



SELMA

An Exploration of the Womanist Lens and the Servant-Leader

— CARMEN DELA CRUZ

Most of the Black community remember where they were the day the news broke that Barack Obama would be the 44th president of the United States. In 2008, I was living in the historic city of Atlanta where I had left behind the dust of an unpaved country road in Russellville, Arkansas. I had wondered then if any of the inhabitants of the predominately White town were somewhere celebrating too. I stared at the screen in the hip Inman Park area with my brother and mixture of folks of different races, and we took to the streets and started shouting and laughing with strangers in the street, “Yes we can! Yes, we can.” I was so hopeful. I had not lived through what our parents had experienced as children in the Jim Crow South, or fully understood what our grandmother who was born in 1918 had seen in her day, but I’d had my own taste of racism. I had received a unique education from the time our parents moved us from our hometown of Pine Bluff, Arkansas to Russellville. My father had accepted a nuclear chemist position at AP&L, now Entergy, and I’m sure my parents too were filled with hope as they moved into a new home in our all-White neighborhood. My mother was an educator and took it upon herself to visit schools and talk to teachers. I was with her as one teacher gave us strange looks and said, “We don’t have many of y’all here.” At five years old, I don’t think I really understood who the “y’all” was that she was referring to. My mother



decided to enroll us in St. John's Catholic School at the advice of a neighbor whose two girls were half-Mexican. My parents who had both attended Catholic school decided that paying the tuition was worth it if it meant a better education, as my mother said, "The nuns would be mean to everyone." My brother and I made up two of the three Black kids at the school, and there were three Hispanics including the neighbor's two kids. The real education happened outside the school yard in our all-White neighborhood. We did what kids do which is to find other kids to play with. One day the older White boys that my seven-year-old brother had played with several times before had a few new friends join in. These new friends were not as keen to allow my brother to play baseball with them. I sat watching as the boys who we had thought were friends stood by as one of their friends laughed, pushed my brother, and said, "Oh let the little nigg** play." We were able to make a quick escape as some of the boys laughed and some stood silent. We ran the mile or so home fighting back tears. This was one of the moments that I became acutely aware that I was different. There would be several other moments like riding the school bus in the third grade and having a White boy of five or six say, "Hey, what would you do if I called you a nigg**?" In middle school, another White boy got on our bus a few times, wearing a homemade shirt that read, "KKK I'm a Member," without any repercussions from the bus driver or school officials. These devastating occurrences awakened me to the fact that my very presence, my color, incited this behavior in some people. However, I had parents who also taught me that those people were just ignorant and that there were also good people in the world. I made friends in that rural town who had probably never truly known a Black person, and I was definitely the first Black person in their home for sleep overs or parties. So, I carried with me this duality of humanity's love



and hate. I was also fortunate that my mother moved us to Atlanta when I started high school which gave us an entirely new perspective on the wealth of opportunity for Blacks in all fields. There, I worked in media at Turner Broadcasting and found that it was not unusual to have Black managers or a Black Vice President of Operations. After Obama's election, I was hopeful along with so many people of color in the world that change was not just a campaign slogan but that real change in the minds and hearts of people was under way. However, with the recent civil unrest surrounding the protests to honor the lives of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others affected by senseless violence, it seems necessary to ask, where are we now? Where is the leadership that the country needs?

In the present climate, films such as Ava DuVernay's (2014) *Selma* now feel more relevant than ever. I can remember watching the film for the first time and thinking how powerful and disturbing it was. I felt connected but at the same time I felt distant from the events happening on screen. Growing up, I had sat through television specials about Dr. King that often rushed through his life and death and usually ended with some reading of the "I have a dream" speech. While these specials did not necessarily make any negative statements and served to celebrate the life of King, there was no depth to these projects to tell audiences who he was behind the podium. Film is an art form that can give shape to characters and reimagine history in new ways, having an almost transportive quality. Yet, biopics about historical leaders can fall into the trap of regurgitating similar well known facts about historical figures without giving new insight into their motivations. In DuVernay's (2014) *Selma*, King is a central character, but *Selma* is not a biopic. *Selma* is an artistic look at the events that shaped the historic 1965 march to Selma, Alabama and an examination of King's character as



a leader and as a man. *Selma* addresses the question of who King was and what type of leadership allowed him to unite so many people under one cause. Through DuVernay's womanist lens, the events leading up to the march on Selma and signing of the Civil Rights Voting Act can be viewed in a powerful new light, and King is shown not as a sainted figure who was a central part of the Civil Rights Movement but as a servant-leader with human flaws.

