

## Compassion and the Unspeakable\*

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James W. Douglass

Compassion drew Thomas Merton into his encounter with the unspeakable. We continue to be blessed by that transforming encounter.

I first wrote Merton in 1962 after reading in *The Catholic Worker* his Auschwitz commandant's soliloquy on the unspeakable, 'Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces'. The final lines were a nuclear-age chant: 'Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done.' The unspeakable had been spoken.

He answered my letter quickly, and I his. Merton's compassion, understanding and encouragement helped sustain me through the next six years—three of them lobbying at Vatican II in Rome for a theology of peace, a year teaching at Bellarmine College in Louisville (when I shuttled visitors to his hermitage), and two years writing a book in the mountains of British Columbia. Merton critiqued my draft of *The Nonviolent Cross* chapter by chapter.<sup>1</sup> He never saw the final text. By then he was on his way to Bangkok, for a more profound encounter with the unspeakable. But in what sense?

I love Thomas Merton's quote about the wilderness source of our transformation: 'It is in the desert of compassion that the thirsty land turns into springs of water, that the poor possess all things.'<sup>2</sup> I think Merton meant that in terms of real people, so let's begin this meditation on compassion and the unspeakable with a poor, compassionate person who possesses all things.

\* This paper is a revision of a Keynote Address to the International Thomas Merton Society's meeting on 13 June 1997 at Spring Hill College, Mobile, Alabama.

1. James W. Douglass, *The Nonviolent Cross* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).  
2. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 334.

That person in the wilderness of our prison system is Mumia Abu-Jamal, a death-row inmate in Pennsylvania. Mumia Abu-Jamal was convicted and sentenced to death in a blatantly unjust trial for a murder he did not commit. On death row he has been baptized by the springs of compassion. His most recent book is on that theme. Its title is *Death Blossoms*. The walls around Mumia have given him eyes to see the walls around us all. Thus one wellspring of solitude, solidarity and social transformation in our national security state is the compassionate heart of a dead man walking. But Mumia is no dead man.

Let's listen for a moment to our desert brother Mumia, as he tells us a parable about another death row prisoner:

Norman called over, his voice heavy and strangely conspiratorial.

'Hey, Mu. Ya bizzy, man?'

'Naw, Norm. I wuz just doin a little readin. But wussup, man?'

'I been lookin' at this mama spider in my cell. She beautiful, man!'

'Yeah?'

'She tiny, but she so strong, man!'

'Uh huh...'

'An ya know what's amazin—?'

'Whut's dat, Norm?'

'Think bout how she make her own home—her web—out of her own body!'

'That's amazin—, man.'

And indeed it was amazing, especially to Norman, a man encaged in utter isolation. Here he sat—would sit for the remainder of his days—in the antiseptic stillness of a supermaximum-security prison block, yet he was not entirely alone. With a quiet, unwitting bravado that defied the State's most stringent efforts to quarantine him, spiders had moved in and built webs in the dark corner under his sink. Now they shared his cell, and he spent hours watching them spin their miraculous silken thread ...

Norman watched, and whenever something truly remarkable occurred, he quietly tapped on the wall. He'd begin in a deep stage-whisper:

'Mu—Yo, Mu! Ya bizzy, man?'

I was rarely too busy to listen for fifteen or twenty minutes, and it wasn't long before I found myself sharing his fascination and enthusiasm. And in time, lo and behold, a web scaffold appeared in my own sink-corner.<sup>3</sup>

3. Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Death Blossoms* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing, 1997), pp. 77-78.

In her preface to *Death Blossoms*, another great writer, Julia Wright, points out the scientific truth behind this symbol. No material on earth absorbs more energy before it breaks than spider silk. 'The writing in *Death Blossoms*', Wright says, 'is as prison proof as the silk for vests, currently derived from imprisoned, anesthetized spiders, is bullet proof'.<sup>4</sup>

Mumia's compassion has spun out of his imprisoned body a web of solidarity not only with his brothers and sisters on death row but with us all. Compassion is the web, and our creator the spider. Lacking Norman's and Mumia's death row vision, we may not see the spider spinning. We may not feel the web between us. But the web of our compassion is the strongest stuff on earth. That inconceivably powerful web is the reality of our humanity.

What we are tempted to feel more than our web of compassion is the system. Mumia describes it in this way:

Ninety-five percent of the guards I've met are doing their jobs simply because they need the money. Like cops and sheriffs, they are men, human beings, and their central concerns, needs and fears are the same as anyone else's—they need money to pay rent, put bread on the table, provide an education for their children. But they have become part of the system because of their fear; they have bought into it because it is built on fear. Remember, the system is not a true reality, but an idea which can be fought and dismantled. People forget that we don't need the system, or the accessories we mistakenly assume are essential for living. We need only the things God gave us: love, family, nature. We must transform the system. That's the challenge. It's do-able, but only if we ourselves do it.<sup>5</sup>

Now this is interesting. Here is a man locked up in a maximum security cell, surrounded by some of the thickest walls on earth, guarded 24 hours a day, monitored constantly by electronic devices and video cameras, who is telling you and me out here that the system is an illusion.

