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Luther Ivory, 2007

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Interview of Dr. Luther Ivory. Interviewed by Francesca Davis of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

This interview was conducted in 2007 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project.

Dr. Luther Ivory is a professor of Religious Studies at Rhodes College. Originally born and raised in Memphis, TN. Prof. Ivory was involved in gang activity as an adolescent but after witnessing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech in the mason temple, he later changed his way of thinking about the world. Before his experience with Dr. King he was involved in aggressive gang behavior ashamed of his intellectual urges, but after the experience he learned to embrace what knowledge could add to his life and obtained an initiative to pursue intellect.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

Francesca Davis: – and like to thank you for coming in to share your story with us and we're really excited about it.

Luther Ivory: You're quite welcome. Thanks for the invitation.

Francesca Davis: Okay, absolutely. So I'm just gonna go ahead and begin and if you could tell me what your name is and your current occupation.

Luther Ivory: My name is Luther Ivory and I'm currently employed at Rhodes College as a professor of religious studies.

Francesca Davis: Okay and where were you born and raised?

Luther Ivory: I was born in Memphis, Tennessee and raised in Memphis, Tennessee; born in '53, 1953.

Francesca Davis: Okay and can you tell me a little bit about your parents, what their names are or what.

Luther Ivory: Yes. I have a unique situation here. My mother's name is Dorothy Mae Hayes and then later she married a guy named William Ivory, so she becomes Dorothy Mae Hayes Ivory. My father is Joe Thompson, my biological father, and my mom split off – split up and so at that point, I was in foster homes from maybe from ages – maybe about two to about five.

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Luther Ivory: So I spent a lot of time in foster homes, so when my mom remarried, she married William Ivory and then he adopted me and we moved to – they moved to north Memphis in the Douglas area and began to raise hogs in this area, in an area between Douglas

and Crump. I'm not – you may be familiar with this area, prior to its being annexed into the city and once, of course, it became to be annexed into the city in the early '60s then we were – had to lose the hogs, butcher them off, and then they came into the city to be short order cooks and construction workers.

Francesca Davis: Okay, very interesting. Could you tell me a little bit about your brothers and sisters?

Luther Ivory: Yeah. I have 12 sisters and 8 brothers. I have – on the Thompson side, I have 4 brothers and one's dead, Charles, and I have 5 sisters there and then I have 8 sisters on my mom's side. One of those are dead and so – and 4 brothers.

[00:02:00]

Luther Ivory: So bouncing back in between the Thompson family and the Ivory family, it gets kind of unique for me. It gives me a perspective of where, why, kind of a country type of family, agrarian-based family raising hogs and soybean and okra and corn.

Francesca Davis: Okay and you said you grew up in the Douglas area. Could you tell me a little bit more about your neighborhood?

Luther Ivory: Yeah, the neighborhood, the Douglas neighborhood. Of course, I grew up in segregated Memphis and at this time, it was definitely segregated by race. Douglas was all black. It was all black but it was working class black people and we had one high school there and elementary. There was no junior high or no middle school. You just went from elementary to high school and Douglas now defunct but it's beginning to be rebuilt. It was – I would say the neighborhood was working class people, a few professional.

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Luther Ivory: The professional class maybe about 5 percent, the farmers maybe about 30, 40 percent and then everybody else would have been day laborers, maybe 40 percent day laborers, but I would say that the type of neighborhood I grew up in had two – it had two elements in it that made it, I think, distinct from the neighborhood today, Douglas today. One, it had – the school was the center of activity, the neighborhood school. When that got defunct, of course, that buffer dropped out. The second thing in this neighborhood was the church or the connection of churches in the area, so you were tied to the school and the church.

The same people, Mrs. **Rowe**, for instance, her husband was Rev. Rowe. He was the associate pastor at the church I attended. It was First Baptist Mount Olive on Mount Olive Street, so I saw Mrs. Rowe all during the week and when I came to church, I saw Mrs. Rowe again. She was my Sunday school teacher, so everything I did in school, my mom was able to find out.

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Luther Ivory: So it was very close knit in the sense that everybody watched out for everybody. I could do something on Sunset Street. By the time I got to Sidney Street, my mom would know about it and so everybody sort of watched out in a sense for everybody else's children. We had our – I think there were the negativities in any community. It wasn't pristine but the buffers were at least there. Home, school, church and community at least were there in a significant way that they're not there now.

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Francesca Davis: Okay, could you tell me a little bit more about your home life?

Luther Ivory: Yeah. Early part of my home life, I remember being bounced around in I would say foster homes, so it was colored by the tenor of the foster home that I was in. If the foster home was nice, then I had a nice time. If the foster home wasn't nice, then I didn't have a nice time, so that home life challenged me to try to have an inner equilibrium regardless of where I was.