When *Selma* (DuVernay, 2014) begins, the camera takes audiences inside King's home, giving us a more intimate portrait of him. You see him fretting about a tie that his wife, Coretta Scott King, has picked out for him. Quickly, the audience realizes that he is dressing for an important event and the conversation between husband and wife seems innocent but hints at issues within their family life. The dialogue about King's not wanting to seem like they are "living high on the hog," shows that he is very conscious about his image and how he wants to look as a minister and leader in the Black community. As the scene shifts to the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony for King, it is juxtaposed with the scene of the four little girls who are bombed in the church in Birmingham. This scene shows the girls giggling in the church which is filled with a golden light. The choice to have the girls discussing how to get Coretta's hair style both shows how enamored Black women at the time were with her and adds a more heartbreaking element to the scene. As the sudden explosion hits, DuVernay chooses to play with the depth of field blurring the images of the little girls, with only pieces of fabric from their dresses moving slowly in the air. Then, we see their legs in the air, and the camera closes in on their little black patent leather shoes and white socks. The image of these little girls all dressed up for church reminded me of summers spent in my grandmother's Black Baptist church in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. It was not as casual as



the Catholic masses we attended. You were expected to be well dressed and stylish every Sunday, and I had also owned a pair of little black patent leather shoes for going to church with my grandma. These added layers give a more human element that might not have been realized from either a White or male director

THE WOMANIST LENS

It seems clear that similar to Black female filmmakers like Kasi Lemmons who directed films such as *Eve's Bayou* (Lemmons, 1997) and *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019) that DuVernay's point of view may be influenced by a womanist perceptive (Barron, 2016, p. 208). The womanist term coined by writer and activist, Alice Walker, speaks more specifically to a branch of feminism for Black women or women of color. "A womanist, according to Walker, loves other women and prefers women's culture, a very antipatriarchal orientation. However, womanists also evince a commitment, 'to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female'" (Gilkes, 2009, p. 286). In essence, the initial scene also points to DuVernay's (2014) careful portrayal of both King and his wife Coretta.

DuVernay like Walker is passionate about issues that affect both women and the entire Black community. In the wake of George Floyd's death, a recent Harper's Bazaar's article (Gonzales, 2020), asks DuVernay and other cast members to reflect on the timing of *Selma's* release. The 2014 film debuted five months after a video surfaced, showing another Black man, Eric Garner, being choked as he pleaded, "I Can't Breathe." The entire *Selma* cast showed up to an event to promote a film about the Civil Rights Movement, wearing black t-shirts with the white letters spelling, "I Can't Breathe." David Oyelowo, who plays King, recounts the calls that came in from members of the Academy Award voting board:



Members of the Academy called in to the studio and our producers saying, “How dare they do that? Why are they stirring S-H-I-T?” and “We are not going to vote for that film because we do not think it is their place to be doing that.” (Gonzales, 2020)

This glimpse into the behind the scenes world of the film industry suggests that people of color in the industry are not imagining larger issues of systemic racism. DuVernay, who was the first Black woman to receive a Golden Globe nomination for Best Director, decided to use her platform for social activism despite the displeasure of some in the film industry with the power to vote. *Selma* went on to receive only one Oscar for Best Original Song for “Glory” written by Common and John Legend, but despite not winning an Oscar for Best Picture or being snubbed for the Oscar’s Best Director nomination, DuVernay’s unique voice in *Selma* speaks for itself.

In an interview with NPR, DuVernay discusses what makes her voice different from that of a male director, revealing her thoughts on the recreation of the 1963 Birmingham church bombing that killed four young Black girls:

I was much more interested in reverence for the girls. It was important to me that you hear their voices. You hear what their concerns are at that moment as four little Black girls walking down a staircase in what should be a safe place, in their sanctuary, in their church. They’re talking about Coretta Scott King’s hairstyle. They’re talking about what little Black girls talk about—getting your hair wet and keeping it pressed and doing all that kind of kind of thing. You start to come into their world just as they are taken out of the world. (Gross, 2015)



This interview also highlights the sanctity of the Black church as she points out the sanctuary that such buildings should represent. The repeated motif of the golden light that you see in the churches seemed to convey that feeling of sanctity and hope about the Black church (Barsam & Monahan, 2016, p. 15). DuVernay sets the stage for a very different kind of film about the Civil Rights Movement and King's life, showing her vision of the leadership that must take place in the short time in 1964 when King wins the Nobel Peace Prize and President Lyndon Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act in 1965. The obstacles that unfold tell us a great deal about the mammoth task that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) undertakes along with the volunteers to the cause, and it also sets the perfect stage to show a more up close view of King as a servant-leader.