Merton had his own way of describing the system he didn't believe in. In his beautiful essay 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', he adopted Ionesco's image of our growing inhumanity, a rhinoceros herd filling the earth. But in his own writing, Merton moved the crushing unreality of an inhuman system from sight to speech to non-speech. The evil at the center of the system was, above all, the unspeakable. And for Merton, in his *Raids on the Unspeakable*, the unspeakable was the void:

4. Julia Wright, Preface to Abu-Jamal, *Death Blossoms*, p. xx.

5. Abu-Jamal, *Death Blossoms*, p. 76.

It is the void that contradicts everything that is spoken even before the words are said; the void that gets into the language of public and official declarations at the very moment when they are pronounced, and makes them ring dead with the hollowness of the abyss. It is the void out of which Eichmann drew the punctilious exactitude of his obedience ...<sup>6</sup>

In relation to Mumia, the unspeakable is the void where there is no compassion. It is the absence of the web of solidarity. But Mumia learned more compassion on death row. Out here we have gone the opposite way. On our death row we have lost compassion. For in our time of the unspeakable there is a death row at the center of our history. As Americans we have been forced to witness a series of public executions. To the degree that we accepted those executions, the web of compassion has been broken.

Death Row USA began on 22 November 1963 with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Our death row continued on 21 February 1965, with the murder of our prophet Malcolm X. Then came the 4 April 1968 execution of our other great prophet, Martin Luther King. Two months later, on 5 June 1968, presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was executed. This death-row execution of two prophets, a president and a likely president-to-be all happened in four and a half years at the heart of the 1960s. It was the assassination of America's most compassionate leaders.

By whom? By what? To answer first in the most generic sense, it was the unspeakable.

In *Raids on the Unspeakable* Merton says that 'Christian hope begins where every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the Unspeakable'.<sup>7</sup> It is no coincidence that Merton wrote that in the mid-1960s, when people's hopes were being extinguished in Dallas, Harlem, Memphis and Los Angeles. As a result, hopes also died in the jungles of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Yet there is also an unimaginable hope that begins in a despair so total that God alone can break into it, when 'every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the unspeakable'.<sup>8</sup>

The unspeakable struck down Martin, Malcolm and the two Kennedys because compassion had come alive in their voices and in those who took hope from them. In the 1960s compassion was beginning to electrify the United States of America in response to nuclear

6. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 4.

7. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 4.

8. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 5.

war, racism, the Vietnam War and the Other America of the poor. As the unspeakable began to be named, the void began to be filled with compassion. Compassion came alive in our streets. That compassionate movement moved the unspeakable to retaliation.

In the summer of 1963 President John Kennedy expressed a profound hope of ending the Cold War. In his American University address on 10 June 1963, Kennedy repudiated 'a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war'. He said, 'Let us re-examine our attitude toward the Soviet Union'. With a compassion that moved his enemy Nikita Khrushchev, Kennedy pointed out that 'no nation in the history of battle ever suffered more than the Soviet Union suffered in the course of the Second World War'. He appealed to US citizens to 're-examine our attitude toward the Cold War'. As a concrete step toward ending it, Kennedy declared that 'the United States does not propose to conduct nuclear tests in the atmosphere so long as other states do not do so'. This unilateral pledge provided the foundation for the atmospheric test-ban treaty that was then agreed to by Kennedy and Khrushchev, over the opposition of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In this great speech, which I believe triggered his murder, Kennedy saw 'a mutually deep interest [between Cold War adversaries] in a just and genuine peace and in halting the arms race'. Why? Because 'we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.'

Kennedy's hope for an end to the Cold War was bitterly opposed by the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His conflict with the CIA was intense following the Bay of Pigs, where Kennedy felt he had been trapped by the Agency, which in turn considered him a traitor for not escalating the battle. In the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy infuriated the Joint Chiefs by pledging to Khrushchev that the US would not invade Cuba in return for the withdrawal of Soviet missiles. In October 1963 he angered them further by committing himself: (1) to withdraw 1000 US troops from Vietnam by the end of 1963; (2) to withdraw all US forces by the end of 1965. In the biblical sense of *teshuvah*, *metanoia*, repentance, Kennedy was turning.

Kennedy was quoted in the *New York Times* after his death as having said that he wished 'to splinter the CIA into 1,000 pieces and scatter it to the winds ...'<sup>9</sup> The unspeakable made certain that intention was never fulfilled.

Compassion and the unspeakable.

9. *The New York Times*, 25 April 1966, p. 10.

One of the unspeakable secrets in our country is that Lee Harvey Oswald was a US intelligence agent. When Oswald was arrested in Dallas after the assassination, he was carrying a Department of Defense ID card that is routinely issued to intelligence agents abroad. The FBI later obliterated the card by 'testing' it, but writer Mary La Fontaine discovered a copy of it in 1992 in a Dallas Police Department photo. Oswald had been a radar operator for the CIA's U-2 spy plane while he was a Marine stationed at Atsugi Naval Air Station in Japan. The Atsugi base served as the CIA's center for its Far East operations. His fellow Marines David Bucknell and James Botelho said that when Oswald 'defected' to the Soviet Union, he did so under the direction of US intelligence.<sup>10</sup> After the professed traitor Oswald was assisted by the US government in returning from the USSR, when he settled in Dallas his closest friend and mentor was long-time CIA operative George DeMohrenshildt.

