

Martin Luther King, Jr., Homosexuality, and the Early Gay Rights Movement

Keeping
the Dream
Straight?

Michael G. Long

*Afterword by Archbishop
Desmond Tutu*



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.,
HOMOSEXUALITY, AND THE
EARLY GAY RIGHTS MOVEMENT

ALSO BY MICHAEL G. LONG

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INTRODUCTION

KEEPING THE DREAM STRAIGHT?

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. WAS NOT AN advocate of homosexual rights.¹ But that has not prevented many gay rights proponents, including Coretta Scott King, from claiming him as an ally in their various campaigns. Dr. King was not an enemy of homosexual rights, either. But that has not discouraged many gay rights opponents, including his sole surviving daughter, Bernice King, from touting the famed civil rights leader as one of their own. This fascinating situation—both a familial and wider conflict over the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. in relation to gay rights—poses the problem that this book seeks to address and resolve.²

It is not shocking that King appears in contemporary debates on gay rights even though he was neither an advocate nor an opponent. After all, individuals, institutions, and movements have long hijacked the legacies of famous now-deceased personalities, especially those of national or international icons, in order to serve and advance their own special interests. Consider the use of Jesus by opposing sides in abortion rights battles, the photograph of Jackie Robinson in the heroes section of the Republican Party's website, or the silhouetted image of Abraham Lincoln in countless advertising campaigns across the United States. Dead heroes are easy pawns.

Those who have passed before us cannot, of course, defend themselves against the abuse of their legacies. But in some cases, they have left behind enough solid evidence to help us rightly assess the use of their words, deeds, and images in our contemporary lives. This is certainly true in the case of Martin Luther King Jr. on general issues like war and peace and even on more specific ones like the desegregation of elementary schools. It is also true that there is enough evidence for us to draw some specific conclusions about his stance on homosexuality and discrimination against gays.

Indeed, the main purpose of this short book is to uncover and understand King's thoughts and actions in relation to homosexuality and gay rights and thereby to assess the use of his legacy in debates about these

issues. In doing so, this book will not seek to answer the question of what King *would* say about homosexuality and gay rights had he lived a long life. Any prediction about what King would do or say today (about homosexuality or anything else) is merely conjecture—historically untenable and ultimately groundless. Whether he would say that the Bible opposes homosexuality or that civil rights is inclusive of gay rights is entirely unknowable. Unlike those who guess what King’s positions might be, this book will focus on extant historical evidence.³

Because scholars and writers have largely neglected or glided over the divisive issue of homosexuality and gay rights in relation to the life and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. this project represents the first book-length treatment of this controversial topic.⁴ The controversy stems not only from the radically different ways in which King has been used in the debate but also from the seemingly conflicting evidence of his life. Historical evidence is often messy, inconclusive, or contradictory, and the material that King has left behind on this topic seems, at certain points and at first glance, no different.

There are several different pieces of evidence for us to explore. An especially important item is something that neither Coretta Scott King nor Bernice King ever cited in their opposing campaigns: Dr. King’s only written statement on homosexual feelings. It would not be surprising to learn that Coretta and Bernice did not know of this evidence; the statement has never been widely publicized. Because it has not yet gained public traction, many educated and informed commentators believe that King never publicly addressed homosexuality. Columnist Ambra Nykol, for example, writes, “The reality is, King never spoke publicly about the issue of homosexuality.”⁵

Nykol is far from alone in this belief, but she is mistaken. The reality is that King wrote about homosexuality in a January 1958 column for *Ebony* magazine.⁶ The monthly column was titled “Advice for Living,” and in it King penned a remarkable reply to a young man struggling with homosexual feelings. Although this historic statement is brief and in need of careful analysis—a detailed exegesis of what he did and did not say and a comparison between his words and contemporaneous beliefs about homosexuality (especially those held by the American Psychiatric Association and by many of his fellow Christian ministers)—it offers rich and substantive material for drawing some conclusions about King’s understanding of homosexuality.

Nevertheless, it would never be sufficient merely to describe and analyze his words on the topic of homosexuality. Although such interpretive work is necessary, it is at least equally vital to explore King’s actions.