DEFINING SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

In discussing King as a servant-leader, it's important to define, what servant-leadership entails and to look at the work of Robert Greenleaf, who first coined the phrase servant-leadership. In Greenleaf's (2002) book *Servant Leadership*, he discusses his source of inspiration behind the theory of servant-leadership:

The idea of the servant as leader came out of reading Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*. In this story we see a band of men on a mythical journey, probably also Hesse's own journey. The central figure of the story is Leo, who accompanies the party as the servant who does the menial chores, but who also sustains them with song. He is a person of extraordinary presence. All goes well until Leo disappears. (p. 21)

Greenleaf illustrates how the character Leo from Hesse's (1956) *Journey to the East* is seemingly a lowly servant, but somehow he is



also the force that ultimately gives the crew direction on their journey. Once Leo, who is actually head of the Order, is gone, the crew lose focus and everything unravels. As Greenleaf (2002) further describes what makes Leo a great leader, one can see that service is an essential element of servant-leadership:

But to me, this story clearly says that *the great leader is seen as servant first*, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness. Leo was actually the leader all of the time, but he was servant first because that was what he was, *deep down inside*. Leadership was bestowed upon a person who was by nature as servant. It was something given, or assumed, that could be taken away. His servant nature was the real man, not bestowed, not assumed, and not to be taken away. He was servant first. (pp. 21-22)

This idea of the servant as the leader resonates as you see the layers of King revealed in *Selma* as a minister who first is the servant to God, the servant to his followers, and the servant to the Black community in his capacity as the leader of the SCLC. Early in the film, we see King take the issue of voting rights for Blacks to President Johnson before he leaves for Selma. Johnson prior to King's arrival discusses with his advisor that he has other seemingly more important initiatives to pursue and seems frustrated that the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act six months prior was not enough to resolve racial conflicts or pacify King. King is direct about what is needed to assist Negroes in the south:

Well Mr. President, I'm here to speak with you about the denial of the basic American right for the Negro, the right to vote. Technically, I know we already have it. Yes, Mr. President, we both know in the South, Black voters are kept off the rolls and



out of the voting booth by systematic intimidation and fear. Now, you asked how you could help. We want federal legislation granting Negroes the right to vote unencumbered, and we want federal protocol eliminating the decades long dismissal and illegal denial of Blacks seeking the vote. And we want robust enforcement of that protocol. (DuVernay, 2014)

Despite President Johnson's praise of King as a statesmen and the one to lead the movement as the safe Negro, "not one of these militant Malcom X types," Johnson denies King's request saying that he needs to address, "the war on poverty." King persists in telling him that voting rights cannot wait due to the thousands of racially motivated murders in the South which include the four little girls in the church bombing:

And you know the astounding fact that not one of these criminals who murder us when and why they want has ever been convicted. Not one has been convicted because they are protected by White officials chosen by an all-White electorate. On the rare occasion that they face trial they are freed by an all-White jury. White because you can't serve on a jury unless you are registered to vote. (DuVernay, 2014)

When he leaves the president's office announcing, "Selma it is," it is clear King has made his best effort to articulate to Johnson the urgent need for Blacks to have voting rights in the U.S., and he is unwavering in decision to pursue justice for Blacks despite the danger that this puts him under. He must be a servant to the cause. The president alludes to the fact that King turned down offers to have a position in the White House which again emphasizes King's desire to be in the best position to serve, caring little for titles or honors.