The more one investigates the assassination of John Kennedy, the more one becomes immersed in the depths of US intelligence. The American intelligence community was the sea around Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby and the host of anti-Castro Cuban exiles and gun runners with whom Oswald and Ruby worked closely.

Compassion and the unspeakable. The compassion for humanity for which John Kennedy died was peace. Kennedy had been a Cold Warrior, but toward the end of his life he saw the web of compassion with all of humanity. He turned toward it at American University and in the Test Ban Treaty. In the fall of 1963, he and Nikita Khrushchev were on the verge of committing themselves to an end to the Cold War.

What has amazed me in researching the assassination of President Kennedy is how overwhelming the evidence is. It is obvious from the beginning to a clear-eyed observer that the CIA killed Kennedy. But in the USA in 1963 we had very few people who could see Dallas clearly. There were more outside the country. I want to point you to a book that provides the basic information and analysis 34 years later, so you can read it now yourselves.

*History Will Not Absolve Us*, by E. Martin Schotz, is 'The Emperor's New Clothes' as applied to Dallas.<sup>11</sup> When one looks closely, the

10. Jim Marrs, *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1989), p. 110.

11. E. Martin Schotz, *History Will Not Absolve Us: Orwellian Control, Public Denial, and the Murder of President Kennedy* (Brookline, MA: Kurtz, Ulmer & DeLucia, 1996).

generals and intelligence agents stand naked in the center of Dealey Plaza. As Fidel Castro recognized in a speech the day after the assassination (which Schotz includes as an appendix), 'CIA' was written all over Lee Harvey Oswald. *History Will Not Absolve Us* will allow you to see for yourself right through the Empire's New Clothes in Dealey Plaza. The murderers are then revealed as the covert agents of our national security state.

A contributor to *History Will Not Absolve Us* is Philadelphia lawyer Vincent Salandria, one of the earliest and most brilliant analysts of the assassination. In several ground-breaking articles, Salandria's questions about this crime of the century take us into the heart of the unspeakable, the void at the center of our society. Salandria pointed out in the early 1970s the peculiar fact that the massive evidence in favor of a conspiracy had been gradually parceled out to us citizens by the federal government which at the same time denies there was a conspiracy. For example, in the 26 volumes of testimony given before the Warren Commission, the government provides us with all the evidence needed to see a conspiracy, yet in the Warren Report it ignores its own evidence to conclude there was no conspiracy.

Salandria asks: Why? 'Why would the federal government on the one hand wish to provide us with data which prove a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy and simultaneously contend on the other hand that there was no conspiracy?'<sup>12</sup> He suggests:

This coup was covert. The people would not have tolerated an overt coup against such a beloved man as President John F. Kennedy. Because of the covertness of the coup, the new governmental rulers were eager to reveal their work at differing levels of certainty to diverse people and at different times... The new rulers carefully and selectively orchestrated revelations of their bloody work, so as to gain therefrom the deference to which they felt they were entitled by their ascendancy to absolute power.<sup>13</sup>

The Warren Report gave us the unspeakable in prose, with a void at the center of its almost 1000 pages. Remember Merton's description of the unspeakable. It sounds as if he is describing the Warren Report:

It is the void that contradicts everything that is spoken even before the words are said; the void that gets into the language of public and official declarations at the very moment when they are pronounced, and makes them ring dead with the hollowness of the abyss. It is the void

12. Vincent Salandria, 'The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy: A Model of Explanation', *Web Fair Play Magazine* 16 (May-June 1997), pp. 1-14 (1).

13. Salandria, 'The Assassination', p. 2.

out of which Eichmann drew the punctilious exactitude of his obedience...<sup>14</sup>

The Warren Report is a monument to the unspeakable. Yet it provoked no revolution. That void of citizen response remains at the heart of our national security state. The unspeakable that rules us now took power on 22 November 1963, and was confirmed by the Warren Report. By denying the void at the heart of our system, we have allowed it to undermine everything. The unspeakable rules by the power of our denial.

Malcolm X was our voice of truth and compassion from the black ghetto, where today hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the unspeakable. At night when I hear bursts of gunfire in Birmingham, Alabama, I know these are the desperate voices of Malcolm's children. They are like his 12-year-old grandson Malcolm Shabazz, charged with setting the fire in Yonkers in June 1997 that resulted in the death of Betty Shabazz. That fire is going to burn us all. Millions of Malcolm's heirs are under siege by the system. But the unspeakable deflects their rebellion into assaults on their own families. At our Catholic Worker house in Birmingham, Mary's House, we see other victims of that system, such as single mothers struggling to sustain their families on minimum-wage jobs. These are Malcolm's extended family, the holy family of the gospel.

