

# Martin Luther King, Jr.

## THE DRUM MAJOR INSTINCT

*In Hearing the Call Across Tradition: Readings on Faith And Service*, Adam Davis (ed.), 2009

\*All page references are from this book\*

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# Preparing

Before delving into the rest of this lesson, take a moment to do the following:

BREATHE

Notice where you are.

Notice what and who are around you.

Notice your body and any sensations.

Notice your emotions.

BREATHE AGAIN

## Read Mark 10:35-40

### The Request of James and John

**35** James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” **36** And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” **37** And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” **38** But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” **39** They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; **40** but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

# Reflect

What's your gut reaction to the request of James and John?

What do you think is behind their request – what's the underlying human conditions that drive this request?

## Read Dr. King

“But before we condemn them too quickly, let us look calmly and honestly at ourselves, and we will discover that we too have those same basic desires...

For recognition...

For importance...

That same desire for attention...

That same desire to be first.”

(p. 14)

## Read Dr. King

“And there is deep down within all of us, an instinct.

It’s a kind of drum major instinct – a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first.

And it is something that runs the gamut of life.”

(p. 14)

# Reflect

How has this instinct shown up in you throughout your life?

How are you currently experiencing it?

## Read Dr. King

“Nobody is unhappy when they are praised, even if they know they don’t deserve it, and even if they don’t believe it. The only unhappy people about praise is when that praise is going too much toward somebody else.” (p. 15)



# Reflect

How did that quote land for you? What did you experience when you read it – sensations, emotions, thoughts?

## Read Dr. King

“Now the presence of the drum major instinct is why so many people are joiners...some people who just join everything... really a quest for attention, and recognition, and importance...And we join things, overjoin really, that we think we will find that recognition in.” (p. 15)

# Reflect

Have you ever been an “overjoiner”? How did it go for you? What do you think it was like for the people around you?

## Read Dr. King

“Now the presence of this instinct explains why we are so often taken by advertisers.... In order to [\_\_\_], you must [\_\_\_\_]. That’s the way the advertisers do it.” (p. 15)

# Reflect

When was the last time you were suckered by this kind of advertising?

## Read Dr. King

“And you know what else it causes to happen? It often causes us to live above our means. It’s nothing but the drum major instinct.” (p. 16)

# Reflect

Where have you seen this lately?

# Destructive tendencies of the drum major instinct

- Boasting
- Over-identifying with important people
- Do things just to get attention
- Pushing down others to lift up self
- “Snobbish exclusivism” (p. 18)



# Reflect

Where have you seen this in the church?

## Read Dr. King

“The church is the one place where the lawyer ought to forget that he’s a lawyer. And any church that violates the ‘whosoever will, let him come’ doctrine is a dead, cold church, and nothing but a little social club with a thin veneer of religiosity.”  
(p. 18)

# Reflect

Write or draw:

What words, images, or stories come to mind with that quote?

## Read Dr. King

“Do you know that a lot of the race problem grows out of the drum major instinct? A need that some people have to feel superior. A need that some people have to feel that they are the first and to feel that their white skin ordained them to be first...

It has led the most tragic prejudice, the most tragic expressions of man's inhumanity to man.” (p. 19)

# Reflect

Just take another deep breath and sit with those words.

Move on to the next slide when you're ready.

## Watch

White folks: I encourage you to watch and listen with open hearts. Sit with these words before moving on. Be uncomfortable. And breathe.

BIPOC folks: You know yourself. Watch if you're feeling resourced. Take care of yourself as you watch and react. Skip if this is not what you need today.

[“For every Black man that sees himself in Daunte Wright”](#)

*Toussaint Morrison, journalist and activist from Minneapolis, reacting to the murder of Daunte Wright by police in Brooklyn Center, MN on April 11, 2021.*

## Read Dr. King

In talking with poor whites while in jail:

“You are put in the position of supporting your oppressor. Because through prejudice and blindness, you fail to see that the same forces that oppress Negroes in American society oppress poor white people. And all you are living on is the satisfaction of your skin being white, and the drum major instinct of thinking that you are somebody big because you are white. And you’re so poor you can’t send your children to school. You ought to be out here marching with every one of us every time we have a march.” (p. 20)



Image credit: Bryan Dozier/Shutterstock



## Read Dr. King

“And I would submit to you this morning that what is wrong in the world today is that the nations of the world are engaging in a bitter, colossal contest for supremacy...

