

MLK led a short, anguished life enshrined in Memphis



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The National Civil Rights Museum, built on the site of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, and visited by 200,000 people every year, is re-opening this weekend. A remarkable renovation, joining history to our moral future, has been completed in conjunction with the 46th anniversary of the MLK assassination on the motel balcony, April 4, 1968.

“Today is history, in Memphis and for mankind.

I was privileged to publish an oral history of the painful transition of the Lorraine Motel into this world-class museum in my 2012 book, *'Room 306: The National Story of the Lorraine Motel.'*

King discovered something within himself to elevate his hard, quick journey (some say it was his deep love of Jesus) and his uncommon vision. In truth, Martin Luther King, Jr. lived a short, brutal life, filled with prison stays, bouts of depression, fear, and threats. He traveled to Memphis three times in the spring of 1968 in order to help garbage workers get a 10 cent per hour raise and some basic benefits.

He had very little time with his wife and children, never accumulated any personal wealth, fought his weight, cigarettes, and an unrelenting physical exhaustion. He was harassed by common criminals and by the FBI—an agency that once

advised him to simply commit suicide.

He was afraid of the dark jail enclosures into which he was cast so often. He knew that, in the end, somebody would shoot him.

He was ultimately reviled by many of his allies in the federal government, including President Lyndon B. Johnson, because he unilaterally stood up and took a strong moral position against the Vietnam War. M.L. King, child of a domineering father, spent his adulthood as a prisoner of his own passions and skills. He was often as unhappy as he was grandiloquent.

Over the hasty thirteen years of revolutionary King's Civil Rights Movement, 1955 to 1968, the rather short, almond-eyed American visionary lived such a passage. The preacher would replicate Moses opposite many Pharaohs—from Birmingham police chief Eugene "Bull" Connor to Alabama governor George C. Wallace to Chicago mayor Richard Daley, Sr.

They were all Pharaonic stand-ins who assaulted King and so many brave Americans, from honchos to housewives, who withstood their succession of fire hoses, state segregation laws, and polite agreements to ban black people from housing and schools and a share in the national journey.

Neither Martin nor Moses arrived to the Promised Land. But at least Moses lived to a ripe, full age.

Today is history, in Memphis and for mankind. Imagine if Martin Luther King had never been born—we'd still be wandering in the desert of legal segregation and social disgrace.

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See my newest book, *'DANGEROUS FRIENDSHIP: Stanley Levison, Martin Luther King Jr., and The Kennedy Brothers'*