When Malcolm X was shot to death in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom on 21 February 1965, we were told by the police and media that the Black Muslims did it. That seemed to be the case. The one assassin caught by the crowd that day was in fact a member of the Nation of Islam, Thomas Hayer. So, too, were the two additional suspects who were arrested later and then convicted with Hayer. But Hayer, in later confessing his own role, has said that the other two were not among the five assassins at the Audubon on 21 February. Moreover, Hayer himself has never been clear on who was ultimately behind the plot, if he in fact knew. Everyone who has studied Malcolm's murder agrees that the Nation of Islam was involved in the conspiracy. But there were deeper levels of involvement.

The key to understanding Malcolm's assassination is the last year of his life. He spent over half of it outside the United States, on four separate trips abroad. In his autobiography, Malcolm tells the well-known story of his transforming April 1964 Hajj to Mecca, where he experienced a profound unity of worship with Muslims of every race,

14. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 4.

including those 'whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white'.<sup>15</sup> The autobiography says little, however, of Malcolm's 9 July to 24 November 1964 travels through Africa, an equally important story he was saving for a book he didn't live to write.

The purpose of Malcolm's tour of Africa was to internationalize the plight of African-Americans in the US. Malcolm went first to Cairo, where he attended the African Summit Conference and appealed to the delegates of 34 African nations 'to help us bring our problem before the United Nations, on the grounds that the United States is morally incapable of protecting the lives and the property of 22 million African-Americans'.<sup>16</sup>

Malcolm wanted to name the unspeakable at the United Nations. He was taken seriously in that purpose by African heads of state and by his own government. At the same time US intelligence agents followed him closely, as can be seen from CIA and FBI documents. Malcolm was acutely aware of the surveillance, which was made obvious by the agents in order to intimidate him.

At the Cairo conference Malcolm collapsed with stomach pains and was rushed to a hospital. His stomach was pumped, and he survived. The doctors told him he had consumed 'a toxic substance' at dinner. They ruled out food poisoning. Malcolm thought he had been poisoned by the same forces that were shadowing him. He then wrote an open letter to friends in Harlem in which he said:

You must realize that what I am trying to do is very dangerous, because it is a direct threat to the entire international system of racist exploitation ... Therefore, if I die or am killed before making it back to the States, you can rest assured that what I've already set in motion will never be stopped ... Our problem has been internationalized.<sup>17</sup>

Malcolm continued his human rights campaign for African-Americans for four and a half months throughout Africa, speaking before huge crowds in nation after nation and dogged everywhere by the CIA. He told his sister, Ella Collins, that he narrowly avoided another poisoning in Ethiopia.<sup>18</sup>

On 9 February 1965, 12 days before his assassination, Malcolm X

15. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine, 1965), p. 340.

16. Baba Zak Kondo, *Conspiracys: Unravelling the Assassination of Malcolm X* (Washington, DC: Nubia Press, 1993), p. 45.

17. Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), p. 110.

18. Kondo, *Conspiracys*, p. 241.

was barred from visiting France on another speaking trip. When his plane landed, the French government without explanation ordered him to leave the country. Malcolm believed the State Department was responsible. After Malcolm's death, journalist Eric Norden discovered the reason why France had barred Malcolm. Norden was told by a North African diplomat that

...his country's intelligence department had been quietly informed by the French Department of Alien Documentation and Counter-Espionage that the CIA planned Malcolm's murder, and France feared he might be liquidated on its soil ... 'Your CIA is beginning to murder its own citizens now', he commented in elegantly modulated French.<sup>19</sup>

On 14 February, one week before the assassination, the Queens home of Malcolm X, Betty Shabazz and their four daughters was fire-bombed. The four bombs had been set off carefully to block any escape routes, but Malcolm and his family made their way out. New York police officials then told reporters off the record that Malcolm had set fire to his own house 'as a publicity stunt'. The police claimed they had found a whiskey bottle full of gasoline in a bedroom. Malcolm thought they planted it themselves. Malcolm's sister Ella said, 'When they planted the gasoline, I knew it was *no longer the Muslims*. Only the police could have planted it'.<sup>20</sup>

On the day before his assassination, Malcolm X phoned Alex Haley and told him why he was going to stop saying that it was the Muslims who were about to kill him. He said: 'I know what [the Muslims] can do and what they can't, and they can't do some of the stuff recently going on.'

Malcolm then made a final remark that Haley thought 'an odd, abrupt change of subject' but may have been no change of subject at all: 'You know, I'm glad I've been the first to establish official ties between Afro-Americans and our blood brothers in Africa.'<sup>21</sup> Malcolm knew that was the real reason his life had been targeted. And he had no regrets.

But there may have been a second reason why the unspeakable killed Malcolm. On the day his home was bombed, Malcolm had another significant phone conversation. It was with Dr Martin Luther King. The conversation was described by human rights lawyer William Kunstler:

19. Eric Norden, 'The Murder of Malcolm X', *The Realist* (February 1967), pp. 1, 4-22 (12).

20. Norden, 'The Murder', p. 12.

21. Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, p. 431.

There was sort of an agreement that they would meet in the future and work out a common strategy, not merge their two organizations, but that they would work out a method to work together in some way. And I think that that quite possibly led to the bombing of Malcolm's house that evening in East Elmhurst and his assassination one week later.<sup>22</sup>

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were moving toward an alliance that would have shaken the system to its foundations. The unspeakable dreaded such connections. It executed them both.

