

## WHAT I KNOW FOR SURE

### MY STORY OF GROWING UP IN AMERICA

TAVIS SMILEY

As told to David Ritz

Over the next few years, I would often sit on the floor in the living room of our trailer, my father's headphones pressed to my ears. Dad had given me permission to use the phonograph, a rare privilege in our family. Dad's precious phonograph normally was off-limits. He made an exception only because he respected Deacon Gossett and saw no harm in the sermons of Dr. King.

I checked out a book of Dr. King's speeches from our school library, one of the few books I could find concerning African Americans. Now in ninth grade, I was enrolled in speech class, preparing for a series of speech contests. They triggered my intensely competitive spirit; I was searching for just the right material. After listening to Dr. King for only a minute or two, I knew I had found a kindred spirit.

It was a stormy afternoon when I made my discovery, simultaneously reading the text of King's speeches while listening to his mellifluous voice on my father's phonograph. Mama was baking cakes in the kitchen at the time, and the aroma was sweet. The crackle of distant thunder and the radio report of possible tornadoes had me on edge. I looked out the window and saw that the sky -- half dark, half light -- had the right disposition for twisters. A sense of danger hung in the air. That same ominous threat of sudden change thundered in the sound of Dr. King's voice. I felt the genius of King's soul. His radical politics would take time for me to grasp, but the musicality of his phrases seduced me from the first sentence.

I remember my siblings were running around the trailer. Big Mama was helping my mom in the kitchen while Dad was tinkering with his car outside. With the headphones clamped against my ears, though, I was oblivious to it all. I was miles away in the magic of King's language, 500 miles away in the National Mall in Washington, D.C., amidst a teeming crowd of supporters. I imagined looking up at the podium placed before the Lincoln Memorial where Dr. King was speaking. The date was August 28, 1963, the year before my birth. In some ways, listening to Dr. King's speech and imagining myself at the great March on Washington was my birth, at least my rebirth, my christening into a larger world where words and ideas fired my imagination and excited my ambitions.

"I Have a Dream," Dr. King intoned. In English class, we were just starting to learn about similes and metaphors and figures of speech. Those concepts weren't immediately clear to me as Dr. King talked about "symbolic shadow," but when he spoke of coming to Washington to "cash a check," when he said the Founding Fathers has signed a "promissory note to which every American was to fall heir" and that "America has defaulted," I understood the power of symbolic language. When he claimed that America

“has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’ ” I saw how metaphors could stir the heart and persuade the mind. Dr. King spoke in the cadences of the Black church in which I’d been raised. I loved those cadences. His was a familiar voice, a preacher’s voice, an evangelist’s voice, though grander and more eloquent than any I’d ever heard.

Over the next several weeks, I spent hours studying that one speech. I would recite it in unison with Dr. King, memorizing every nuance, noting how he emphasized a certain vowel or consonant. I’d stand before the mirror and elongate words and modulate my inflections as he did.

But such practice also contained a metaphysical component. King’s speeches touched me so deeply and profoundly that, for reasons I couldn’t explain, I found myself crying. I wasn’t sure what those tears represented: maybe his words touched the pain and hurt and humiliation I was still feeling; maybe my tears stemmed from the new confidence and purpose his words gave me. Maybe I felt an empathy with my people, whose history of suffering and survival was coming alive to me for the first time. In part, they reflected my pride in the courageous brilliance of a leader outspoken in conveying our purpose and passion.

I see now that King influenced me on several levels: First, he showed me that words have meaning -- they aren’t arbitrary -- and words are powerful. He showed me that words can carry the force of love. He also showed me that one man can make a difference. He himself had made that difference. Plus he demonstrated great love for his people. I myself felt that love; expressed in his words and the testimony of his life, that love was powerfully validated. King also personified self-determination. I hooked on to that concept. I hooked on to the notion that we were to be positive, forward-looking and progressive. Hope was his mantra; hope was his conviction. Despite evidence to the contrary, King believed that things would get better. Every day that I read his works, they moved me like a powerful sermon. They changed my life and emboldened my ambition.

Though Dr. King has passed on long before I had encountered his remarkable spirit, I got to know the man better than I knew most of my teachers. I knew him through his words. He spoke to me, and I spoke to him. In a mystical but decidedly practical sense, he became my mentor.

The lesson to me is clear: There is a world of righteous mentors available to each of us. We can adopt them; we can live with them through their words; we can communicate with them as surely as we communicate with our parents and friends; we can keep them close to us as long as we live. Even as I write this, I feel Dr. King by my side.

WHAT I KNOW FOR SURE  
©2006 by Tavis Smiley  
A Doubleday Hardcover  
ISBN: 0-385-50516-7  
ISBN-13: 978-0-385-50516-1