It is important to focus on behavior because, as the adage goes, sometimes actions speak louder than words. At the very least, surveying King's actions will offer additional evidence for helping us uncover his overall views. This point becomes all the more significant when we note that there was sometimes a yawning gap between what the civil rights leader said and what he did, especially on matters of sexual morality. For instance, like other Baptist ministers of his age, King publicly claimed that sex should be reserved for married heterosexual couples. And yet reliable evidence indicates that he engaged in extramarital sex with single and married women.⁷ It is thus incumbent upon us to explore the question of whether King's actions, including those carried out in private, add anything substantive to his written reflections on homosexuality.

With this question in mind, the book will explore King's complicated relationship with Bayard Rustin, the main architect of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.⁸ Although many gays lived in the shadows during the 1950s, Rustin chose to live as openly as he could in that homophobic era. King certainly knew that the colorful Rustin was gay, and there are several incidents in which the civil rights leader's actions were in direct response to Rustin's homosexuality. Scrutinizing those actions will assist our efforts in drawing some conclusions about King's attitude toward homosexuality, at least as it took form in Rustin's life.

Also useful will be the evidence of several incidents in which King, in private, made teasing references about gays. Did his banter reveal a bias or "warmth" toward gays?⁹ Or was there an underlying tone of intolerance? Perhaps the most troubling bit of evidence is a comment that King allegedly made to his best friend, Ralph David Abernathy. The famed journalist Carl Rowan has reported about hearing a tape on which King allegedly speaks about a gay sex act. The tape that Rowan and select others heard included conversations that the FBI had secretly recorded in King's hotel room at the Willard Hotel in Washington, DC, in 1964. In the course of these conversations, according to Rowan, King makes a vulgar comment to Abernathy. "Come on over here, you big black mother——," King says, "and let me suck your d——."¹⁰ Examining this comment, however unavoy it may seem, is necessary work in light of this book's theme.

One more piece of compelling evidence centers on King's philosophy in relation to civil rights. Tending to the most important parts of his philosophy is especially significant because one of the claims in contemporary debates is that the battle for gay rights is a natural or logical extension of King's philosophy. This is a claim made by two civil rights veterans whose lifework has sought to advance both civil rights and gay rights: former

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chair Julian Bond and Congressman John Lewis of Georgia.¹¹ (It is also the major claim that Coretta Scott King made about her husband in her very public battle for gay rights.) Bond and Lewis, among many others, believe that gay rights *are* civil rights and that those who deny this, such as conservative Christian ministers in the NAACP, simply fail to understand the philosophy of the civil rights movement as articulated by Martin Luther King Jr.

Understanding King's thoughts and actions in relation to homosexuality and gay rights is far from an exercise in abstract thought. It is a concrete effort exactly because proponents and opponents of gay rights have *already* appealed to the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. in their respective campaigns. Though assassinated in 1968, King speaks a lot in contemporary gay rights debates—and evidently has a lot to say.

Practical and concrete, the effort to discern King's views is also about basic human decency—to King and to those who are deeply affected, one way or another, by his appearance in the debates. Fewer things are more disturbing in civil rights history than to see King used in ways that are unfair to him as a person and to the dream to which he gave such eloquent expression during his lifetime. King's dream of the "beloved community"¹² has been twisted and turned, for instance, in political campaigns against affirmative action and in theoretical reflections on why he would support military action against Islamic terrorists.¹³ His dream has been twisted just as badly in debates about gay rights, and it is the purpose of this book to wrest back the legacy from those who abuse it for their own special interests. Wrestling back the legacy and untwisting it is no easy task, but it is an essential one if we are to treat King in ways that he sought to treat others—with fairness, respect, and justice. It is also essential if we are to help innocent people avoid feeling as if a global icon—a moral giant—is joining a mob intent on marginalizing them, silencing them, and making them disappear.

What does this mean? Who are the people who twist King's dream? Who suffers when the dream is turned against them in nightmarish ways? What does it mean to wrest back and untwist King's legacy in the gay rights debate? What did he really believe about homosexuality and gay people? How are we to assess his use in the gay rights debate? Using historical, philosophical, and ethical analyses, this book will offer several answers to these perplexing questions, and some of the answers will no doubt be surprising.

