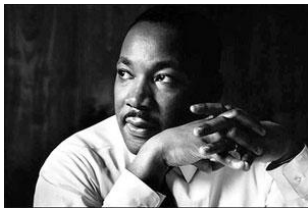


The Drum Major Instinct

The topic of one of the last sermons preached by Dr. Martin Luther King at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, February 4, 1968, reported in *Time Magazine* (1/9/06), caught my attention. His sermon was based on the biblical story of two of Jesus' disciples who sought the **most prominent seat** when Jesus came into power. We find the story in Mark 10:35-40 where brothers James and John make the request of Jesus following an argument among all twelve disciples about who should be most prominent (Mark 9:33-37). In Matthew's version of the story (Matt.20:20-23), Salome, the mother of James and John, asks Jesus for prominence for her two sons.

Tradition has it that Salome was related to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and perhaps her request was prompted by that family relationship. Whatever her reason, the desire for prominence was an issue for the disciples of Jesus.

In his sermon, Dr. King said the disciples desire for prominence springs from a universal impulse for recognition and distinction that he called the drum major instinct.



“And the great issue of life,” Dr. King declared, *“is to harness the drum major instinct.”* He went on to say that an extreme drum major ends up trying to push others down to push themselves up and that this is what drives racism in cultures and arrogance in nations.

This *drum major instinct* was very present not only among Jesus' disciples but was promoted by the social and religious culture of the 1st century world in which they lived. Prominence was about winning the attention and honor of others so one could feel puffed-up and self-important. This behavior was modeled by their religious and secular leaders. It located security and self-worth outside of individuals and was the cause of their anxiety, stress and fear.

In the story, Jesus did not rebuke his disciples for their desire for prominence. That the request was made meant that they had missed the essence of what he was teaching and modeling for them. And so again he taught them that true prominence comes from humble service. To be humble required that the disciples must be empty of the personal self-preoccupation with being important so that they could be filled-up with the Whole Spirit of God.

“And the great issue of life is to harness the drum major instinct.”
~ Dr. Martin Luther King

The drum major instinct is as much an issue for people in the 21st century. It is even more endorsed by our *culture of celebrity* than it was back then. Our religious and secular leaders model it to the extreme with the resulting racism in our culture and arrogance in

our nation. As Jesus' disciples did back then, people on the spiritual path still struggle with each other for power and prominence, and for the sense of self-importance it brings. This still leaves people on the spiritual path locating their sense of security and self-worth outside of themselves, causing them anxiety, stress and fear.

Jesus taught and modeled a better way. That way is the way of personal humility and humble service to others. Metaphysically speaking, humility must not be confused with weakness. The humble ego is not a weak ego. The weak ego is needy and dependent on recognition from others to feel okay with itself. It feels easily threatened and so is compelled to fight and defend itself by means of a number of ego defenses. This prevents the weak ego from turning itself over to be used by and filled with the Spirit of God.

To truly serve God and others, it takes a strong ego to confront and surrender all its' desires for power, prominence and personal self-importance. The key element in such service is the action of self - (ego) surrender, not self-importance. We must make God the center of our lives **over and above** the use to which we desire to put God's power. Daily we must make it our intention and action to keep our heart centered in, loyal to, and dependent on God above all things.

We are here together in Earth School. The core curriculum in Earth School, as Dr. King said, is learning how to harness the drum major instinct in a way that enhances our spiritual growth while also contributing to the spiritual growth and well-being of others. Dr. King closed his sermon saying, yes, he was a drum major –a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness. A few months later, on April 4, 1968, he was shot to death on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee.