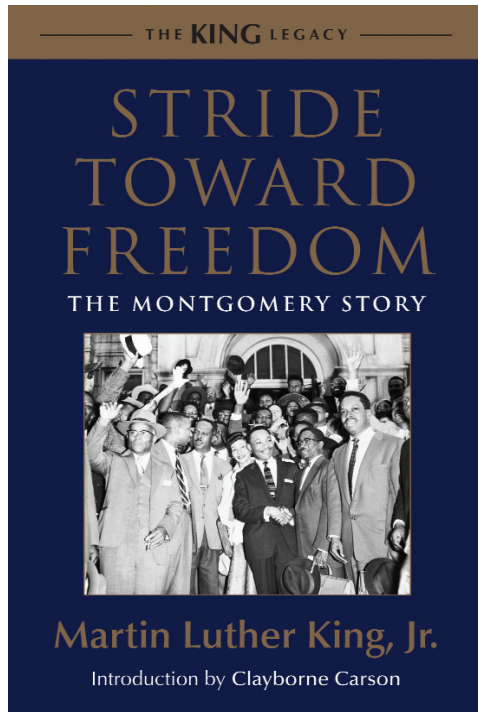


# BEACON PRESS

## READERS' GUIDE



# STRIDE TOWARD FREEDOM

The Montgomery Story

by Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Guide written by Naomi Sobel

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s account of the first successful large-scale application of nonviolent resistance in America is comprehensive, revelatory, and intimate. King described his book as “the chronicle of 50,000 Negroes who took to heart the principles of nonviolence, who learned to fight for their rights with the weapon of love, and who, in the process, acquired a new estimate of their own human worth.” It traces the phenomenal journey of a community, and shows how the twenty-six-year-old Dr. King, with his conviction for equality and nonviolence, helped transform the nation—and the world.

## PRAISE FOR MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND HIS WORK

“Dr. King understood that unity cannot be won on the cheap; that we would have to earn it through great effort and determination.”  
—**BARACK OBAMA**

“Let it never be said by future generations that indifference, cynicism or selfishness made us fail to live up to the ideals of humanism which the Nobel Peace Prize encapsulates. Let the strivings of us all, prove Martin Luther King Jr. to have been correct, when he said that humanity can no longer be tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war.”  
—**NELSON MANDELA**

“Many books record history; a few books make history. *Stride Toward Freedom* will, I believe, do both.”  
—**CHRISTIAN CENTURY**

“Martin Luther King’s early words return to us today with enormous power, as profoundly true, as wise and inspiring, now as when he wrote them fifty years ago.”  
—**HOWARD ZINN**

“I invite all of you to think of King not only as a person who gave a great speech in 1963, but someone who continues to challenge us in 2009.”  
—**CLAYBORNE CARSON**

“Americans all across our great country and people around the world have been inspired to achieve great things because of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—because of his teachings and because of his life.”  
—**HILLARY CLINTON**

“Because of his dedication to the cause of justice and the imperative of human dignity, he wrestled with the soul of a nation and challenged it to reach its highest destiny. King injected new meaning into the very veins of American society and gave his life to make our democracy real.”  
—**REP. JOHN LEWIS**

“With every passing year, we have a greater understanding of the magnitude of Dr. King’s achievements and the historic place he occupies in the pantheon of American heroes.”  
—**TOM BROKAW**

“Much of Dr. King’s broad and powerful message is in danger of being left behind, as new generations come to know him only through history and see him more as myth than man. His life and great works are still relevant to the complex realities of today’s social problems and if we allow the richness of his example to recede, we lose the opportunity to learn from him. There is still so much to learn from walking in his path.”  
—**SEN. EDWARD KENNEDY**

## ABOUT DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), Nobel Peace Prize laureate and an architect of the nonviolent civil rights movement, was among the twentieth century's most influential figures. An eloquent advocate of nonviolence, Dr. King is the author of several books. In addition to receiving degrees from Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University, he was awarded more than two hundred honorary degrees by colleges and universities in the United States and abroad. One of the greatest orators in U.S. history, his speeches, sermons, and writings are inspirational and timeless. Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### General