[00:05:01]

Luther Ivory: When I finally got back with my mom, I was about five and my two sisters and I, we finally got back with my mom. We lived on Sidney Street, 1607 Sidney, right in the heart of Douglas and I would say it was a – we were poor. We were always trying to make ends meet. It was just very poor. We had to give up the hogs, so mom and dad trying to find work. My father, William Ivory, he was forced to quit school when he was in the third grade, so he working on these farms so he really was functioning illiterate for the most part.

My mom went to high school in Memphis but she went to high school in Memphis when black folks graduated at ninth grade, so black school didn't have the 12 grades, so my mom could read and write but once she came out, the opportunities for her as a black woman simply were not there, so I think my parents were

frustrated by this. I think that we had a lot of black angst in that house and they were frustrated.

[00:05:59]

Luther Ivory: Often time, it would take itself out in the family in ways that were counterproductive, but the productive ways that it would take itself out was that they were adamant about us reading, adamant about us getting an education, adamant about us going to church, adamant about us reading the Bible, so we got a chance to learn a lot about each other. I got a chance to virtually memorize chunks of the Bible and to be – have an emphasis about reading, reading, and going farther. It was instilled with us. Go farther than we did. You go farther. And for the most part, I think my childhood life other [than?] that was pretty much normal ~~for~~ [as?]-any other person's life. I think it was pretty happy. I don't look back at it with a sense of dread or anything like that.

Francesca Davis: So you would say that school and going to church were used as sort of outlets for you?

Luther Ivory: Yeah, they were until I got a little bit older, about 11 or 12, and then two other places began to become real important to me. One, the blues people.

[00:06:59]

Luther Ivory: The blues people were in what we called beer gardens or honky-tonks and I found myself kinda gravitating toward a honky-tonk. I thought they were a lot more – how could I say – real and genuine than the church people, the Sunday people, ~~and~~ ~~And~~ I liked the Sunday people but the Saturday night – Friday night, Saturday night people were more genuine and they taught me more stuff. They were more fun. I learned a lot of things from them.

And then another avenue was sort of what we would call gang banging. You know, I fell in with a gang, a group of guys, Bungalow Braves, and then I learned a lot from them although I also learned some bad habits, too, so – but was able to overcome those with a lot of help from people.

Francesca Davis: Okay. How long were you involved in the Bungalow Braves?

Luther Ivory: I was in the Bungalow Braves from about age 11 ~~½~~? until 15. I was about 15 ~~½~~? and when Martin King came to this city in '68

was, I would say, my awakening of consciousness, political consciousness, social consciousness, with regard to race, class.

[00:08:04]

Luther Ivory: I still didn't have the gender piece yet but I think I understood the connection a little bit better between race and class and opportunity, the difference between integration and – the difference between de jure and de facto segregation. I began to understand these things a lot better and I would credit King with being a lightning rod for that, although there were others who definitely helped me a lot. My high school teachers, three of them, are – without them, I probably wouldn't be here.

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Francesca Davis: Okay. You mentioned Dr. King. What does it mean for you when you said that you came to consciousness about more social and political issues?

Luther Ivory: I would say up until that time, my view of the church was I was immersed in the church but the church didn't provide me any analytical categories by which I could assess my own identity as a young black man or didn't provide me with any assessment tools by which I could analyze culture.

[00:09:05]

Luther Ivory: The church, matter of fact, as I grew up and experienced it set itself as a sort of a church against culture. There's us in here and we're striving to have a life that's pleasing to God. Then there's other folks out here and they drink and they smoke and they go to dances, etc. and we want you to come from out of there, come in here, and sorta live this life, which is what I think was programmed into me at this point in time and it seemed logical to me at that time, the over against – the sort of Christ against culture model.

But I would say that at that time what King did was King helped me to see that the notion of reality as dichotomous was probably a false choice, that in fact the reality is a seamless sort of like a floating river in which secular and sacred, that distinction, really doesn't mean very much or chairios and chronos, it really doesn't mean very much.

[00:10:05]

Luther Ivory: What means something is one's identity, one's stance, one's personal stance at any given moment and that's all mixed up together and you can tease it out for teaching purposes or analytical purposes but the way we live our lives, we live lives in a more complex fashion than that, much more complex, and much more mixed bag.

Francesca Davis: So did you actually hear Dr. King speak?

Luther Ivory: Mm-hm.

Francesca Davis: Could you talk a little bit more about that?

Luther Ivory: Yeah, I did. I was with the Bungalow Braves and, matter of fact, when Dr. King came to the city, you have to understand that there was a group of people in the city, both black and white, who didn't want Dr. King to come here, so there was antagonistic pressure against the King movement and resistance. My parents were one of the groups. I think they were fueled by two things.

[00:10:56]

Luther Ivory: One, their necessity to survive every day with a lot of children and shrinking opportunities and, two, what happened, their cache box inside their head was a sort of a conservative brand of religion which didn't neatly distinguish between earthly realities and heavenly realities when you put all in together. Their idea was that what Martin King and the movement should probably do is probably have a lot of active prayer, a lot of meditation. Ask God to change people's hearts and then kind of bifurcate religion from socio-politics.