PART I

KINGS IN CONFLICT

CHAPTER 1

“IT’S CONSISTENT WITH HIS PHILOSOPHY”

CORETTA SCOTT KING’S ADVOCACY FOR GAY RIGHTS

ON AUGUST 2, 1982, MICHAEL HARDWICK, A 29-year-old bartender in Atlanta, was engaging in oral sex with another man when a city police officer knocked on his front door. A houseguest directed the officer to Hardwick’s bedroom, and upon opening the door, the officer witnessed the sexual encounter between Hardwick and his date. The officer explained that he was there to serve Hardwick an arrest warrant related to public intoxication, and the young bartender protested, saying that he could show the officer a receipt indicating he had already settled the matter in court. But the officer proceeded to arrest Hardwick and his date anyway—on grounds that they were violating a sodomy statute that criminalized oral and anal sex.¹

Although the county prosecutor later dropped the charges, the American Civil Liberties Union encouraged Hardwick to file suit against Michael Bowers, the state’s attorney general, challenging the state’s right to make sodomy laws. Hardwick agreed, and the US Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit eventually ruled in his favor, finding that the sodomy statute infringed upon his constitutional rights. The gay community in Atlanta and across the nation was elated with the decision—it was part of the reason that many gays felt that the advancement of their rights was proceeding apace at this point—but Attorney General Bowers appealed the ruling to the US Supreme Court.

The court decided the historic case on June 30, 1986. Writing for the majority, Justice Byron White argued that homosexuals did not have a “fundamental right . . . to engage in acts of consensual sodomy.

Proscriptions against that conduct have ancient roots . . . Sodomy was a criminal offense at common law and was forbidden by the laws of the original 13 States when they ratified the Bill of Rights.” White also observed that in 1986, sodomy continued to be a criminal offense in 24 states and the District of Columbia. “Against this background, to claim that a right to engage in such conduct is ‘deeply rooted in this Nation’s history and tradition’ or ‘implicit in the concept of ordered liberty’ is, at best, facetious,” White wrote. In his concurring opinion, Chief Justice Burger added, “To hold that the act of homosexual sodomy is somehow protected as a fundamental right would be to cast aside millennia of moral teaching.”²

The decision delivered a crushing blow to gays who had been following the Eleventh Circuit ruling with high hopes. In Hardwick’s hometown of Atlanta, for example, Winston Johnson and his longtime partner, Leon Allen, neither of whom had ever played an active role in the gay liberation movement, felt personally assaulted. “Leon and I were just devastated,” Johnson recalls. “We just couldn’t believe it. We were so sure that, because of the earlier ruling, we would win this case. It was a tremendous setback.”³

It was also the engine that finally drove Johnson and Allen, among many other gays, to switch tracks and tend to gay rights in the public square. As Johnson remembers it, “I thought, ‘My God! This is 1986, and the Supreme Court of the United States did this!’ It felt like a declaration of war on us, and I told Leon, ‘It’s time for us to do something.’” Shortly after the ruling in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, Johnson attended a cocktail party hosted by the Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF), the nation’s largest gay rights group, and made sure to speak with Vic Basille, the first HRCF executive director.⁴ “I have a very good friend, a high-profile civil rights activist,” Johnson said, “and I want to see if I can make something happen.” He was referring to Coretta Scott King.

COMING OUT TO MRS. KING

Winston Johnson first met Coretta Scott King on April 5, 1968, just one day after James Earl Ray had assassinated her husband, Martin Luther King Jr., at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee.⁵ Johnson was working as an executive services representative for Eastern Airlines at the time, and his responsibilities that day included escorting Abigail McCarthy (whose husband, US Senator Eugene McCarthy, was in the midst of his run for the presidency) to a private gathering at the King home in Atlanta. Although he was overwhelmed to find himself in the middle of history, Johnson had the presence of mind to offer Mrs. King⁶ his

business card and his services. That small gesture turned out to be the seed of a friendship that would blossom for more than two decades. After the funeral, and for many years, King accepted speaking engagements around the globe, and it was Johnson who met her curbside, drove her to the airport, upgraded her tickets to first class, and reserved a place for her in VIP lounges.

It did not take long before the two grew to be close friends. In their time together, they talked about the civil rights movement, the challenges of life without Dr. King, and the promises of the emerging Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. Johnson and his partner, Allen, even began volunteering at the center by working at its annual fundraising dinner (“A Salute to Greatness”). By the time of the *Bowers* decision, Johnson and King were so close that he felt comfortable enough to share with her the secret of his sexual orientation.