1. This was Dr. King's first book. How does writing a memoir fit into his project of movement-building?
2. (If appropriate) Look at the packaging and cover. How much does the outside of this book seem to be about Dr. King himself, and how much does it seem to be about Montgomery, the bus boycott, and the overall struggle for civil rights? (See p. xxix on "I" and "we" as the subject of the memoir.)
3. What does *Stride Toward Freedom* mean to you? Why might Dr. King, or his editors, have picked it as the title?
4. The memoir was written in 1958. Think about the historical context in which it was written, and then about the time period it covers (December 1955–December 1956). What events took place in between that might have provided new perspectives not available while the struggle was happening? (See p. xxx on Little Rock and the Tallahassee bus boycott.)

### Preface

1. Right from the beginning, Dr. King uses the word "Negro," capitalized, to describe his community. What are the politics of naming here? What resonance might that word have had then, and how does it differ from how the word is used or not used today?
2. Dr. King describes the book as the "chronicle of 50,000 Negroes" and "the white community of Montgomery." What does this framing device tell you about whom Dr. King envisioned as his readership? (pp. xxix–xxx)

### I: Return to the South

1. The book opens with Dr. King in his car en route from Atlanta to Montgomery, listening to opera. How does this position him as a narrator? (p. 1)
2. Dr. King's description of the State Capital in Montgomery mentions how he would often see it again. Do you see this as a use of foreshadowing, and if so, of what? (pp. 1–2)

3. Dr. King worries about what tactic to use in preaching so as to “impress the congregation,” waffling between an intellectual bent and a spiritual one, and ultimately decides to focus on the spiritual. Do you see this choice reflected in his later, more famous, speeches? (p. 3)
4. Dr. King describes his mother’s explanation of segregation as “the problem of explaining the facts of life to [a] child,” one specific to “every Negro parent.” What are moments when you have had to explain to someone difficult truths about life? How did you approach them? Or were you on the receiving end of such an explanation? What did you take away from the conversation? (pp. 4–5)
5. Dr. King realizes that he has “a chance to escape from the long night of segregation” by remaining in the North. What leads him to decide to “return to a society that condones a system I have abhorred since childhood”? (p. 7)
6. Returning South, for Dr. King, is a “moral obligation.” Does this concept make sense to you? Have you ever made a big life decision on the basis of a “moral obligation”? (p. 8)

## **II: Montgomery before the Protest**

1. Dr. King is anxious to “change the impression” that Dexter’s congregation was all of one class background. Where else does a commitment to cross-class engagement or economic justice surface in this memoir? (p. 11)
2. Dr. King gives a detailed description of the economic and labor demographics in Montgomery. How do these specifics seem to have impacted Dr. King’s thinking and strategies—and how might someone doing the work of community organizing there today have to adjust to changes in those demographics since the 1950s? (pp. 13–14)
3. Schools remained segregated even through *Brown v. Board of Education* had come down from the Supreme Court in 1954. Where else do we see a gap between de jure and de facto rules—in the book or in our own lives? (p. 14–15)
4. Many people in Montgomery found Dr. King’s “dual interest in the NAACP and the Council surprising” because, though the two organizations shared a goal of integration, their tactics were “diametrically opposed.” Can you think of any parallels to our own time, where organizations that share a goal are seen as being opposed to each other because of a difference in tactics? (p. 20)
5. “Many of the educated group were employed in vulnerable positions, and a forthright stand in the area of racial justice might result in the loss of a job.” How does Dr. King address the tension between standing up for justice and remaining employed? (p. 22)
6. Dr. King writes that religion should deal “with both earth and heaven,” addressing both spiritual concerns and humanitarian problems. How does this line up with your belief system, or with your ideas about the role of religion in the world? (p. 23)