I think they're different. I know my mom was different when she died in 2004. I think my dad's different now but then, since they were of this mindset, they forbade us to do anything with regard to the movement, so my brother, Pop, and I – the big dog as we call him – what we did with the rallies was we would sneak out of the back window and we would go to the rallies and if the rallies was at **Clayburn** Temple or was at Mason Temple or it was somewhere – at Centenary United Methodist Church, we'd sneak out and we'd go.

[00:12:03]

Luther Ivory: We'd hook rides with the Bobos across the street. Mr. Bobo was actually a sanitation worker so he was – and his family was heavily

involved and a couple more sanitation families on our street and we would go down there and get involved and when I got involved, I began to listen to the rhetoric and listen to the analysis and I began to see the distinction between one way of unreality and another way of unreality and the King way of unreality was socially active faith is how I call it and he believed that faith compelled – matter of fact, morally obligated a person to be involved in any injustice situation.

So based on that, I would say he was the first person to actually shake me out of a slumber to get me to see that my faith could be involved in changing situations from injustice to justice. I will credit him with that.

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Francesca Davis: Okay, so you talked about hearing him speak and everything. What were the feelings of the people around you?

[00:13:01]

Francesca Davis: What kind of more – what was the atmosphere like of being in a room with people who were just so quiet and listening to Dr. King? What did that feel like?

Luther Ivory: Yeah, I remember – I know a lot more about it now than I did then at 15, having reading different various accounts and researched myself, but I actually went down with the Bungalow Braves because we knew that the ladies would put their purse in the back of these – trunks of these cars and my name was Cool Hand Luke. I was good at certain things. I had certain skills and so those skills allowed us to get access to these cars' trunks and then we'd get the money. I'd leave the purse and go, you know, and do our business.

But while we were there, the torrential rains came in. It was raining so hard. I remember it was raining sideways and what we know now there was a tornado in West Memphis that was coming this way and it was raining to beat the band where it drove us into the north exit of the church at Mason Temple.

[00:13:56]

Luther Ivory: And while I was there I didn't know then but we now know that Martin had already called Coretta and said, "I'm not going. I'm tired. Nobody's gonna be there tonight. It's been raining, so I'm gonna let Ralph and Jesse and Hosea and Andy – let them all handle it." Well, everybody was speaking, but in these days – you

have to remember these days – women wore these high heels and they would stomp these high heels – thump, thump, thump. I remember the sound of high heels and just a lot of clapping. “We want Martin. We want Martin.”

And nobody could quiet that crowd. Nobody could quiet that crowd. Lot of good speeches but they wanted Martin. Finally, Martin King came in. It looked like it was an interminable amount of time but he came in from the left and I was struck with – and everybody erupted, man, just erupted. It was like a rock star, man. It was something. He came through and I was struck with two things. One, how diminutive in stature he was. He was not a tall man. He was short and kind of pudgy from these southern meals that they had been feeding him.

[00:14:59]

Luther Ivory:

And the second thing I was struck with was the breadth and depth of his intellect, his ability to – I would say to divide people’s emotional states and intellectual states with the power of the spoken word. I mean I think – I was looking at one of the top maybe three orators that the planet has produced. I think that now. I wasn’t then, ~~but~~ But with no notes at all, he launched into this diatribe about if he could talk to God and he could ask God – God asked him where would he want to live in any century in the planet where would he live and just diatribe, he came all the way down and said he would want to live in the 20th century to help these sanitation workers and that speech was about over an hour long but [what? Or all?] we get is the “I’ve been to the mountaintop.” We get that piece.

I may not get there with you but prior to that, there’s a litany of analysis that he gave that I think was brilliant, not only in terms of the depth of it but in terms of how he packaged [it?].

[00:16:00]

Luther Ivory:

I think we were seeing the best of the brilliance of the black pulpit, too, which its motto is “what you say is only as important as how you say it,” so we were able to see him weave in themes, rhythmic responses, pause, cause and effect, litany, these types of things – narrative – and he was able to do that in a crescendo in a way that not only made what he said important but how he said it was memorable.

I think that's why we still remember that as one of his three greatest speeches and I was struck with all of that. I actually didn't listen to the whole speech. I listened to about three-quarters of that speech and then Ghost, one of my friends, one of the Bungalow Braves, he pulled me aside and then we went on out and got in the back of a truck and drove back home with the Bobos and went on about our business.

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Francesca Davis: So as a 15-year-old, when you were in this room, you were struck by the words that Dr. King had to say and it stayed with you.

Luther Ivory: Yeah, yeah.

Francesca Davis: And it influenced how you studied, how you read and that sort of thing.

