

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

How Civil Rights Leader Wyatt Tee Walker Revived Hope After MLK's Death

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Four years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the novelist James Baldwin would write on the pages of *Esquire* magazine, "Since Martin's death, in Memphis, and that tremendous day in Atlanta, something has altered in me, something has gone away."

Baldwin wrote about how "the act of faith" – that is, his belief that the movement would change white Americans and ultimately America – maintained him through the years of the Black freedom movement, through marches and petitions and torturous setbacks.

After King's death, Baldwin found it hard to keep that faith.

Nearly two weeks after King's funeral, in April of 1968, King's confidant and former strate-

gist Wyatt Tee Walker tried to renew this faith. Drawing on a tradition of Black faith, Walker encouraged a grieving community to embrace hope even in the face of despair.

As a scholar of religion and American public life, I recognize the important lessons Walker offers for current times when America is deeply divided.

Faith in action

Black public faith has a storied place in American life.

The Black church has been a place of fellowship and affirmation from colonial America to modern day, empowering individuals to undertake public acts to transform politics and society.

The 19th-century National Negro Convention movement, which ran from 1831 to 1864, demonstrated this Black faith in action. Its leaders advocated for the aboli-



Civil rights leader Wyatt Tee Walker addresses a crowd at St. Phillips AME Church in Atlanta. Afro American Newspapers/Gado/Getty Images

tion of slavery and full citizenship for African Americans. One activist reflected years later that the "colored conventions" were "almost as frequent as church meetings."

The civil rights movement carried this faith in

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action forward. Theologian Dwight Hopkins has written how the sermons and songs of Black faith empowered and sustained African Americans, even in bleak times.

These practices on Sunday morning, he noted served to "recharge the

worshippers' energy" so they could deal with the "rigors and racism of 'a cruel, cruel world' from Monday through Saturday."

It was this faith that empowered many African Americans to maintain their faith in the pos-

mass meetings were all public displays of black faith.

The risk of faith

In the wake of King's assassination, the words of his last published book, "Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community," reverberated throughout the nation.

Urban rebellions erupted in the wake of King's death. With parts of over 100 cities smoldering or in ruins, chaos seemed a more likely future in 1968 America than community.

In a sermon called "Faith as Taking the Risk," delivered at Princ-

eton Theological Seminary, Walker sought to address a question posed by a young theologian James H. Cone after King's death: "Without King, where was the hope?"

Deftly navigating the tension between hope and despair, Walker based his message on the response of the Hebrew prophet Elisha in the Book of Kings who faced crisis and despair with an invading Syrian army, widespread famine and people ready to give up.

Drawing inspiration from the faith of the com-

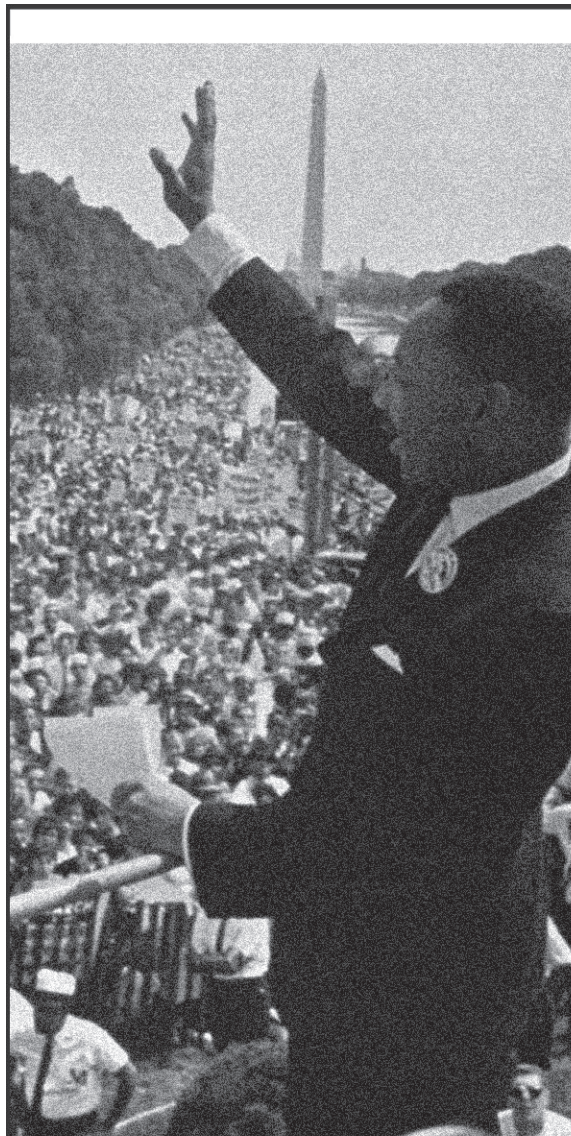
See WALKER on page 8



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- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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