Ten days before the assassination of Martin Luther King, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said: 'Martin Luther King, Jr., is a voice, a vision, and a way... The whole future of America will depend on the impact and influence of Dr. King.' Heschel, our greatest writer on the prophets, was identifying King as our greatest prophet. King's prophecy was a choice: non-violence or non-existence. But by non-violence King meant revolution. He meant a people's movement that would employ massive civil disobedience to overthrow an unjust system. During the final year of his life, King became a living Declaration of Independence from the system. That is why it killed him.

Compassion and the unspeakable. The voice of Martin Luther King and the guns of our military-industrial complex.

A first factor in King's assassination was his deepening opposition to the Vietnam War. It was in January 1967 that he made the decision to place his life in resistance to the war. The catalyst was an illustrated article in *Ramparts* magazine, 'The Children of Vietnam'. He read it one day in an airport restaurant. His companion, Bernard Lee, described King's reaction to the pictures of napalmed children:

He froze as he looked at the pictures from Vietnam. He saw a picture of a Vietnamese mother holding her dead baby, a baby killed by our military. Then Martin just pushed the plate of food away from him. I looked up and said, 'Doesn't it taste any good', and he answered, 'Nothing will ever taste any good for me until I do everything I can to end that war.'<sup>23</sup>

For those who have wondered at the passion with which James Earl Ray's attorney William Pepper has pursued the murderers of Martin Luther King for 19 years, we can find here a connection. It was William Pepper, then a journalist in Vietnam, who had taken the pictures and written the text of 'The Children of Vietnam'. Pepper is

22. David Gallen, *Malcolm X as They Knew Him* (New York: Ballantine, 1992), pp. 73-74.

23. David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), p. 543.

deeply aware that his Vietnam pictures taken 31 years ago marked the beginning of the end for Martin Luther King.

Exactly one year before his assassination, on 4 April 1967, King delivered his Riverside Church Address against the Vietnam War. He identified 'the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today' as 'my own government'. Most of the media condemned his speech's uncompromising opposition to the war with a vehemence that sobered King. He was realizing the depth of the waters he had entered. But he did not know the speech had moved FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to write President Johnson that it was clear King was 'an instrument in the hands of subversive forces seeking to undermine our nation'.<sup>24</sup>

A second major factor in the assassination was King's increasingly radical resistance to poverty. He saw the Poor People's Campaign, set for April 1968, as the beginning of a revolutionary movement. He thought poverty should be abolished in the United States. 'We must create full employment', King said, 'or we must create incomes'. The only moral and humane choice for the richest country in history was either universal employment or a guaranteed annual income.

At the end of his life, Martin Luther King thought and spoke in terms of a total non-violent revolution, for America and the world. He said the non-violent movement needed tactics that would 'cripple the operations of an oppressive society'. Through civil disobedience the movement would dislocate the functioning of America's major cities. It would begin with the Poor People's Campaign in the nation's capital. But as William Pepper's book *Orders to Kill* makes clear, government leaders were determined to kill King before he ever got to Washington for that revolution. They brought all their forces to bear on Memphis.

Pepper's description of King's assassination is detailed, chilling and, in comparison with what we know of the other 1960s assassinations, quite believable. The close collaboration between intelligence agencies, Memphis police, organized crime and perhaps even a US army sniper team in killing Martin Luther King was the system working at its most efficient level. A little story within that story gives one a further sense of the unspeakable.

After the shooter (not James Earl Ray) fired the fatal bullet from the brush area across from the Lorraine Motel, he put his rifle on the ground for another man to dispose of. Then he jumped down from a retaining wall and ran to a waiting Memphis Police car, which he

entered on the passenger side. The police car drove away quickly.

This police-assisted getaway was witnessed by an astounded Yellow Cab driver who reported it...to the Memphis police. He was interviewed that night by police at the Yellow Cab offices. Later the same night the cab driver died, 'either falling or being pushed out of a car on the Memphis Arkansas bridge'.<sup>25</sup>

But it would be as wrong to focus blame on the Memphis Police for King's murder as it would be to blame the New York Police for the fire-bombing of Malcolm's home. They were just low-level functionaries in the system. For a better understanding of how the system works, we can recall the revelation of Myron Billett.

Myron Billett was a Chicago mob member who attended a meeting in Apalachin, New York, in January 1968 between mob leader Carlo Gambino and CIA and FBI agents. The purpose of the meeting turned out to be the government's offer of a contract for the assassination of Martin Luther King.

I feel like I know Myron Billett. His best friend over the last decade of his life through the 1980s was Revd Maurice McCrackin of Cincinnati, a prophet in the peace movement. McCrackin told me he met Billett on a pastoral visit while Billett was serving a term in the Ohio State Penitentiary. McCrackin baptized Billett after he was released from prison for health reasons. Then Billett became a member of McCrackin's congregation. Myron Billett lived his final years dying of emphysema, deepening in his faith and repenting his mob past by speaking out about it. I have read dozens of letters from Myron Billett to Maurice McCrackin. He was truly a child of God.