[00:16:59]

Luther Ivory: Yeah, it did. I was already reading. I was an avid reader, but being an avid reader and a man or a male in this culture at this time is not something you want people to know about. You don't want them to know you're reading James Baldwin or Richard Wright. It's not – you want them to know that you're down with the culture and you're out in the streets, that you can smoke a cigarette and can hold your own in a fight, these kinda things, or you can make yourself appealing to the girls, but reading, that's not something you wanted to do but what Dr. King did was he took me and he – in a sense like a telescope, he focused my reading more on social critique, cultural analysis and I wanted to find out everything I could about him, so I started reading about him, a lot about him.

Francesca Davis: Okay. I know you talk in your book about there's a great deal of confusion and maybe ambiguity surrounding the legacy of Dr. King. Could you tell me or talk a little bit more about what you feel to be the true legacy of Dr. King?

[00:17:56]

Luther Ivory: Yeah, I think the ambiguity has to do with the crisis of identity and it's a crisis of vocational identity with Dr. King and the heart of it – to just be brief about it – the heart of it is the connection between the reverend part of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the doctor part of Martin Luther King, Jr. and usually we know something about the doctor part, maybe the tip of the iceberg about the doctor part. We may know some of his speeches. We probably have named him as

a social activist, but even with the doctor part, there's a whole litany of the sources of his speech and social analysis, where he went to school, what's Bostonian personalism, what he learned from Edgar **Must**, how did he come to nonviolence.

That's a whole piece we still haven't got but we're even – have even a greater dearth in terms of our knowledge base about the reverend part of King and that is what motivated him from a spiritual standpoint, how – what was the spiritual basis of his social and political action. Why did he define himself as I'm just a Baptist preacher, a black Baptist preacher? What does he mean by that? What's the cold word of that?

[00:19:01]

Luther Ivory:

Once I believe we can link the reverend part and the doctor part and to show the role of faith in his life as an activist and then we can say more about what he means for us. ~~and~~ And I think what he means for us is basically he offered us a sort of a theological perspective of radical involvement. **Here** [check he? Or here?] is one of the first people, not the only one, to link the worship of God with the active life of the mind and service to a personal transformation and also the transformation of public institutions.

I think he did that in a way in America that no one ever did. He is, I think, probably the guru – for lack of a term on that. He's not the only one that does it, but he did it in a way that calls faith towards action and I think that that's what we need to learn from him. Not that we agree with everything he did, everything he said, but how his approach, his method, I think, is what we can learn from him.

Cut 5: 20:00:00

Francesca Davis:

Do you think people from my generation and younger have kind of gotten away from understanding what Dr. King meant by his words and the goals of integration or anything like that?

Luther Ivory:

I believe so. I believe the same could be said of any, I think, great public figure. I mean we could take Malcolm X and put him in there. We could take W.E.B. Du Bois and put him in there. We could take maybe Benjamin Hooks and put him in there and the challenge is – for us is for the generation that precedes the current generation you're talking about, Generation X as you've been called. It's a challenge for us to make sure that we have been

continuous in teaching you the breadth and depth of these people's legacy.

So the first thing we have to do is look at ourselves in the mirror and see what we have done, either positively or negatively, and I would argue that we have forced your generation to learn much about Martin King and others on your own.

[00:21:04]

Luther Ivory:

And as you might imagine, when young people learn about any issue on their own because they don't have the depth of experience – and you may be very smart and you are, may be wise in areas and you are, but the depth of experience that you cannot account for in a 20-something-year-old body as opposed to a 50- or 60-year-old body who's been living, you have truncated analyses and you'll get some things wrong.

So that means there has to be a conversation, a trans-generational conversation, about these figures and we have to introduce them to you again in a way that's fresh, that's alive and that's enthusiastic, and generate enthusiasm for it and then in conversation the mistakes we've made, then you'll probably be less likely to make those although you'll make your own – that's good – and then you'll learn more about the true legacy of Martin and Malcolm and others.

[00:22:03]

Luther Ivory:

And particularly I think what we've dropped the ball on with Martin is, is that we have allowed a generation to believe that Martin King did nothing and said nothing after '63. After the "I have a dream," speech which is what we sound bite you all to death on or we talk about the dream, which is glorious language and a great metaphor, and it has compelling power I think, proleptic power.

It can pull the present into the future in a way that's very deep if it's accompanied by some other things, but we haven't done much with '64, '65, '66, '67 and '68, those last five years of this brother's life where he said a lot and did a lot and met with some different directions and I think we need to recapture the zeal of that and the content of that together, both generations, and then I think we'll kinda be on track.

[00:22:55]

Francesca Davis: In thinking about the civil rights movement as a whole, do you feel like – in particular in Memphis, do you feel like people just don't know how important it is and what actually went on aside from like the big ticket items? Like people know Memphis for this is the place where Dr. King was assassinated but there were a lot of grassroots things happening along the way to lead to Dr. King actually coming to Memphis. Do you feel as if we have a gap in there for those years as well?