While King's leadership aligns with the characteristics of servant-leadership, it is also arguable that he also shows characteristics of transformational leadership which shares commonalities with servant-leadership. Transformational leadership known for its four key behaviors, "idealized influence (or charismatic influence), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration" (Stone et al., 2004, p. 354), bears a strong resemblance to servant-leadership especially in its relationship to followers. Researchers have analyzed whether one is possibly a subset of the other. "Both transformational leadership and servant leadership emphasize the importance of appreciating and valuing people, listening, mentoring or teaching, and empowering followers. In fact, the theories are probably most similar in their emphasis upon individualized consideration and appreciation of followers" (Stone et al., 2004, p. 350). Seemingly, the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement are closely aligned to this symbiotic relationship between leader and follower which are attributed to both transformational and servant-leadership. The followers must trust the vision and foresight of King and other leaders in the SCLC, and similarly there must be a level of trust from leader to follower. Although King is driven by service to others, he exudes an extraordinary amount of charisma that appears transformative to the lives of his followers. As the character Annie Cooper is introduced as an older Black woman who is trying to register to vote, one can assume that she has been inspired by King's work with the SCLC. Through DuVernay's (2014) womanist lens, Cooper has real agency. She makes a point of showing the grace and dignity that Cooper possesses even in the face of the racist White man who asked her to recite the preamble to the constitution when she attempts to register to vote. After she recites the preamble to a man who obviously



doesn't think that a Black woman would possess such knowledge, she is also able to meet the challenge of telling him how many county judges there are in Alabama. She is then asked to name all 67 judges and denied the right to vote when she does not know them. As a big red DENIED stamp is marked on her form, Cooper still walks out with her head held high. This moment does not appear to deter Cooper from wanting to vote because the next time you see her on screen, she is sitting in the church along with many others who have come to hear King speak in all his golden light of glory. The speech ends with a call to action:

Those that have gone before us say no more. That means protest, that means march, that means disturb the peace, that means jail, that means risk, and that is hard. We will not wait any longer. Give us the vote. We are not asking. We are demanding. Give us the vote. (DuVernay, 2014)

As the camera pans across the room, a close up of Cooper reveals that she is chanting right along with the crowd, "Give us the vote." The camera also focuses on another character, Jimmie Lee Jackson, along with his mother and grandfather, who also are moved to join the protest. This scene illustrates the unique ability King has to get followers to answer the call to serve. This may be the distinction between the transformational leader and the servant-leader:

Nevertheless, transformational leadership and servant leadership do have points of variation. There is a much greater emphasis upon service to followers in the servant leadership paradigm. Furthermore, while both transformational leaders and servant leaders are influential, servant leaders gain influence in a nontraditional manner that derives from servanthood itself (Russel and Stone, 2002). In so doing, they



allow extraordinary freedom for followers to excise their own abilities. (Stone et al., 2004, p. 350)

The idea of servanthood drawing people in seems to explain part of King's magnetic appeal. It is not just about giving speeches like a politician. In the film, we see the depth of King's work behind the scenes, rolling up his sleeves to strategize and going out to protest hand-in-hand with his followers.

CHARISMATIC INFLUENCE AND PROPHETIC VOICE

Yet, King's charisma is also marked by the element of speaking in a way that is awe inspiring. Perhaps it is his educational background, his experience as a Baptist preacher, or his love of gospel music that gives him this unquantifiable element of leadership:

Jay Conger (1991) drafted probably the best explanation ever written about the inspirational leadership impact of the "I have a dream" speech and other rhetorical techniques that leaders use. The rhythm and harmony of a song, and not just the lyrics, can also generate a following. Usually it is the rhythm or the 'riff' that draws our attention to a song. It is only when we are following the sound of the music that we can then understand the lyrics. All too often these will have a powerful message, one that can generate sensemaking and commitment to a cause. However, it is the music that we follow. It is the music that is a form of leadership. (Jackson & Parry, 2011, p. 129)

This comparison of King's delivery of the "I have a dream speech" to music is fitting. If you watch any one of King's speeches, you can hear the beautiful cadence to his voice and see his dynamic ability to draw people in. He is perhaps an example of the prophetic voice that Greenleaf (2002) refers to:



The variable is not in the presence or absence or the relative quality and force of the prophetic voices. Prophets grow in stature as people respond to their message. If their early attempts are ignored or spurned, their talent may wither away. It is *seekers*, then, who make prophets, and the initiative of any one of us in searching for and responding to the voice of contemporary prophets may mark the turning point in their growth and service. (p. 22)

Greenleaf's reflections on prophetic voices refer back to this connected relationship with the seeker or follower which means that King's followers inspired by his voice are also the key to propelling him and his message forward. So how does one even begin to tackle the seemingly insurmountable task of emulating the prophetic voice of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.?

