

They Couldn't Kill the DREAM

This month, as Americans commemorate Martin Luther King Jr.'s birth, a Covenanter remembers his death, and the devastating days that followed in her Chicago neighborhood.

PATRICIA SMITH ADARANIJO

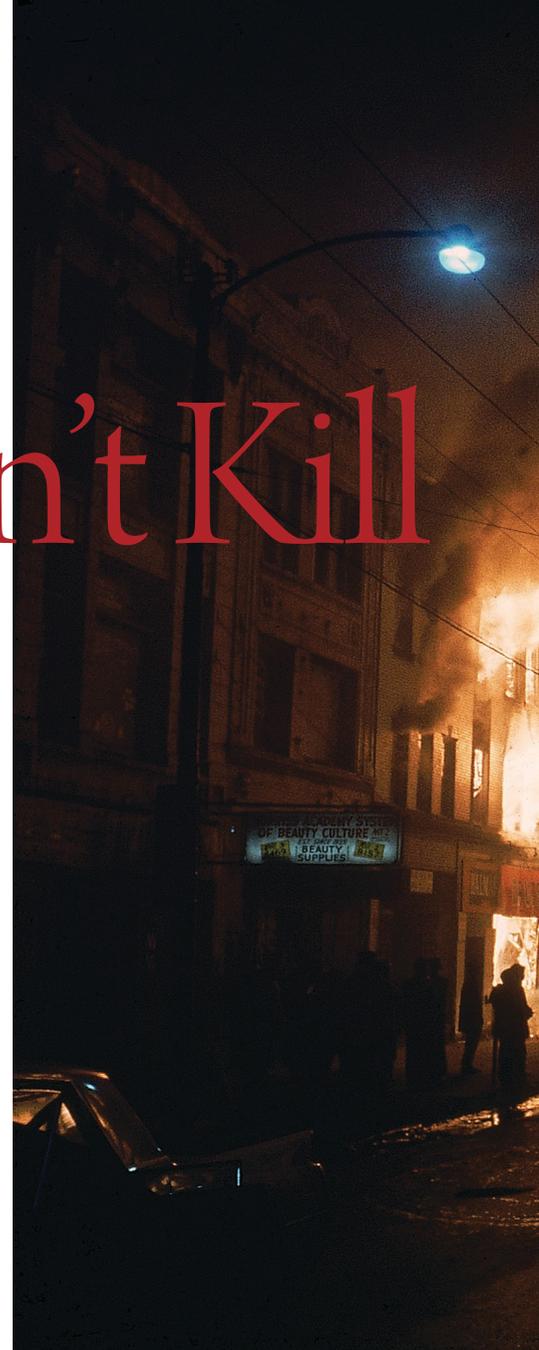
O God! I knew it! I knew they were going to kill him!" Mama screamed, as the newscaster announced the unthinkable: "The civil rights leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Martin Luther King Jr. has been shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee. He was there to lead a nonviolent march of sanitation workers in protest against low wages and poor working conditions." My five younger siblings and I rushed into the room from all corners of our second-floor apartment, located in an all-black neighborhood on the west side of Chicago.

"What's wrong, Mama?" we shouted. "Is Daddy dead?" eight-year-old Lisa blurted. Frightened, six-year-old Sonny began to cry. Stunned, Mama stared at the TV. Finally, coming to herself, she said,

"No, no, baby, it's not your daddy! It's Martin Luther King Jr. He was like the president to black people. We have never known another person to have so much influence on people and to help bring us up from poverty the way he has. And now they have killed him, and only God knows what is going to happen next!"

Mama's statement proved to be true. None of us could have known what was about to unfold. The events that followed began to prepare me, at age thirteen, for a lifelong struggle to live peaceably in a society that was often hostile.