Luther Ivory: Yeah, I think so. I think that's very well put, too, and a very profound statement. The distinction I would like to make here using your words is the difference between coming to a place as a tourist and coming to a place as a pilgrim and I think with Dr. King the reason we're in the state that we're in, why we don't know who AFSCME is or who the Invaders are or what happened with the local grassroots people trying to do stuff long before King came at Centenary United Methodist Church, who all the other people are here, is because we come to – most of us come to the project as tourists.

[00:24:03]

Luther Ivory: We take the pictures. We say we were there. We read King. We went to this National Civil Rights Museum where we read the "I have a dream" speech and then we go home, put the stuff in our photo albums, put it down. Maybe two years from now, we take it up and go, "Yeah, I was there. I was there." It looked good but there's a difference in coming to a project as a pilgrim where as a pilgrim you are interested in learning the language.

You're interested in finding out what the smells are all about, what the sights and sounds are all about. You're interested in knowing the history, the transformative history. You're interested in knowing who's who in the zoo. You're interested in knowing what the mission is, what the basic vision of people are, what they fought against, what were the issue and what was the resistance factors and then you're interested in left – a pilgrim is interested in the unfinished agenda. When you start talking about the unfinished agenda – I hear that language – I know I'm dealing with a person that's a pilgrim and not a tourist.

[00:24:58]

Luther Ivory: But, again, until we can find some common ground where we're invigorated enough to motivate it – find a language or find a tool to

motivate people to say, “Here is why you should come as a pilgrim rather than a tourist. Here is how your life will be infinitely deeper and more profound and more genuine,” until we can put it on that level for people, something like rational self interest, I think, will be hard put to move most of the people from the tourist camp into the pilgrim camp, although to use King’s own words, there will always be a prophetic minority who will always take the pilgrim path but they’ll be burdened and beat up on a lot.

Cut 6: 25:38:00

Francesca Davis: Wow. That’s quite profound. You mentioned AFSCME and the Invaders and that’s something that I’m not really familiar with as being in Memphis. Like I’ve done research about it but there’s just something that we’re not taught in schools in our history classes, especially here in Memphis. Could you talk a little bit more about AFSCME and the Invaders and what they meant for the city?

[00:26:00]

Luther Ivory: Yeah. AFSCME, the Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, were trying to – actually what this was about when King came was sanitation workers trying to get a union because sanitation workers were the hardest of the hardest working here in Memphis. There were a lot of hard-working people in Memphis. They were the hardest of the hardest working. They were the poorest people. Their children had on the most tattered clothes. They were the poorest of the poor. We were poor but they were poorer than we were and which they were working for starvation wages, almost nothing.

When you said “garbage man” in Memphis, there was an image that came in your mind. You knew there was gonna be smell. They’re gonna smell bad. They were gonna be dealing in garbage all day, bad smelling. They were gonna be illiterate, uneducated, and they were not gonna count and they most likely were gonna be black although there were some whites and browns in there as well.

[00:26:56]

Luther Ivory: But AFSCME was the union that was seeking to have this recognition under the Mayor Loeb years and why it was important for Martin King to lend national support to dramatize it. When King came, the union was trying to get its recognition but it was just totally ignored by Henry Loeb, the mayor, and the city council and they never – many of them never understood, that they thought

they had a labor problem and they did, but they never understood that in addition to labor problem they had a race problem, too.

What AFSCME and the leaders here were able to do were they were able to – T. O. Jones and others were able to link gender with race and they were intertwined, so who was the most visible symbol that would dramatize this. It'll be Martin King. Well, Martin King had friends in Memphis and they called him and he came in to help dramatize the plight to get a union so that they could get wages.

[00:27:57]

| Luther Ivory:

And it turned out to [\[be?\]](#) not only a question of wages but it turned into a question of ontology and that sign, "I am a man," is all about identity. It's all about being recognized as a human being who undergoes the human condition, who also makes a contribution, purposive human contribution to the human experience, and Martin King was able to help that. The Invaders came along. They were a younger generation. They were a gang like the Bungalow Braves. The difference between the Invaders and the Bungalow Braves was the Invaders had a lot more educated young black males in it.

First, there's Coby Smith, who's a graduate of Rhodes, the black **mayor**. He was a member of the Invaders, very articulate, very smart, and he was able to force the powers that be, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, AFSCME, and others like SNCCs, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, **remember** those pieces in there. He was able to force all these organizations to come to terms with what it meant to be in Memphis, that Memphians had to set the tenor of the time.

[00:29:04]

Luther Ivory:

They had to set the agenda and everybody else could lend support. There's – if you look at "At the River I Stand," then you'll see a clip of Coby Smith in there but the Invaders were able to force King and others to the table and say, "We need to have a part in it. Now you may not like our emphasis on – what they would call a certain type of violence, not retaliatory violence but defensive violence. You might not like that but we're trying to get justice like you are. Is there a role for us?"