While *Selma* (DuVernay, 2014) has an ensemble cast of talented actors, the British Nigerian actor, David Oyelowo, is the one that must face the impossible task of playing King. Oyelowo is the glue the must hold the film together, and he manages to succeed where some have failed to tap into the rhythm and power of King's voice. It is almost eerie watching how much he achieves the feeling and sound of one of King's speeches. In a behind the scenes interview with *O, The Oprah Magazine*, the actor discusses the shooting of the epic speech scenes:

I knew I'd have to throw down an epic speech, which was terrifying because King was one of the greatest orators of all time. So before filming two speeches in a church in Atlanta—in front of 500 extras—all of us prayed together. And then an unforecast thunderstorm hit, and the lights went. Afterwards, the sky turned an incredible purple, and not one but two rainbows appeared. (Davis, 2015)



It seems that the actor needed to experience a spiritual and divine moment to help him channel King's voice. Additionally, DuVernay's (2014) choice to film in an actual church in Atlanta is an essential ingredient to recreating the feeling of attending a Southern Baptist church. While I have attended a few good sermons in Southern Baptist churches, I have never witnessed the kind of preaching that King or the actor David Oyelowo embodies in the film. I can only imagine what it must have been like to sit in those pews and listen to King's sermons during that oppressive time for Black folks in the United States and receive that uplifting call to action from King. It is also important to note that DuVernay did not own the intellectual property rights to King's speeches, which were licensed exclusively by King's estate to Stephen Spielberg. Therefore, she took on the daunting task of rewriting his speeches while also trying to maintain both the rhythm of King's delivery and the spirit of his intention (Suskind, 2015). The incredible and moving words that the actor speaks are also attributed to DuVernay's talent as a writer, who is not credited for any of her writing contributions to the script due to a prior contract with the original screen writer, Paul Webb.

After the stirring performance in the church scene, it is not surprising to see that Cooper and others like Jimmie Lee Jackson join the cause. First, you see that Jackson and his grandfather are calling to King after his speech, "Dr. King, Dr. King." King reaches out his hand in greeting as he continues to talk to a reporter. This scene shows King not only as a respected minister and activist but as a celebrity within the Black community. It shows again this charismatic element of idealized influence associated with transformational leadership. In the eyes of those Black folks watching in the church or on T.V., Dr. King and the SCLC are a part of a distinctive group to be admired. For Cooper and Jackson, it



seems logical that they feel a connection to King with him being a Black Christian man with a goals of equality; consequently, the speech spurs them on to join King's mission.

However, not everyone is thrilled to see King arrive in Selma. The leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), John Lewis and James Forman, who felt inspired and encouraged by King to form their group, are not happy to see King. The idea that Congressman John Lewis, who played a pivotal role in the Civils Rights Movement, was not onboard with the SCLC's plan to march on Selma, paints a different picture of the challenges that King faced as a leader. From the film, King appears to realize that it would be better to have the support and involvement of the local SNCC group. A key component of transformational leadership is "a transformation in the attitudes and motivations, and consequently behaviors, of followers" (Jackson & Parry, 2011, p. 31), but servant-leaders also find ways to communicate with empathy even when someone's ideas or actions might not be in line with the overall goal of the organization. "The servant always accepts and empathizes, never rejects. The servant as a leaders always empathizes, always accepts the person, but sometimes refuses to accept some of the person's effort or performance as good enough" (Greenleaf, 2002, pp. 33-34). In the scene where King and the SCLC face the two leaders of SNCC, King must find a way to reason with them. King takes a diplomatic approach, complimenting them first on their grassroots efforts to raise Black consciousness, and he explains how SCLC works:

But what we do is negotiate, demonstrate, resist, and a big part of that is raising White consciousness. In particular, the consciousness of whatever White man is sitting in the oval office. Right now, Johnson has other fish to fry. He'll ignore us



if he can. The only way to stop him doing that is being on the front page of the national press every morning and by being on the TV news every night. (DuVernay, 2014)