April 4, 1968, had begun as usual for our family. In the morning, Daddy went to his factory job and later that evening he would go to his job as a part-time Yellow Cab driver. Mama, who was a full-time homemaker and took care of all other family responsibilities, made sure everyone had breakfast and left for school on time. I walked to school as usual with my friend Dotty. On our six-block trek, we encountered people of various ages, personalities, lifestyles, and home situations. Most kids came from families like the residents in our building with between four and eight children. Many of their parents, like ours, had been a part of the great migration of African Americans from



the South to Chicago in search of better jobs, housing, and educational opportunities.

After school that day, I ran home to watch TV where I saw faces and places that were different from what I saw in my neighborhood. I often wondered what it would be like to be white. I had contact with white teachers, store owners, and city employees, but none of them interacted with me outside of their respective roles. There were no white residents in my neighborhood, so TV, movies, and books were my windows to white culture. It disturbed me that I saw so few black people on TV. When I did see any, they played bit parts and I always knew that if anyone was



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going to die, those characters would be first.

But there was one image on TV that rose above the others—one that brought pride to my community and inspired hope for our future—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He dared people throughout the country to hope for something better when he stood at the Lincoln Memorial and said, “I have a dream.” He was pictured with presidents and world leaders.

So when the newscaster reported the assassination of Dr. King I was in a state of shock. I quickly realized, upon hearing other TV sets throughout the building tuned into the same station (there were only three stations

back then), that everyone else was in shock as well.

Mama ran out to join the neighbors gathering on the back porch. Then the telephone began ringing, and calls kept coming in throughout the night. First, Daddy called us to make sure we were all OK and inside the building. He had heard the news on the radio, and saw people gathering in the streets and crying. He warned Mama to keep everyone indoors and not to go outside.

Moments later, Aunt Amy knocked on the door, wide-eyed and panting. “Some men came into the drugstore when I was working and told me they were going to burn the place down and that I had better get out while I

could,” she told us. “I pulled off my apron, told the owners that they had better get out too, and ran out as fast as I could.” Soon we heard fire engines roaring by.

People gathered on the street. Some stood in silence, and others grieved loudly, shouting angrily, “How could they do this? They killed him! I knew they were going to do it. But they are not going to get away with it this time!” I had never seen such an emotional reaction in the community before.

By nightfall, we could hear distant sounds of shattering glass, people shouting and running, and shopping

Patricia Smith Adaranijo is a member of South-west Covenant Church in Homer Glenn, Illinois.

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carts full of clothing, furniture, televisions, and hi-fi stereo sets being pushed down the street. Looking out the window, my siblings began shouting, “I want to go out too. I want to get something too.” One sibling shouted, “I want an Easter basket!” Another said, “Get me some candy!” With a raised eyebrow and a calm look, Mama said, “The only place you are going is to your room.”

When Daddy got home a little later, he talked about Dr. King.

“When I was growing up in Stuttgart, Arkansas, it was hard on black folks,” he said. “Many of us had to wake at 4:30 a.m. on cold mornings, dress, start a fire to keep warm, and get ready for the truck to take us to the field miles away by 7 a.m. We missed school to pick cotton that was wet and heavy with dew.

“You could not look a white man in the eye, and it was nothing for them to curse and even slap a grown black man in the face if they chose to,” he said. “But then Dr. King came along. He showed more courage than any man in my lifetime, black or white, when he said, as human beings created by God, we all have dignity and should be treated as such. Dr. King used his intellect to bring the plight of black America to the attention of the world,” Daddy said. “Many white people hated him for that and wanted to beat and kill him. And so they did. But they will never be able to kill his dream.”

Before going to bed that night, I peered out the living room window and watched the orange flames and black billowing smoke shoot from the tops of buildings just four blocks away. The thick acrid smells were heavy in the air, and I listened to the constant blare of police sirens and fire trucks. We all slept with our clothes on and our shoes near our bed.

The next morning, arriving at our respective schools, my siblings and I were among very few students to show up, and by 10 a.m. an unscheduled school assembly was called. The tense and worried expressions on the teachers’ faces revealed their fear. The principal explained that in a few minutes the school bell would ring and that everyone had to leave the building and run straight home without stopping along the way.