Picking up the telephone that day in 1986 was a daunting moment in Johnson’s personal history. King, alas, was out of the office, but when she finally returned his call at 12:30 a.m.—she had a reputation for calling friends in the wee hours of the morning—he was still ready. “Mrs. King,” he said, “there’s something we’ve never discussed all this time. There’s something that we should’ve talked about years ago, but we just haven’t.” On the other end of the line, King was quiet, just listening. “I know you love us, and we love you, and there’s a secret we don’t want to keep from you anymore,” Johnson added. “Leon and I are a couple, we’re gay, and we’ve been together since 1964.” And just like that—with ease—a secret of twenty years faded into the quiet of the night.

“Winston,” Mrs. King replied, “it was obvious to me years ago that you and Leon loved each other, and I knew we would talk about it someday—someday when you were ready.”⁷ His eyes filling with tears, Johnson continued with his mission.⁸ “Leon and I wanted to come out to you because we love you, because you love us, and because we didn’t want that secret between us,” he said. “But I’m also telling you this because I want you to do something—I’d like you to become a visible figure in our movement.”

Johnson’s reference to the gay rights movement required no explaining; it was eminently clear to his dear friend. “You just tell me where and when,” King replied, “and I’ll be there.”⁹ Johnson had specifics in mind—he knew King was a careful planner—and he mentioned the possibility of her speaking at the HRCF dinner to be held in New York City that fall. “It’s just like the ‘Salute to Greatness’ dinners for the King Center,” he explained, “except it’s for the cause of gay rights.” Mrs. King agreed without hesitation, and a thrilled Johnson called Basille the next day to

begin making arrangements for King to speak at the HRCF dinner on September 27, 1986.

The gala event proved to be another milestone in Johnson's life, especially when Mrs. King began her first formal speech on gay rights. "My dear friend Winston Johnson asked me to be here this evening," she said, "and I am here to express my solidarity with the gay and lesbian movement."¹⁰ The audience erupted into applause, and for the next twenty years, thanks in part to Winston Johnson, Coretta Scott King gave her public support to the campaign for gay rights.

BEING GAY WITH MRS. KING

There is another individual who served a catalytic role in connecting Coretta Scott King to the gay rights movement: Lynn Cothren.¹¹ Beginning in 1982, when he was just 19 years old (still a "country bum," as King would teasingly say), Cothren took his first job at the King Center.¹² His sartorial choices of that year steered toward Madonna, and he did not hesitate to show up for work with big holes in his jeans. But Mrs. King, who was always professionally attired, took an immediate liking to the young man with artistic flair, and it was not too long before she made him a key member of her personal staff. Cothren loved working with Mrs. King—so much that he would serve as her special assistant for 23 years.

King often worked in her bedroom after the center closed for the day, and Cothren frequently joined her there to catch up on work and each other's lives. During one of those late-night sessions in 1984, he decided to seize a quiet moment—no one else was around, and the phone had stopped ringing—to talk with her about a private concern. "By the way," he said to Mrs. King, "I want to talk with you about something." King looked up at her young assistant and put her papers down, and Cothren shared the secret news that he was gay.

To the outside world, King could sometimes appear regal and distant—at the very least, somber and serious—but with her friend Lynn, she could be disarmingly funny and even slightly wry. "*Okaaaaay*," she replied, with a smile. "Lynn, I already knew that you were gay. And it's okay."

Cothren felt relieved, but her assuring reply did not take him by surprise. He had been hoping all along that her typical understanding and encouragement would help steel him for the next step: coming out to his mother. In line with his predictions, Mrs. King had proven to be wholly supportive, and after telling her of his plans to come out to his mother, she stated, "Well, Lynn, people love you. But . . . a lot of people are not going to understand it. But it doesn't mean they don't love you. They may not know how to accept you, and they may not know how to embrace

this, because they don’t understand it. I don’t completely understand it, but I know that you’re a child of God.”