King's tactic seems to be working as you see the camera switch to a medium shot of the two young men. Lewis' demeanor is clearly different from Forman who continues to look and respond in an angry fashion. Perhaps they are pondering King's point that it is important to raise White consciousness in order for real change to occur. When King asks Lewis and Forman if Sheriff Jim Clark is like the sheriff in Albany, Laurie Pritchett, who arrested protestors in a humane way, or if he is more like Bull Connor in Birmingham, it is Lewis who answers Bull Connor to confirm that Jim Clark is as treacherous and as brutal as they had heard. This means that Selma is an ideal place to stage their protest and get the attention of the media. From this small gesture, Lewis appears to be looking at the larger goal of voting rights for Blacks rather than whose territory it is. Thus, King's diplomacy has worked with Lewis and both Lewis and Forman appear with other volunteers to march to the courthouse. King displays aspects of leadership that can be likened to both servant-leadership and transformational leadership because he uses his power of charismatic influence along with his empathy and desire to cultivate these future servant-leaders.

THE POWER OF IMAGES AND SONG

As the group of protesters march to the county courthouse, DuVernay gives audiences a great wide shot of the hundred or so Black men and women walking as a White woman standing in the street stares intently at them with disdain. King leads the group from the front with Andrew Young, Ralph David Abernathy, James Bevel, and with the leaders of SNCC, John Lewis and James Forman also



there at his side. We also see Cooper along with three generations of the Jackson family: Jimmy Lee, his mother, and grandfather. The big group walks on with the folky gospel song, “I got the New World in My View,” playing in the background. The gospel music positioned in this scene and other parts of the film seem to be a reminder of the resilience of Black people through difficult times. Similar to the Negro spirituals that soothed the souls of slaves in the field, helping them to keep thriving, the music is a reminder of this strength and also serves as their battle cry as they march to the front of the county voter registration office. As soon as the camera pans to show the formidable figure of Sheriff Jim Clark lined up with other menacing looking police officers holding billy clubs, there is a sense of foreboding that something will go wrong. King addresses Clark as a crowd of Whites shout out racial slurs. When Jackson’s elderly grandfather has trouble sitting and is struck by the sheriff, it’s not a complete shock. As Jackson goes to stand in front of the sheriff in a confrontational fashion, Cooper sacrifices herself for the young Black man. She hits Clark in the back of the head. Clark shouts out, “Get that nigg** woman” (DuVernay, 2014). Then, the scene erupts to violence, and when several policeman grab Cooper to hold her down, the action starts to move in slow motion. In this pause in motion, it is almost as if viewers are transported back in time to Selma and at the same time there is a moment that one can flash forward. You see rather than hear Cooper’s screams as she is slammed to the ground. This silent scream echoes loudly for those watching today. Perhaps, the images of the film blur with the current images of George Floyd on the ground as we hear the echoes of him pleading, “I can’t breathe.” There is power in this kind of moment that makes one pause to reflect on past and present events. This scene is juxtaposed with another startling scene of Governor George Wallace making a declaration about “not tolerating a



bunch of niggra agitators” (DuVernay, 2014). Governor Wallace, known for his disturbing speech that declared, “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever,” adds another level of emotion to the film. This drama captured by cameras is part of King’s plan, and it reaches the front page newspaper in the hands of President Johnson. King and his followers stick to the battle plan to: negotiate, demonstrate, and resist.

Seemingly, Paulo Freire (2010), Brazilian writer, educator, and philosopher shared some of King’s ideals on action:

The revolutionary leader must realize that their own conviction of the necessity for struggle (an indispensable dimension of revolutionary wisdom) was not given to them by anyone else—if it is authentic. This conviction cannot be packaged and sold; it is reached, rather, by means of a totality of reflection and action. Only the leaders’ own involvement in reality; within an historical situation, led them to criticize this situation and to wish to change it. (p. 67)

Freire echoes the notions that in order to be authentic and respected as a leader there must be direct involvement in the actions of the cause, and this is something that DuVernay (2014) articulates through King’s character that despite the repeated reminders of “the closeness of death” that Coretta’s character mentions, King persists in his mission to serve a greater purpose. He is sitting in a jail cell like everyone else after the incident with Cooper.

