still carried an intense anger against some of the people who were with my uncle when he died. He held the greatest anger toward Jesse Jackson, who had been with my uncle—trying to convince Uncle ML in heated tones that nonviolence might no longer be the answer—when the shooting occurred. Daddy King believed it was Jackson's job to protect his son, and he wouldn't forgive Jackson for failing in that duty.

At the 1976 Democratic National Convention, when Jimmy Carter received the presidential nomination, Daddy King was backstage when someone told him Jesse Jackson wanted to speak with him. Granddaddy refused.

I couldn't let this pass. "Granddaddy, I don't understand," I said. "I thought you always told me that we can't hate anybody. Doesn't that mean Jesse Jackson too?"

Granddaddy looked at me with pain and confusion in his eyes. Finally, he nodded slowly and said, "You're right, girl." With that, he told the man who'd come to tell him of Jackson's request that he would be willing to see him.

When Jesse Jackson came up to my grandfather, his face bore years of anguish and grief. He sat on Daddy King's lap, put his arms around his neck, and wailed, "I'm so sorry."

"I forgive you," Granddaddy said, and the two men at last got to mourn my uncle together.

It has been more than four decades since that day at Jimmy Carter's nomination. In that time much has changed, including the fact that a man with brown skin has served two terms as president of the United States. Still, as much as we've accomplished, my uncle's vision of a "Beloved Community," a

philosophy of his, remains in many ways unfulfilled.

Uncle ML said, "We must all learn to live together as brothers"—and I'll add sisters here—"or we will all perish together as fools."

We must one day unite and realize that we all come from the same source, and it is more essential than ever that we realize we are all connected by our humanity. Once we the people of America—and indeed the whole world—acknowledge our commonality, oppression and bigotry can cease to exist in this nation and beyond, and freedom and unity can reach to the far corners of the world. {eoa}

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