After he came out, neither King nor Cothren let the matter rest, and their ongoing dialogue about his homosexuality was sometimes marked by a good-natured silliness, especially in those moments when she used code language to refer to gay men. When she saw someone she thought was gay, for example, she would turn to Cothren and say, “Oh, he’s in your *faaamily*.” King’s humor and acceptance helped Cothren flourish as an openly gay man. While he schooled her in the nuances of alternative lifestyles—the differences between a transvestite and a transsexual, for instance—she inspired him to feel comfortable about his homosexuality, live openly as a man who was sexually attracted to other men, and try to forgive those who expressed prejudice and discrimination toward his sexual identity.

When others at the center belittled or criticized Cothren for being gay—incidents that left him seething rather than forgiving—King publicly advocated for him. In the 1990s, one of those incidents occurred when a member of Mrs. King’s extended family, a conservative Christian and an outspoken critic of homosexuality, handed him a religious tract, telling him she would be praying for his hell-bound soul. Cothren grew livid and took the matter directly to his boss, and the family member never bothered him again. On yet another occasion—this time when he and King were planning a trip to Mexico—two key board members of the center privately advised King that she would do well not to take him on the trip, suggesting that the Mexicans would not accept a “gay white boy.” When King relayed the conversation to Cothren one day later, she assured him that she had delivered a stinging rebuke to the board members and that they would never dare to suggest the same in the future. And on still another occasion, she asserted herself after a center staff member accused Cothren of running a “gay mafia” at the center and pushing Mrs. King to adopt a “gay agenda.” Cothren offers an unqualified assessment of King when he recalls his many years at the center. “Mrs. King was very comfortable . . . with me being white and gay,” he says, adding that King’s open acceptance was relatively unusual for the times. “You didn’t see Jesse Jackson, or people who came out on the issue, or congressmen, with their gay staff members out. Mrs. King let me be out. She allowed me to keep my job and be openly gay . . . Mrs. King was way ahead of her time.”

GAY RIGHTS AND THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY MARCH

Coretta Scott King was ahead of her time on issues of gay rights even before Lynn Cothren and Winston Johnson came out to her as gay men. In fact, she made her first public statement on gay rights shortly before

the march to mark the twentieth anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The run-up to the march proved to be a difficult and painful experience for gay rights activists, and perhaps no one was more frustrated at the time than Gilberto Gerald, who was acting director of the National Coalition of Black Gays (NCBG).

Gerald learned in early 1983 that King was hoping to build a “new coalition of conscience”¹³—a large, diverse, group of civil rights activists—and he asked his board members to support a motion endorsing the march. When the members of the board did so without dissent on April 17, they were unaware that just a week earlier, Michelle Guimarin, a lesbian activist, had attended an organizational meeting where she claimed to have heard Reverend Walter Fauntroy—a veteran civil rights leader, a friend of Coretta Scott King, and one of the main leaders of the twentieth anniversary march—compare gay rights to “penguin rights.”¹⁴ Fauntroy allegedly made this remark right after Guimarin had proposed that the National Gay Task Force (NGTF), a leading national gay rights group, become a formal member of the march’s national steering committee. Fauntroy balked, reportedly stating that if the march included “extraneous issues” like gay rights, “we might as well be for penguin rights.”¹⁵

Gerald grew concerned after he learned of the allegation against Fauntroy, and his concerns turned to anger when Donna Brazille, the administrative director of the march, would not return his phone calls about the possibility of including a gay speaker on the program. With the march a little more than a week away, Gerald decided to appeal to authorities higher than Brazille by sending mailgrams to the march’s top decision makers, including Coretta Scott King. “We are concerned,” he wrote King, “that gay and lesbian people, including gays and lesbians of every racial, ethnic, religious, and national grouping, will not apparently receive even an acknowledgement regarding our request for an open lesbian/gay speaker on the program of the 20th anniversary mobilization for jobs, peace, and freedom in Washington, D.C. The theme of the march is diminished in meaning if it does not address the concerns of lesbians and gays who are indeed a part of the coalition of conscience.”¹⁶

King did not reply, and several days later, Fauntroy told the press that because gay rights were too “divisive,” the march would not include speeches about the issue. He also stated that march organizers had “agreed we would not include those [organizations] which might be divisive to the organizations belonging to the ‘coalition of conscience’ (the march endorsers).” Although there was “unanimity” among the organizers that gays and lesbians should be assured of their civil rights, Fauntroy continued, “there was division as to whether embracing specifically gay rights