Over the next few days the violence continued, and Mayor Daley called in the National Guard. My siblings and I were both excited and frightened by the guards hanging onto green military jeeps, wearing battle fatigues, carrying rifles and other weapons, and rolling through the streets of our neighborhood. The police frowned suspiciously and spoke harshly to people who passed by, and we did not know whether to be happy or afraid. We weren’t sure if they were there to protect us or hurt us.

The mayor instituted a curfew not only for children but also for adults. Everyone had to be in the house by dusk, and police were given orders to “shoot to kill” looters. Tensions were high and we were scared. During that time, food and other necessities were scarce. We ate Mama’s thick pan-fried bread made of flour and water, drizzled with Karo syrup, and whatever else we could muster.

When the smoke finally settled, nearly thirty blocks of the west Madison Street business district had been vandalized, looted, or burned. When the curfew lifted, my family drove around to assess the damage. We were saddened to discover that our community’s shopping area looked like a bombed-out war zone. My ten-year-old sister Brenda said, “There will be no more shopping for first day of school and Easter clothes

at Three Sisters, Goldblatts, and Lerner. Now they are all gone.”

Also gone were the apartments and dwellers living above the stores, as well as their jobs. The windows of the drugstore where Aunt Amy worked were broken and all the merchandise was gone. A few places, where people had written “Soul Brother” on the window in an effort to dissuade looters, were still intact.

The *Chicago Tribune* reported that eleven people had died during the rioting, 350 people had been arrested for looting, and 162 buildings had been destroyed by arson. The losses were great and small, touching all of us. My Uncle James had taken three new pairs of expensive dress pants to the tailor’s shop on Madison, but when he went back for them the store had been burned.

The rumor was that young black men in the neighborhood, angered by the assassination of Dr. King and the blatant injustices in America, wanted to send the message that they were tired and did not plan to take the injustices anymore. Indeed, some people said, “Because America refused to listen to Dr. King’s message of nonviolent change, we will do whatever it takes to get justice.” Others said, “The white businesses in our neighborhood did not care about black people anyway and were just ripping us off with high prices and poor quality merchandise. So good riddance to them.” Still, after the riots, it did not help that we had no choice but to shop in surrounding white communities, where white people stared at black people with suspicion and fear, not knowing what blacks might do next.

Over the next several weeks, as white people in surrounding neighborhoods sold their homes and moved to the suburbs, my parents, who had long been looking for new housing for our family, were able to find the house of their dreams in what had by then

become a primarily African American community. My parents bought a two-story brick, four-bedroom, two-bath home, with a fenced lawn and flowers in the yard one mile northwest of where we had been living.

As we moved into the quiet, clean, trimmed-lawn community, I thought about the sacrifices my parents had made to enable us to achieve this American dream of home ownership. Daddy took evening courses after work and often worked long hours. Mama cooked our meals at home, shopped at thrift stores, bought secondhand clothing, made repairs, and prayed their dream into existence.

Today I am grateful to have grown up seeing my parents and many other African Americans model faith and hope in the face of difficulty and conflict. They repeatedly left familiar surroundings behind, and they dared to pursue their dreams of a better life for their families. Along the way they encountered many indignities—it was a given that they would experience racial discrimination in their employment, housing, and healthcare—yet they held fast to their trust in God.

In 1968 the destruction caused by the riots left me with little hope. My world had been destroyed. But my parents did not despair. Instead, they took advantage of the chance to make their dreams come true. Now, forty years later, our country has elected its first African American president, and I hope this is an indication of our future—that we are more willing to put aside superficial or stereotypical assumptions about race, that we are better able to accept people based on their character and ability. As a mother, grandmother, homeowner, a special education teacher, and a community activist, I have my own positive message to share with others. God is good and we can achieve all good things through faith in him. ■