Shortly before his death in 1989, Myron Billett was interviewed on a BBC documentary about the King assassination. He said that at the January 1968 meeting in Apalachin, CIA and FBI agents offered \$1 million to Carlo Gambino for the killing of Martin Luther King. When Gambino refused the offer, the agents indicated it would be placed elsewhere. As William Pepper shows in *Orders to Kill*, that government contract was then given to mob leaders in New Orleans and Memphis. They carried it out in cooperation with the system's other forces in Memphis.

Maurice McCrackin told me Myron Billett died a happy man because he had been able to reveal publicly the CIA-FBI offer to kill King that he witnessed. Myron Billett named the unspeakable as the system.

24. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 555.

25. William F. Pepper, *Orders to Kill: The Truth behind the Murder of Martin Luther King* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1995), p. 482.

When Robert Kennedy was killed, a whole generation died with him. On the night of 5 June 1968, Jack Newfield, a writer and friend of Robert Kennedy, took a plane from Los Angeles to New York after Kennedy's shooting at the Ambassador Hotel early that morning. In *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir*, he wrote about that night:

The plane took off and quickly the stained city grew smaller, and vanished under a permanent shroud of haze. The flight, I thought, would retrace—West to East—America's geography of assassination. Los Angeles. Dallas. Memphis. New York. Kennedy. King. And Malcolm X. I imagined a bloody, crescent-shaped scar on the face of the land, linking the four killer cities ...

Now I realized what makes our generation unique, what defines us apart from those who came before the hopeful winter of 1961, and those who came after the murderous spring of 1968. We are the first generation that learned from experience, in our innocent twenties, that things were not really getting better, that we shall not overcome. We felt, by the time we reached thirty, that we had already glimpsed the most compassionate leaders our nation could produce, and they had all been assassinated. And from this time forward, things would get worse: our best political leaders were part of memory now, not hope.

The stone was at the bottom of the hill and we were alone.<sup>26</sup>

#### Compassion and the unspeakable.

Robert Kennedy's assassination followed the well-known scenario of the lone nut. Sirhan Sirhan, like Lee Harvey Oswald and James Earl Ray, was said to have single-handedly changed American history for senseless reasons. By itself the lone-nut thesis might have provoked major suspicions the third time around. But unlike Oswald and Ray, who were never seen firing murder weapons, Sirhan was seen shooting at Kennedy by a whole roomful of people. Lone nut or not, Sirhan had obviously killed Robert Kennedy.

But there was a problem. Dr Thomas Noguchi had carried out a meticulous autopsy, assisted by some of the best forensic pathologists in the country. Noguchi concluded that Senator Kennedy's fatal wound in the right mastoid area had come from a gun held one inch behind the edge of his right ear. Yet the witnesses placed Sirhan in front of Kennedy, anywhere from ½ to 4 feet away from him. It was physically impossible for Sirhan to have fired the fatal shot.

Another problem surfaced. Besides Kennedy's three wounds, five other people had been shot from a different angle. In addition, there were three bullet holes in the ceiling, and two in the center post of the

swinging doors. Yet Sirhan's gun held only eight bullets, and he had not re-loaded. Those numbers didn't add up.

A third problem was the testimony of CBS News employee Donald Schulman. Schulman had seen a security guard fire three times at the same time as Sirhan, in the direction of Robert Kennedy. Uniformed security guard Thane Cesar, who was holding Kennedy by his right elbow, in fact admitted pulling his gun from his holster. But he denied firing it.

A fourth problem was that several witnesses testified to having seen a woman in a polka-dot dress with a male companion fleeing the scene. The woman was shouting, 'We shot him! We shot him!' When asked who, she said, 'Senator Kennedy!'

The Los Angeles Police Department suppressed all these problems, and many more.

What is most disturbing about the investigation into the RFK assassination is the total arrogance of its cover-up. The LAPD inquiry, known as 'Special Unit Senator', outdoes even the Warren Commission as a transparent conspiracy.

The LAPD officers repeatedly threatened and intimidated conspiracy witnesses. By their own admission, they destroyed 2400 photographs, negatives and x-rays of vital evidence.

They also destroyed the doorframe wood and ceiling tiles that showed too many bullet holes for a lone assassin. Then Assistant Police Chief Daryl Gates justified this destruction of evidence on the grounds that the wood and tiles would not fit into a card file.

The two LAPD officers who ran Special Unit Senator were Manuel Peña and Enrique 'Hank' Hernandez. Both had extensive CIA backgrounds in training Latin American security forces. Peña had returned from the CIA to the LAPD shortly before the assassination. So once again an agency that should have been a prime suspect had been put in charge of investigating the crime.

And so it goes, less a cover-up than a transparent conspiracy. While we are told that it was again the work of a lone assassin, we are told at the same time that all evidence to the contrary has been suppressed or destroyed. The doublethink message is: There was no conspiracy/See what we have done. Underlying it all is the announcement: You people have no say in the matter.

Robert Kennedy's life was a journey into compassion. As much as anyone can die through the death of a loved one, Robert Kennedy died with his brother John. The rest of his life was endurance, instinct and compassion. He kept going places inside and out where no one else wanted to go. He was learning to feel what the poor thought no

26. Jack Newfield, *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir* (New York: Bantam, 1970), pp. 346, 348.



rich man could feel. Those who had no voice in the system responded to his.