And they were able to forge a role for younger black people, younger black educated people, to be involved in there in a way we

weren't able to do, but they should be recognized for their contribution to the movement in this regard.

Cut 7: 29:47:00

Francesca Davis: Absolutely. You mentioned that Colby Smith asked the question, "What does it mean for us to be in Memphis? What does it mean to be a Memphian?" What does that mean for you, especially since now you're able to look back on the events that you witnessed?

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[00:30:03]

Francesca Davis: You were here with Martin King was assassinated. What does it mean for you to be a Memphian?

Luther Ivory: Well, for me it means I live in a city that has a history of having great promise and potential but is always on the cusp of trying to decide whether it's gonna choose greater – lesser goods when the greater goods present themselves. I live in a city that has a history. At one point in time – the great W.E.B. Du Bois writes about this – in the early 1900s, Memphis was poised to be a greater city than Atlanta but because of stone age thinking, Atlanta eclipsed Memphis and became a more cosmopolitan city while Memphis began to be stuck in the quagmire of old city politics or old racial politics.

[00:31:00]

Luther Ivory: And 'til this day, Memphis has great potential and in some pockets and some areas, I see some great things happening in Memphis and I'm glad I see that. I'm glad I get to see that before I sleep with my ancestors. I've been waiting for when we could all come together, find common ground across racial lines, gender lines, class lines, educational lines, religious lines, to be able to come together and see the good of a city – the city, the polis, what it means to be a good citizen of Memphis, regardless of if you're green with white stripes or blue with red polka dots.

I've been troubled by the fact that Memphis as a city has more often than not chosen lesser goods where greater goods presented itself but I'm heartened by the fact that particularly after the King intrusion into the city and beyond the election of a black mayor, the election of more African Americans on the city council now that are in dialogue with whites, with the rise of the National Civil Rights Museum, with the rise of more businesses, with the

internationalization of the airport, etc. etc., I've been heartened by things of this nature.

[00:32:12]

Luther Ivory: But I'm still grieved in the spirit – in my spirit about certain aspects of Memphis life. I think de jure, we're doing better. We're doing better as most all cities in American are, but de facto, we still live in highly segregated worlds. Black Memphians and white Memphians for the most part live in highly segregated worlds on a daily basis. That has to grieve anybody in their spirit, I think, who's interested in justice.

The second thing that I'm grieved about in Memphis is the lack of educational equity for people of opportunity. There are a vast amount of people who are labeled by sociologists as the underclass who when you look at it, will never get out of a quagmire they themselves did not create.

[00:33:00]

Luther Ivory: And maybe they're contributing in some ways but I would argue apples don't fall far from trees. We have a tremendous political, educational, social, economic opportunity and I think obligation to help people live the most fully empowered lives that they can, so when I look at the Memphis city schools, it's even more segregated now than – or as segregated now as when I came in in 1971. What is this about? It's 36 years later and the Memphis city schools are predominantly black and the county schools are predominantly white. What is this about?

The educational levels of students graduated from schools has to be a concern although there are pockets that we can celebrate and there are emphases we can celebrate but one's heart has to be grieved when one hears businesses saying, "Well, I would go to Memphis but I'm concerned about the educational base for my business where I can staff my business with people who can learn sophisticated technology."

[00:34:05]

Luther Ivory: I mean that has to be hurt, I mean that's like a spear and Memphians don't live together except across racial lines and across church lines predominantly unless we're in a workspace. I think we're doing better in the workspace in Memphis, although there are levels of analysis that need to be given to that, but I think

Memphians across racial lines of any type will probably dialogue more at the water fountain at the job than they will perhaps maybe at the local barber shop or at the local schools because of that segregated piece. It's still running.

Our cemeteries are becoming a little bit better but they're still by and large segregated, our barber shops, our beauty salons, where we buy our gas, although we're all paying much higher for gas but we're paying higher for gas in communities that are de facto segregated.

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[00:35:02]

Luther Ivory:

And that lends itself to educational opportunity, how the money in the city budget is sliced. Who are the primary movers and shakers economically? Where do we get those and the business that leads –? For instance, I'd to pose a question at this point. Could you imagine that the next president of the United States will emerge from a Memphis city school? I mean we have to assess that our next senator – I mean these things concern me.

That is in Memphis proper we know we'll get a mayor from Memphis city schools probably, maybe come from the county – I'm not sure – and city council, but beyond that into the national scope and the international arena, which is where King took us. His vision was an internationalist vision. It was metaphysical and moral but it was internationalist in scope, too.

[00:35:55]

Luther Ivory:

So where I see we're paused on the brink that good things happen – and I don't want to diminish those – but I'm still troubled by the fact that there are – we celebrate those too far and too far between. That's something that something has to happen to galvanize us towards becoming the international city I think that King and the movement – other than the movement hadn't really envisioned and so for a Memphian, it means that.

