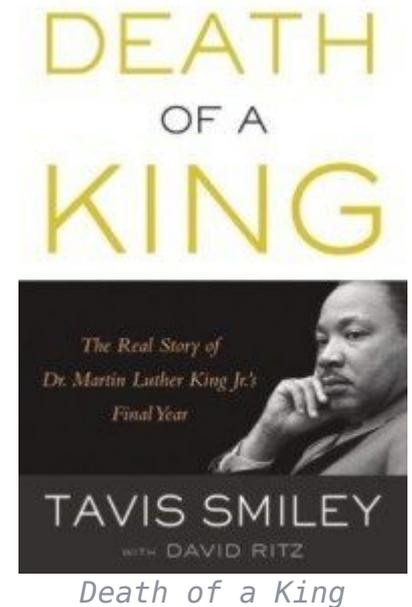


# You've Got to Encourage Yourself

Media personality Tavis Smiley reports that his avid interest and love for slain civil rights leader Martin



Luther King, Jr., stemmed from his own dark days, particularly after he landed in the hospital at 12-years-old, in traction, because of fractures he suffered at the hands of his father. Smiley's 2014 book, *Death of a King*, explores the last year of King's life, starting with his speech condemning the Vietnam War, and ending with his assassination one year to the day later. King's death meant his immediate goal to lead a massive march, and rally in Washington, D.C., to bring attention to poverty and income inequality that would lay unrealized.

**MESSAGE:** When I got to the end of the book, I thought that in the epilogue you were going to talk about what happened to the Poor People's Campaign, and pick up and say here's where it stands now.

**Smiley:** This is the first book that looks at just the last year of his life, and keeps in focus just that particular time frame. In our book, *The Rich and the Rest of Us* we try to lay out a portrait of what poverty looks like today. We also highlight a portrait of persons throughout the country who are doing what needs to be done to make the eradication of poverty a priority in this country. One of the things I've pushed for, and we are working very aggressively and quite assiduously, is using the hashtag #2016povertydebate. We've called upon the presidential debate commission to make sure that one of those final three debates focuses, for the first time ever, exclusively on the issue of poverty and income inequality. It's hard to imagine anything else that can advance this conversation like that kind of focused attention.

**MESSAGE:** Tell us a little about why you say that Martin Luther King, Jr., in this book is the Martin Luther King that you like best.

**Smiley:** The short answer is that the King that I love the best is the King who stood in his truth when everybody and everything turned against him. When things are going well, it's all good. But in the dark, difficult, and desolate days, those dreary days, when we fight those uphill battles, we get to know who we are as human beings, and Dr. King was no different. So if you

think you know Dr. King, but don't know him in the last year of his life, then you really don't know him. The last year turned out to be the most difficult, the most tragic, again, when everything and everybody turned on him, the media, the White House, White Americans, Black Americans, even inside of his own organization, the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Council]. And so the King who I love the most is not the King who won the Nobel Peace Prize, not the one in the Montgomery bus boycott, not the one in the "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington, but the King I love the most is the one who stood for truth and continued to confront America even when everything and everyone in America had turned against him.

**MESSAGE: King's serious introspection is underpinning the whole book. You've talked about how we have "deified him in his death," but that we "demonized him in his life." We've reduced King to simplistic quotes—I'm not sure what I'm asking—but it seems as though there is a spiritual implication to that somehow. It says a whole lot about who we are as Americans then, and now. Can you unpack that a little bit? It was compelling to see the groupthink, the lack of collective principle.**

**Smiley:** Let me respond to it this way: We live in a pick-and-choose society, as opposed to living in a society where people choose to live their lives by a certain set of uncompromising, immutable principles. People go through life picking and choosing what kind of morals they want to live by, picking and choosing when, and what values they do want to live by. Picking those things that they do and do not believe. It's not about living a life about uncompromising principles, its about doing what best suits the situation one finds himself or herself in.

**MESSAGE: Over and over throughout the book, throughout his life, there were times when Martin Luther King could preach himself out of the blues. How does that work?**

**Smiley:** We could do a whole seminar on that question.

**MESSAGE: I would like it if you would.**

**Smiley:** Let me offer the best answer I can. In the book there were times that King was so depressed, so despondent that all he could do was sing to himself, preach to himself, and pray through his own situation.

Sometimes in life you have to encourage yourself. Sometimes there's nothing anyone can say or anyone can do. While they can offer encouraging words and good advice, suggestions, sometimes you, and you alone, have to pray and pull and push, and sometimes sing your way through certain situations.

That's why for me, and Dr. King, there's nothing quite so powerful in the world as gospel music. There are times in our lives when there's nothing like a gospel refrain to pull you through something.

Two quick examples:

*I've seen the lighting flashing*

*I've heard the thunder roll*

*I felt sin's breakers dashing*

*Trying to conquer my soul*

*But I heard the voice of my Savior saying*

*Telling me to fight on*

*He promised never to leave me,*

*never to leave me alone*

*No, Never alone, no never alone he promised never to leave me alone*

***"Count Your Blessings"***

***"Count your blessings  
name them one by one  
count your many blessings  
and see what God has done  
I could do this all day."***

There are some moments that all it takes is for you to sing that song. Sing it over and over. Sing it over, whatever that favorite song of yours is, whatever is appropriate for the moment, and, the more you sing, it just lathers up.

It's just like getting in the shower. That soap and that water get together. The more you put that soap on that towel, that rag, that loofah sponge, whatever it is, the song comes into a lather, and you lather yourself up in a frenzy, and before you know it you start to feel that healing balm that comes over your spirit and over your soul.