If somebody doesn't bring an end to this suicidal thrust that we see in the world today, none of us are going to be around, because somebody's going to make the mistake through our senseless blundering of dropping a nuclear bomb somewhere, and then another one is going to drop.” (p. 20)



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Iran blames its regional arch foe Israel for Sunday's incident at the Natanz nuclear facility.

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## Read Mark 10:41-45

**41** “When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. **42** So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. **43** But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. **45** For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

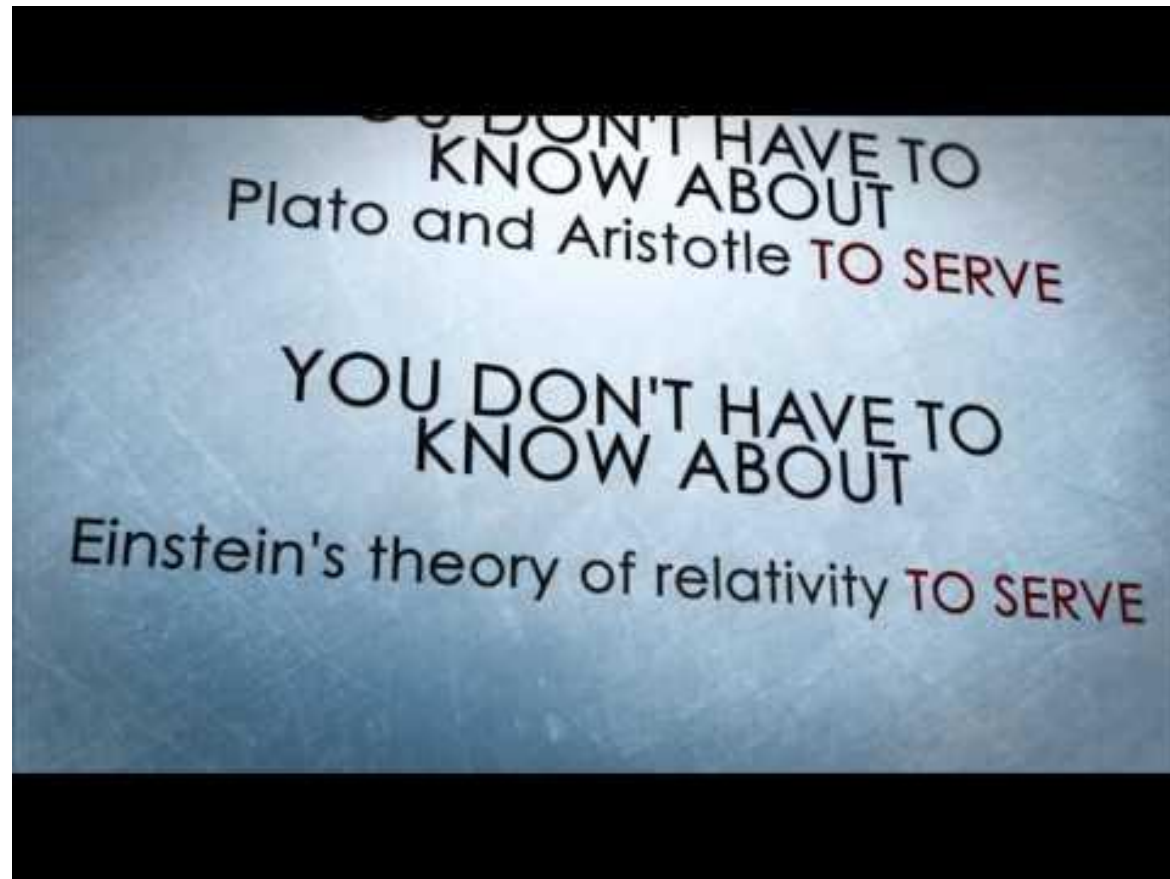
## Read Dr. King

“But he reordered priorities. And he said, ‘Yes, don’t give up this instinct. It’s a good instinct if you use it right. It’s a good instinct if you don’t distort it and pervert it. Don’t give it up. Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do.’ And he transformed the situation by giving a new definition of greatness.” (p. 21)

# Reflect

What stuck out to you in the previous quote? Why?

Hear Dr. King



# Reflect

What gut reactions does this quote bring up? Why?

BONUS: Do a quick image search with the words “service” and “jesus” – check out what comes up. Again, check your gut reactions. Notice what comes up for you.

## Read Dr. King

“If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don’t want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long...

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity...

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.” (p. 24)





# What

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What did you hear? What did you notice?

# So What?

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Why is this important? Why does this matter for people of faith?

# Now What?

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What do you need in order to go forward? What tensions, questions, or new opportunities are you bringing with you?