It also means the lands of blues and barbecue. It also means lands of where the great dances occur, where the great blues singers are, the land of historic Beale Street, the land of the buckle on the Bible belt where I learned the great stories of the Bible. It's a land in where I fished for tadpoles in the Wolf River before the suck holes got us, where my folks were cotton pickers and hog growers, and so I'm attached to the land in a way that just about every really just

narrative will tell you that when you're attached to the land, you have true identity and soul. It's something in the soul.

[00:36:59]

Luther Ivory: I'm southern born and southern bred and when I die, I'll be southern dead as I always like to say and it will be right here in Memphis, so all the rhythm of Memphis, all the things that Du Bois saw, all the things that King saw and others – my grandmamma Flora saw. There's a greatness in Memphis and I'm ready for us to do it and I'm pleased with some things I've seen in Memphis and now I'm ready for us to get on to the next internationalist level that I think Martin King really was trying to push us towards.

Francesca Davis: In what ways do you think that we can galvanize groups of people to actually step it up to make it – have our society and our city move to the next level?

Luther Ivory: I think first we're gonna have to – may have to make a commitment to justice and a commitment to justice in several areas. One, a commitment to economic justice and that is that every citizen of Memphis – that it would be a crime in Memphis in which all of us who hold power, wield power in some way, will be held accountable if every Memphian did not have access to basic subsistence necessities.

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Luther Ivory: That that would be criminal and that somebody would go to jail if you're in Memphis and you're living life as a Memphian and you don't have basic subsistence necessities – point blank. Parenthetically, I'm probably not gonna have a lot of people agree with this but I'm gonna say it anyway – my analysis.

Secondly, a commitment to educational parity and equity, that is large sums of money and resources are pumped into teacher preparation, maintenance of teachers. They should be the highest – some of the highest paid workers in this city. Until that happens, we're just playing. And then that money has to filter down so the resources of the schools will get it across the board. I don't care what kinda school you are.

[00:38:55]

Luther Ivory: If your name is Podunk Memphis School or if your name is Harvard Memphis School, if you're a Memphian that [\[check – that or then?\]](#) you are owed an excellent education and you are taught by teachers who don't have to moonlight, who don't have to worry about what they're gonna do for the next three months of the year when they're –during the summertime, that they can devote full time to preparing themselves to be the best in the classroom that they can be and to be rewarded for that and recognized for that. Those two things have to happen.

Secondly, a more progressive political elite. The politics of Memphis, I think, lack progressivism at the level that will lead us to the internationalist vision that we really need, so I'm not talking about party politics. When I talk about political vision, I'm talking about vision in the sense that Aristotle maybe talked about politics, in the sense that this is how we get together to make decisions, to organize our life together as a city and that has to be progressivist on the economic front, progressivist on the social front, progressivist particularly on the educational front and then an elimination.

[00:40:00]

Luther Ivory: The fourth thing has to be an elimination to public health menaces like AIDS, malaria, West Nile virus, gonorrhea, syphilis. These things affect infant morbidity and they affect infant mortality and diet. They affect diet and diet has a lot to do with the health of an individual who's a Memphian growing up trying to achieve citizenship status, so there has to be a massive effort for inoculations, immunizations at the base level so that people can get adequate healthcare so that they can try to be the best they can.

Now having said that, we still need prophets among us who challenge us when our comfort zones are too wide to narrow them. We need people who can embrace a prophetic vision of saying, "Well, black people live here and white people live here and blue people live there."

[00:40:59]

Luther Ivory: "Okay, the 150 of us are gonna get together and we're gonna volunteer to live in a community where we're gonna purposely be religiously diverse, politically diverse, racially diverse, educationally diverse and just do it and start affecting the housing markets and start affecting the religious market. We're gonna have more people willing to do this and more pockets of Memphis make

the commitment to do that so that the rest of us will have a model to follow. That's King's prophetic minority. Without that, it's not gonna happen.

Having said that, I realize that this is a hard burden on people to have to do that, but we still need prophets among us to lead us to that vision, speak the prophetic language, prophetic utterance, and then model that in some ways to help us see that it can be done and once people start doing it then it'll become more natural and normal to people and perhaps my grandson, who's four, it'll be more normal to him to fuss and fight when it's not happened than it is for me to – people of my generation to fuss and fight when it does happen.

[00:42:05]

Luther Ivory: I think that's what we're gonna need and my hope really is that with the generation like yours – you all are the arbiters, I think, of the new dialogue of the new community. My age, we are wisdom carriers to be sure, but most of us are – I think are tired or convinced ourselves we're tired and most of us are out of the fight in a way that we could be on a more progressive basis, but yet there are many of us who are still trying to do it.

