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Dreams of My Father

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s youngest child, Bernice King, talks to Essence about the challenges of coming of age in the shadow of her father's towering legacy

By Katti Gray

In her earliest dreams, the ghosts of Bernice Albertine King's dead kin are at first gliding slowly toward her. Then, ratcheting up to a chase, they try to mow her down. In waking life, King's father, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been gunned down in Memphis on April 4, 1968, when Bernice was just 5 years old. A year later her uncle mysteriously drowned in his Atlanta pool, two weeks after teaching her to swim. Then her grandmother was shot by an anti-Christian fanatic while playing the organ at Atlanta's famed Ebenezer Baptist Church. "The ambulance is driving off, and I am 11 years old," King recalls. "Then, when I'm 13, my first cousin Darlene dies while jogging. I was like, Is death after me?"

For a painful string of years, Bernice King endured the recurring nightmare, which she ultimately reasoned was the marker of her accumulated grief. She had been a famously, suddenly fatherless child, forever surrounded by people staking their claim to her slain, hugely public parent. "My attitude was, 'Why does everybody have to come to the crypt with us?' "says King. " 'Why do we have to share him? He is my dad.'"

By the time she was in her mid-twenties, struggling not to flunk out of Emory University Law School and wrestling with a soul-stirring call to the ministry she had first heard at age 17, King was contemplating suicide. A hair-trigger temper left her prone to cursing those around her. "I was angry at Black people for not carrying forth my father's work," she says, "and at White people because they took him. I was angry at my dad because he left me, angry at God because He could have done something, angry at my mother because she took on his work, and I was probably angry at myself too."

In the aftermath of tragedy and in the midst of her roiling emotions, King fought to fashion a self-identity. A full 20 years after her father had been assassinated, what ultimately steadied Bernice Albertine King was his cameo appearance, once again, in her dreams. "The first dream was in 1988. My dad was at a desk. He reached across and we were holding hands. I was touching his hand and talking about my fear of death," says King, now 45. "And nobody was chasing me anymore."

The next and final visitation from her father took place two years later, following her ordination to the ministry: "In the dream, Daddy was sitting in a chair," King remembers. "I was standing and facing him, and my sister Yolanda stood to his right. I

was pointing my finger at him and saying, 'You have not been in touch.' He looked at me, and he said, 'You will understand.'"

In time, King, now an author, lecturer, preacher and attorney (she earned that law degree from Emory and a master's of divinity too), did gain some clarity about herself and her martyred father. She learned that he was just a man, even while shouldering an extraordinary duty as teacher, preacher and world-altering activist. That she, of the four King children, is following in their father's pastoral footsteps is hardly what she expected. "My brother Dexter has said, 'It's just surprising to see her delivering a sermon to thousands. When we were kids you could hardly get her to talk. Now you can't get her to shut up,'" says King, laughing. "My ministry is a surprise for them, but when they think of my personal journey, they see it as a natural progression."

Elder King, as her cleric's title goes, is on the staff as an ordained minister at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia, near Atlanta. From that megachurch's pulpit, in appearances throughout this country and abroad, and from her position as founder and president of Be A King, LLG, also in Atlanta, King says she is riffing on her father's legacy. She is trying to build upon his rock and, in some aspects, also angling to measure up.

"People would touch me sometimes and say 'favor,'" King says. With this gesture, they hoped her presumed fortunes might rub off on them. "And I'd say, 'You just don't know.'"

Living the Dream

Far from the modest life her father chose by situating his young household in Atlanta's old working-class neighborhood of Vine City, Bernice King, a few years back, was carrying a note on an SUV and leasing a Mercedes convertible. Her credit cards were charged up to there, her phone got disconnected, and she couldn't afford the maintenance on the home she had purchased at age 28. "Going through what we do in our community, we get caught up in image--what you drive, how you dress, where you live," she reflects now. "The real issue is how responsible you are with what has been entrusted to you."

The sale of her father's papers in 2006 allowed her to pay off her house and assist people and charities in need, she says. (The King heirs had initially agreed to have the papers auctioned by Sotheby's, but a group of Atlantans struck a deal to buy the archive and place it at Morehouse College.) Getting out of debt has helped King better see that there isn't much distance between a chained body and a shackled mind. "My father was trying to elevate the way we saw ourselves in society," she says. "He dressed well, but he was not defined by that. He knew that we are not commodities, not second-class citizens. I'm trying to be the living epistle of my father. Look, I'm on a mission."

To that end, she endowed a scholarship in Coretta Scott King's name at Spelman College, where Bernice earned a bachelor's degree in psychology. She is also developing several film projects, including one set in 1963 during the Civil Rights Movement, and she is creating an awards show and initiatives related to health and education. "My mother was very passionate about education and health, even though illness really snuck up on her in the last year of her life," King says. "I don't want my mother to be lost in all this. A part of the great legacy of my father is that he had a spouse who bonded with his mission over a lifetime. She gave insight and direction at some very difficult times. My mother spoke out against the Vietnam War first. She was in the house when it was bombed. She was able to manage incredible things, calmly, under crisis."

Of that martyred father who appeared to her in dreams, Bernice King says she holds on to one actual memory. On returning from a road trip, Dr. King would immediately strike up his self-styled kissing game with Yolanda, Martin III, Dexter and Bernice. "This was his way of creating a lasting bond; he knew his time was nigh," she says. "He would say 'Where is Marty's lass? And where is Dexter's kiss?' My spot was on the forehead, so I would kiss him right there." Other recollections of her dad have been handed down. Her siblings tell her that he was fun-loving, a jokester who sent their mom into hissy fits whenever he hoisted and plopped the children atop the fridge and told them to jump into his arms.

Her father's singular greatness, the daughter says, was his faithfulness and obedience to divine edict. Putting aside personal desires and concerns, he submitted himself to what he believed was God's design for his life. His grand dream of a nonracialized society has unfolded in fits and starts. Record numbers of African-Americans have been elected to office, formed corporations and, by other means, begun swimming in the mainstream. Yet when Bernice King makes a \$1,500 purchase in a department store, a White clerk will still ask her, "What do you do?" implying that her earnings must be illicit. This happens in 2008.

"My ministry has helped me better understand the sacrifice my father had to make," King reflects. "And that becomes my healing balm. It moves him away from just being the daddy who left me." King pauses, then adds slowly, "There is this expectation: You all have got to carry on. I would not be able to get away with doing anything else. It's an Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph thing. It's my lineage, my family's calling."

Writer Katti Gray lives in Brooklyn.