SHADOW, LIGHT, AND VULNERABILITY

Despite King’s jokes with his inner circle of the SCLC about Selma, “It’s a good place to die” (DuVernay, 2014), he has moments of doubt and weariness. In jail, King is away from his external support system of family and friends and cannot call upon the



famous gospel singer Mahaila Jackson to sooth him with song. He like other servant-leaders may be motivated by his own search for healing:

Perhaps, as with the minister and the doctor, the servant-leader might also acknowledge that his or her own healing is the motivation. There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between the servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share. (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 50)

King appears to have a close bond with Abernathy whom he calls Ralphie. Abernathy must understand this servant-leader compact as both follower and friend to King. When King mentions to his friend Ralphie that he is tired, Ralphie reminds him, “Eyes on the prize, Martin.” During the jail scene, DuVernay (2014) allows King to reveal vulnerability in the dialogue between these friends. King goes on to ask Abernathy:

How does it help a Black man to sit at a lunch counter if he doesn’t own enough to buy the burger, or worse yet can’t even read the menu ‘cause there was no Negro school where he’s from? What is that? Is that equality? What about in our minds? Equality in the Black psyche? Look at these men beaten down for generations.

King is contemplating real problems within the Black community that involve layered complexity. In his work, Freire (2010) explains a similar observation about the state of oppression, “One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that the oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings’ consciousness” (p. 51). Freire’s statement along with King’s dialogue in the jail is sobering in that it points to



the enslavement of the mind that is so much harder to conquer especially as it gets passed down from generation to generation.

The fact that King is contemplating the plight of all Black people shows that he is not just interested in helping a select few from his own educated class of Black folks, and it also shows that he is a human being who experiences dark moments of doubt. His role in bringing about change for Blacks and people of color in the U.S. and inspiring change in other places in the world like South Africa, is evident to those who know history, but as King talks privately with Ralphie, we are reminded that he is also just a man. In Parker Palmer's (2000) *Let Your Life Speak*, he explores the notions of the shadow and light in all of us:

But before we come to the center, full of light, we must travel in the dark. Darkness is the whole of the story—every pilgrimage has passages of loveliness and joy—but it is the part of the story most often left untold. When we finally escape the darkness and stumble into the light, it is tempting not to tell others that our hope never flagged, to deny those long night we spent cowering in fear. (p. 18)

Leaders like King are not supposed to show the darkness that Palmer speaks of, but when you carry the heaviness similar to a commander in the armed forces of being responsible for decisions that affect people's lives, how can one not feel weary at certain junctures. In his most vulnerable moments, King is able to share his thoughts with his friends in the inner circle of SCLC who also ultimately take his lead. This also seems to be a mark of a great leader, having a willingness to be vulnerable and being able to ask for help when needed.



BALANCING LEADERSHIP AND LEGACY

When Jimmie Lee Jackson is killed by a state trooper after a peaceful protest, King must once again face the burden of what he is asking his followers to do. He cannot shirk his responsibility either as a spiritual leader or as the voice of the movement. DuVernay (2014) brings the camera into an intimate moment when King goes to console the Lee family as you would expect a minister to do. He tells his grandfather honestly that, “There are no words to soothe you, Mr. Lee. There are no words. I can tell you one thing for certain; God was the first to cry.” After this heartbreaking exchange with the grandfather, we learn that Jackson who had only been thirty-eight years old when he was killed, had also served in the Army. King has no time to grieve because he delivers a eulogy and another compelling call to action:

Who murdered Jimmy Lee Jackson? Every White law man who abuses the law to terrorize. Every White politician who feeds on prejudice and hatred. Every White preacher who preaches the bible and stays silent in front of his White congregation. (DuVernay, 2014)

King goes on to challenge that Negro men and women who stand by and do not get involved as they watch their brothers and sisters get brutalized are also responsible, but the speech ends with a defiant declaration:

We are going back to Washington. We going to demand to see the president, and I’m going to tell him that Jimmy was murdered by an administration that spends millions of dollars every day to sacrifice life in the name of liberty in Vietnam that lacks the moral will and the moral courage to defend the lives of its own people here in America. We will not let go, and if he



doesn't act, we will act. We will do it for all of our lost ones. All of those like Jimmy Lee Jackson gone too soon taken by hate. (DuVernay, 2014)

From this passionate speech, it's clear that King will not accept from President Johnson that he has other agendas to address.