And my hope really right now is in the things that people are doing at my age and beyond, but particularly people in your age, the teens and 20s, the hope that I see in you all and I think that is the great hope right now is that that fervor translates into your generation and you morally compel us and lead us into something different than what we could even envision for ourselves. I think that's the great hope for me.

Cut 10: 43:01:00

[00:43:01]

Francesca Davis: Well, we definitely stand on incredible shoulders and we have great shoes to fill. In wrapping up, in thinking about Dr. King and Memphis in the civil rights movement, what does the Memphis past and King's past mean to you as a African American, as a man? What does that mean to you?

Luther Ivory: I think it's significant. Dr. King came here as a black man against tremendous odds. This is a guy who was born in '29 at the height of America's economic – worst economic crisis in American history, even worse than so-called black Monday, which I called red Monday in the '70s, that he grew up during that generation,

went through World War II, or lived through World War II and the Korean War and Philippine War and Vietnam and now Iraq. We're in it right now but King lived through Vietnam and here's a man that went all around the globe, amassed all these traveling miles.

[00:44:00]

Luther Ivory:

I think the most effective public voice for justice change that we produced in America, although we produced a lot of them, and Memphis was the place where he graduated to sleep with his ancestors. To me, that's significant and that he, in fact, came to Memphis and Memphis was the lightning rod of the place where the movement in terms of King's contribution to it ground to a halt. I think that's significant.

Now what I think about that is that – I make this – that if we view King's legacy in a dialectical sense, that is we look back [\[at?\]](#) it as a past to learn the lessons in order to critique the present to determine our vision for the future, we must ask ourselves what can we learn and what we can learn this is we can learn that there are many Martin Luther King, Juniors out there who are already living now and that they're giving birth on a local level, not as global as King but on a local level.

[00:45:01]

Luther Ivory:

And some of these Martin Luther King, Jr.s, are women. Some of them are black, white, blue, green, red, yellow, that he himself birthed, I think. It was important to know that he didn't die – his spirit didn't die when his body died, that he produced seeds in embryonic fashion that are bearing fruit, because once you release into the universe a person of the power and passion and persuasion of a King then there is no way you can go back to things the way they once were 'cause you have to learn. You have to be willing to be focused and learning from the pattern of the man, so what he has given us then is seeds once planted.

Secondly, he's given us a blueprint – not the blueprint – for getting from the situations where we don't want things to be situations where we do want them.

[00:45:56]

Luther Ivory:

Now we've got a person we can look at even in all his foibles, in his humanity, and we can recognize that ordinary people like King

being called to extraordinary tasks and can do it with a lot of other extraordinary people around them and we can realize also that King – that the business of justice is too big business for one person. It's not a Lone Ranger kind of a project. You need companions for the journey and he himself had them and that now we look in a cold moment nationally.

We look for local figures and they're all out there. They're welfare mothers working for welfare rights. There are people who are working – Mothers Against Drunk Driving. There are people against crime. There are people who are working for the rights of children, Marian Wright Edelman and others. We have a lot of these people now. Now we have to try to get this in a concerted voice. The biggest thing I think we get – I get as a Memphian is that to remember how bad things were will never lead you beyond where you want to go.

[00:46:56]

Luther Ivory:

But once you can have – once you can remember how bad things were and tie that to hope that things can be different, that's when the change comes because once people have hope then you better move outta their way or they'll move over you. Hope is what fuels revolution, not an analysis of how bad things are, although that's necessary in order to get beyond that, but what really fuels a revolutionary spirit and what usually fuels transformative behavior is the notion that things can be different and better than what they are now. I think that's the great legacy and this is what Memphis, I think, has to offer people, that Memphis is different from what it was when King came.

Is Memphis perfect? By no means. Does Memphis have feet of clay? Yes. Are there still **hurdles** to be climbed? You bet your sweet bippy **they [there?]** are, but there is enough seeds of justice in people and the heirs and legacy of the movement and enough models out there and enough activism going on out there 'til we have models and we have mentors and we have motivators to help us get to the next level.

[00:48:08]

Luther Ivory:

I think Memphis can offer that in addition to its great cultural life, its musical life. It can also offer this as the place where people struggle to be heard, to have their identity taken seriously and, boom, we can learn from that lesson and that's gonna be global. That is – you can go to China. You can go to [KosovioKosovo](#).

You can go to Iraq or Iran or Chile and people are struggling to have their identities and their humanity to be taken seriously and that's all that movement is saying to us and distill down in the beaker. I think that's what Memphis can give people if it has a heart and if it has the will to do it.

Francesca Davis: Wow. Well, in closing, it really has been my great privilege and honor to be able to interview you today. You are definitely a pilgrim of Dr. King and what he spoke of and it's been my honor.

[00:49:00]

Luther Ivory: Thank you. It's been a pleasure for me to be here. You're a great Francesca Davis and I appreciate the questions.

Francesca Davis: Thank you. You're welcome.

Luther Ivory: Thank you.

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