7. "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." What is the difference between the peace described by Montgomery residents and the peace envisioned by Dr. King? (p. 27)
8. Right after Dr. King's arrival in Montgomery, fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin is arrested in an incident foreshadowing Rosa Parks' arrest. Why did Colvin's story not spur the same kind of action on the part of the community? (p. 28)

### **III: The Decisive Arrest**

1. "Mrs. Parks was ideal for the role assigned to her by history." What underlies this comment? Why is it so important that the public figures at the center for movements for change be "ideal for their roles," and what does that look like in practice? (p. 31)
2. A white newspaper picked up the announcement of the bus boycott and meeting, with unexpected effects. What are other media efforts that have backfired in similar ways? (p. 37)

### **IV: The Day of Days, December 5**

1. What is the significance of E. D. Nixon's insistence that the leaders not conceal their names? (p. 45-46)
2. Coretta tells Martin that "whatever you do, you have my backing." How does Coretta emerge as a player in this series of events? How does Dr. King describe her? (p. 47)
3. Dr. King uses the concept of love to draw together self-respect and nonviolence as the key principles of the protest action, and soon the protest movement. Is this emphasis on love something we still see in politics today? Why or why not? (pp. 51-52)

### **V: The Movement Gathers Momentum**

1. Dr. King spends a full three pages describing the other members of the strategy committee. Why go into so much detail about them? (pp. 57-60)
2. Dr. King describes a number of white housewives who "had no intention of being without their maids" and so picked up and dropped off their employees daily in "Negro neighborhoods" for the length of the boycott. What do you make of the interaction he describes on p. 65 between the "old domestic" and her employer? (pp. 64-65)

### **VI: Pilgrimage to Nonviolence**

1. What is Dr. King's aim in describing at such length his intellectual journey to nonviolence? Who might he be appealing to in this section of the book? (pp. 77-95)

2. Dr. King vehemently dismisses Marxism, while maintaining that he “found it challenging.” Given the Cold War context of his writing, how do you read this section? (pp. 79–81)

### **VII: Methods of the Opposition**

1. Dr. King and his colleagues “ask for justice within the segregation law” and are refused. What do they learn from this experience? (pp. 101–102)
2. When Dr. King is arrested, he has a long car ride before he arrives at the jail. Why is he so relieved to see it? (p. 118)

### **VIII: The Violence of Desperate Men**

1. After Dr. King’s house is bombed, he implores the crowd outside to remain nonviolent, even while one of his colleagues directly places the blame for the incident on city officials and their “get tough” policy. How does Dr. King shape the crowd’s reaction to the city commissioner? (pp. 126–128)
2. Members of Dr. King’s church take different roles in the movement, roles that fall along gendered lines. Have you noticed a gendered division of labor in other social movements? If so, what did it look like? If not, why not? (p. 132)
3. How does Dr. King’s relationship with his father impact his leadership style? What influence does his father have on his decision making? (pp. 134–137)
4. “I was a convicted criminal, but I was proud of my crime.” Dr. King characterizes his actions as “noncooperation with evil” by breaking the law. Have you ever broken the law in service of a higher ideal? What were the consequences? (p. 141)

### **IX: Desegregation at Last**

1. Dr. King contrasts the “relief” of being in federal court with the “sabotage of justice in the city and state courts of the South.” What provides this contrast? (pp. 143–144)
2. Why does U. J. Fields make accusations against the MIA? How do King and Fields address the conflict that ensues? (pp. 145–150)
3. Why is it so important that the community see the Supreme Court ruling not “as a victory over the white man, but as a victory for justice and democracy”? (p. 156)

### **X: Montgomery Today**

1. Dr. King relates the use of “courtesy titles” like Mr. and Mrs. for men and women of color to the success of the bus boycott. Why might or might not that be the case? What evidence does he provide? (p. 176)
2. The Montgomery courts decide to charge those who defy segregation with “disorderly conduct,” so as to avoid “the possibility of a test case.” Does this prove to be an effective tactic? (pp. 178–180)









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