When King goes in for a personal conversation with President Johnson, the camera closes in tight and switches back and forth from one medium close up of King with part of Johnson in the frame to a medium close up shot of Johnson in the frame, and then a medium shot (Barsam & Monahan, 2016, p. 237). The camera work shows both the close proximity that King has with the president and the intensity of the heated debate (DuVernay, 2014). When King divulges his plan to President Johnson that he plans to march from Selma to Montgomery, Johnson appears concerned about the protection of the marchers, but he will not yield about proposing new legislation to help Blacks vote unencumbered in the South. King tells the president, "We need your involvement, we deserve your involvement as citizens of this country. Citizens under attack" (DuVernay, 2014). Johnson responds by telling him, "You're an activist you got one issue, and I'm a politician I got a 101" (DuVernay, 2014). After a less than fruitful exchange with King, Johnson is shown asking to speak to J. Edgar Hoover, who has been bugging King and offering to, "dismantle the family" by using King's infidelity in marriage to their advantage. This is one of the scenes that may have caused debate with critics who thought that DuVernay made President Johnson more of a villain than he deserved. In a Time, magazine article, it is suggested that Johnson did not encourage the bugging of King's home and that this was already going on at the approval of Robert F. Kennedy (D'addario, 2015), and whether it was Lyndon B. Johnson or Robert Kennedy



that ordered the surveillance, the evidence seems to point to the fact that Hoover continued to bug King and his followers which DuVernay highlights by the FBI White type and reports that continuously appear on screen throughout the film.

After the murder of a White priest who has joined King's cause, King and President Johnson have another heated exchange by phone. Johnson is infuriated that a group has come into the White House to stage a sit-in. King sees that President Johnson is still not ready to put forth a bill to give Blacks the right to vote. He asks him to consider his legacy:

I'm a preacher from Atlanta, and you are the man who won the presidency of the world's most powerful nation by the greatest landslide in history four months ago, and you are also the man dismantling your legacy with each passing day. No one will remember the Civil Rights Act, but they will remember the standoff in Selma and that you never set foot in this state. They will remember you saying, wait, and I can't. (Duvernay, 2014)

These words must have haunted the president. Later in the film, Johnson does delay proposing a bill or getting involved in stopping the violence, but ultimately, he does not want to be remembered in the same context as George Wallace. These parallels show us more about King's leadership. Johnson by the nature of being a politician acts in a manner that is more about transactional leadership as he mentions to King "quid pro quo." The questions King poses to President Johnson mirror some of the questions many may be asking now of Mr. Trump:

"What kind of legacy will you leave behind?", "Will you be remembered as the president who do not speak out against racial injustice?" and, "With Trump one must ask, will you be



remembered as the president who instead of uniting the country during the time of a global pandemic and racial unrest, you continue to divide the country with actions such as using racial epithets like ‘Kung Fu Virus’ to describe a pandemic taking the lives of many in the United States and abroad?”

Actions can tell us whether our leaders are acting to serve themselves or to serve the greater needs of the country. From *Selma* (DuVernay, 2014), one can see that King was committed to the fight of equality, and he was unwavering in his service to the cause which helps to get the Voting Act of 1965 passed into law. King’s service came at a very high cost much like Medgar Evers or Malcom X, but in the eloquent words from *Selma* (DuVernay, 2014), “Our lives are not fully lived if we are not willing to die for those we love and what we believe.”

CONCLUSION

Whether you believe as actor Will Smith once said in a 2016 interview on the *Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon that, “Racism isn’t getting worse; it’s getting filmed,” or if you believe there has been a rise of overt acts of hate as a direct result of the current presidential administration, one can see the urgent need for more prophetic voices, more servant-leaders, like King to enact unity, change, and healing. It is also a reminder of the need for artists and filmmakers like DuVernay to paint historical moments in new ways. DuVernay’s (2014) *Selma* takes on the heavy burden of making a film about the Civil Rights Movement and about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As a Black director, DuVernay also is faced with the burden of not damaging the Black legacy, and DuVernay artfully managed that delicate balance to create an admirable portrait of King that shows his imperfect nature as man without dwelling on the rumored



infidelity in King's marriage. Instead, her lens seems to indicate a womanist perspective looking at things both as a woman and a person of color. The camera work, acting, editing, and writing gives voice to the victims of violence who suffered in the Civil Rights Movement and makes us pause to reflect on the current civil unrest still sweeping the country. Despite being an imperfect man, King comes to life in DuVernay's (2014) *Selma* as a servant-leader whose leadership and method of peaceful nonviolent protest transformed the freedoms for Blacks and people of color in the United States with the help of his SCLC members and volunteers from all races and walks of life. Recent events show us that his work is not yet done, and in the words of Dr. King (1961), "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

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