People were puzzled by his contradictions. Civil rights leader Roger Wilkins once told attorney-activist Marian Wright Edelman that he didn't like the man because he knew Kennedy had tapped Martin Luther King's phone. She replied:

Well, Roger, when he came down to Mississippi, I thought, Oh well, it's just a bunch of guys coming down for publicity. But he did things that I hadn't done. He went into the dirtiest, filthiest, poorest black homes, places with barely any floor, and only potbellied stoves; and he would sit with a baby who had open sores and whose belly was bloated from malnutrition, and he'd sit and touch and hold those babies. I didn't do that! I didn't do that! But he did. And I saw that compassion, and I saw that feeling, and I saw how he was learning.<sup>27</sup>

Robert Kennedy was committed to ending the Vietnam War, to rebuilding cities, to transforming the conditions he had seen in Mississippi shacks and South Dakota reservations and California farm workers' camps where no other politician had gone. Winning the California primary was the turning-point toward his becoming president, and acting on that compassion. The unspeakable gave him three minutes of life after he turned that corner.

Compassion and the unspeakable.

And what about you, Tom Merton? Was it the unspeakable that caught up with you on 10 December 1968, in that Bangkok cottage?

I have seen no evidence that it was. So I continue to suppose you died that day, as was claimed, a simple, unnatural death by electrocution, from an electric fan that fell accidentally across your body. Are you smiling through the smoke?

I raised the question of Thomas Merton's death with Robert Bonazzi, the biographer of John Howard Griffin. Bonazzi said his friend Penn Jones, pioneer researcher into the JFK assassination, had traveled to Bangkok to investigate Merton's death. Jones found no evidence of murder.

Michael Mott, in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, reviews the situation and circumstances. They provide only the possibility of assassination, again with no evidence that one took place. The door of Merton's room was locked from the inside. However, the four priests who entered the room after Merton's death discovered the door's panel of louvered glass swung on hinges, so one could reach in and

27. George Plimpton and Jean Stein, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 124.

draw the inside bolt. The room was also not secure from the window.<sup>28</sup>

There was no autopsy. Mott notes: 'Little attention seems to have been given to a wound on the back of Merton's head that had bled considerably. The obvious solution appears to be that it was caused when his head struck the floor.'<sup>29</sup>

Robert Grip has documented the CIA's and FBI's watch on Merton.<sup>30</sup> The CIA illegally intercepted and copied Merton's mail to Soviet author Boris Pasternak. The FBI, through its Louisville office, monitored Merton's involvement in the American peace movement. The Louisville connection is suggestive. Retired Louisville police officer Clifton Baird described to author William Pepper an abortive 1965 plot by that same Louisville FBI office to assassinate Martin Luther King.<sup>31</sup> It is likely the watchful FBI and CIA were tracking Merton from Louisville to Bangkok.

As for a possible government motive, US intelligence agencies would have been alarmed to discover in 1967 at the height of the Vietnam War that Thomas Merton was actively exploring through the peace movement becoming 'a member of an unofficial team talking to the National Liberation Front' of South Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> Then Merton changed his mind. On 13 July 1968, he wrote to his friend June Yungblut (who was an intermediary for NLF contacts) that on this upcoming first trip to the Orient 'on monastic business' he 'would NOT be wanting to tie in anything like conversations with the NLF—which in any case, would, I think, be futile at this point'.<sup>33</sup> However, the CIA could have interpreted Merton's trip to Bangkok, according to his earlier plan, as an ideal opportunity for the radical monk to engage in conversations with the enemy—and for them to stop him from doing so.

But I know of no evidence that such was the case.

What I do know, Tom, is that in the most profound sense your compassion took you into the heart of the unspeakable, the journey of a bodhisattva.

Compassion and the unspeakable.

28. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 565.

29. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 567.

30. Robert Grip, 'The Merton Files: Washington Watches the Monk', *The Merton Seasonal* 2.1 (Winter 1986), pp. 5-7.

31. Pepper, *Orders to Kill*, pp. 140-44.

32. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 490.

33. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 530.

Remember Mumia Abu-Jamal in his cell on death row contemplating the spider. Remember the web of compassion from Mumia's cell to Norman's cell next to him, and to all of our cells. And remember especially his insight into the system that could not make him into a slave. His compassion for his guards had freed him to see that the system is an illusion. It is not a true reality, but an idea that can be fought and dismantled. Because Mumia sees the web of compassion between him and his guards and their creator, he knows that the system is nothing. He doesn't believe in it. It's not real next to that spider's web. What is real is compassion.

I want to make Mumia's compassionate insight explicit with reference to the Central Intelligence Agency, and specifically those people in it (or related agencies) who may have helped carry out these assassinations. Some have died. Others are still living. In either case I believe that compassion at the heart of creation has infinite ways of webbing us all together. Those brothers and sisters may well be far closer in that web to Martin, Malcolm, John and Robert than any of us can imagine. I believe in a universe of unity.

There is also inconceivable grace at every moment of the conflict for everyone involved in it. The Dalai Lama once said:

For a person who cherishes compassion and love, the practice of tolerance is essential, and for that an enemy is indispensable. So we should feel grateful to our enemies for it is they who can best help us develop a tranquil mind.<sup>34</sup>

On still another level of compassion is what Coretta Scott King said two months after the killing of Martin, and right after the killing of her friend Robert Kennedy:

It's just a belief that I have—a strong feeling—that there *has* to be a force in the universe working for good. Bobby Kennedy was doing a lot of good in this world for a lot of people ... like my husband ... and perhaps the greater good goes on after him. Because he died in the cause, you know, and many people have been inspired by his work ... perhaps more than had he died a natural death. You keep thinking about how the death can be redemptive. As my husband said, 'Unearned suffering is redemptive'.<sup>35</sup>

What Mumia says about the system we can apply to the unspeakable, a different image for the same phenomenon. The unspeakable is

not a true reality, but an idea that can be fought and dismantled. The unspeakable is certainly not any individuals. The unspeakable is nothing. It is the void at the heart of our system. The unspeakable is the absence of compassion in the systematic torture and killing of millions in the world for the sake of wealth and power. The unspeakable is also the absence of compassion in the counter-rhinoceros toward those who have carried out such tortures and killings. And while we're at it, let's say a word for the rhinoceros, who has a much better record in the world than our species does. One of them could write an essay called 'Rain and the Human'. In fact, if you believe in reincarnation, maybe Merton as a rhinoceros is doing that right now.

The unspeakable is the void we contribute to by our repression and denial of its presence. Through our denial the unspeakable becomes overwhelming, as it is now.

Drawing on both Merton and Mumia, I believe history is the struggle between compassion and the unspeakable. Faith says the outcome is a foregone conclusion. God has promised that we—meaning our unifying compassion in God—shall overcome. The web of God in humanity is infinitely resilient. Our compassion will ultimately stretch beyond belief. But the unspeakable has its day. And that day will last until we see and feel the web.

I thought of Malcolm and Martin while I was doing jury duty in Birmingham. Each jury that I was dismissed from by the state's challenges had before it a young, black, male defendant, facing a near-lifetime in prison for a combination of charges. I firmly believe Malcolm's and Martin's compassionate leadership would have turned us toward real justice long before we as a nation reached such judicial scapegoating of the poor and the massive expansion of our prison system into a new Harlem. Their web of solidarity with the dispossessed and with us all would have kept our inner cities from becoming battlefields. No one knew the urban Third World of America better than Malcolm did, and he linked it brilliantly to the African Third World. And no one had a vision of non-violent revolution like Martin did, as he planted the seeds for a global Poor People's Campaign. Their assassinations robbed us of such compassionate unity ... but only for a time.

1998 is the thirtieth anniversary of the martyrdom of both Martin King and Robert Kennedy. It is the thirty-third anniversary of Malcolm's, and the thirty-fifth of JFK's. It could be a time to rediscover the web.

But a first issue that would have to be dealt with is denial. How has our denial of the likelihood that all four of these were government-

34. Dalai Lama, *Tibetan Portrait: The Power of Compassion* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1996).

35. Plimpton and Stein, *American Journey*, p. 350.

organized assassinations contributed to our spiritual and social disintegration as a people? Would a celebration of these four martyrs specifically for the most likely reasons they were killed by their government raise anew the hope of a redemptive, non-violent movement? What about the national security state that has continued to crush the poor at home and abroad, with relatively little challenge since the elimination of these four voices (with the implicit threat to any others so bold)? What special responsibility do people of faith have for the spiritual void that allowed two prophets, a president and a future president to be publicly executed in the space of four and a half years? What responsibility do we have now for the aborted, non-violent changes that we failed to resurrect through their martyrdoms?

Some of the ultimate values of their lives can be identified as: JFK—nuclear disarmament and world peace. Malcolm—the transformation of our cities; the United Nations as a forum for US criminal violations of its own citizens' human rights. Martin—the global abolition of poverty and militarism. Robert—our unification as a people across all racial and economic divisions in a national effort to overcome those. But it would be necessary for all of those goals that we live and pray our way into a nonviolent movement of such breadth and spiritual depth that it can overthrow our national security state and restore the Constitution.

I have been reading the Declaration of Independence lately. Yes, it is self-evident that all people are created equal with certain inalienable rights, and that a government derives its 'just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles ...'

Is it not our right as a people to abolish the military-industrial complex and its intelligence agencies that have murdered our leaders and millions of other brothers and sisters? As we begin to be jolted out of our long sleep by the King assassination revelations, how can we come together again? What are the present seeds of that non-violent revolution needed to abolish war, poverty, and racism, a global Poor People's Campaign? Must we begin by facing our own denial of the blood of the Sixties?

Compassion is the most powerful force on earth and in heaven.  
Friends, when will we realize that?

## FURTHER READING

- Klauer, William, and Philip H. Melanson, *Shadow Play: The Murder of Robert F. Kennedy, the Trial of Sirhan Sirhan, and the Failure of American Justice* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997).
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