

# Leadership and the Crisis of the Soul

Let me cite an example. Ten days before Martin Luther King was killed, you, as a good friend of his, addressed a convention of the Rabbinical Assembly. And you said, "Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America." And yet ten days later he was dead in the most cruel and purposeless fashion. It's that sort of question that challenges faith. How do you explain that?

[Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, Abraham Joshua Heschel](#)

Are we Afraid  
To Have Our  
Faith (Beliefs /  
Ideas) Challenged?

What  
does it  
say  
if  
we  
are?

Questions reflect or create doubt, they frighten us, and that fear leads us to seek the safety of denial rather than the enlightenment of truth. Rather than fear plumbing these depths, the emotional honesty, the spiritual mystery, the tension and stress of uncertainty, instead of being afraid when we experience this loss of control, we should embrace the turmoil created by these questions as the inevitable and necessary crises without which we cannot fully live and discover, because these questions leading to crisis navigated wisely are how we find our way out of lostness into the light.

Are we  
Fully  
Alive?

not w/out  
Discovery

Denial fear the tension and stress caused  
by Questions → they pave the road to innovation

Abraham Joshua Heschel was asked a question in the opening quote from an interview concerning the death of Martin Luther King Jr. and the justice of God. The questioner sought to understand why God would allow someone Heschel had called a sign of hope from God to die in "the most cruel and purposeless fashion." The questioner described his inquiry as one which "challenges faith."

Heschel, one of the most influential and inspiring spiritual minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Jewish theologian and philosopher, responded to the question with honesty.

If we understand the Bible properly, and very few people these days study the Bible properly—we itemize the Bible and tear it to pieces instead of immersing ourselves in the thoughts of the Bible—we discover that God shares life with man and He has given man freedom. A very questionable gift, and the most outstanding gift man has. Man can do anything. When the first son of the first

Immersive  
experience

couple decided to murder his brother, he did what he pleased. And God did not interfere.

Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, Abraham Joshua Heschel

The honesty of Heschel's answer would lead the questioner to ask more questions, which is what happens when we are entering or already in the midst of a crisis, what David the King of Israel (1010-970 BCE) called a crisis of the soul.

I am radiant with joy because of your mercy, for you have listened to my troubles and have seen the crisis in my soul.

Psalm 31:7 TLB

For the last few months, I have been asking questions, and without intention entered my own personal crisis of the soul. Perhaps it is circumstance, the Coronavirus pandemic, the way it has disrupted life. More likely it is time, age, the opportunity with measured gaze to examine my life, catalogue failures and feel the pain of losses, then with steps made timid by this record of suffering to stride forward still hopeful toward those elusive dreams I consider destiny, the life seen but not yet realized. ↳ Vision

Questions  
Can  
lead to  
GRIEVE

Perhaps you find yourself at a similar crossroads, where you are asking questions which bring the past into conflict with the present. In these moments we find ourselves struggling to break free of yesterday's entanglements, locked up by grief, overwhelmed by internal conflicts, indecisive and hesitant, feeling inadequate, and as a consequence of our imprisonment incapable of seeing let alone pursuing the future because even if it were possible we believe ourselves unworthy.

Path to Vision

↳ why we don't take the visionary path!

Few can come to our assistance as well as Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK, Dr. King), when it comes to answering questions, navigating these crises of the soul. This is why I have chosen his leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) during the Montgomery Bus

Boycott for us to study, understand, and reflect on his transformative moment, when he embraced his crisis of the soul and became the man destiny intended him to be.

Choice, Decision

### The Lonely Paths of This Life

The obscene and threatening phone calls continued apace, and they took their toll. "I felt myself faltering and growing in fear," King recalled later. Finally, on Friday night, January 27, the evening after his brief sojourn at the Montgomery jail, King's crisis of confidence peaked. He returned home late after an MIA meeting. Coretta was asleep, and he was about to retire when the phone rang and yet another caller warned him that if he was going to leave Montgomery alive, he had better do so soon. King hung up and went to bed, but found himself unable to sleep. Restless and fearful, he went to the kitchen, made some coffee, and sat down at the table.

[Bearing The Cross by David J. Garrow](#)

The first time I heard Martin Luther King Jr. recall this death threat experience was during college. One of my rituals was to study in the music section of the library. They provided headphones, which when plugged into the desk console allowed me to experience the serenity of musical solitude most receive from Spotify and a smartphone today. There was an additional benefit. On my study breaks I could listen to the complete collection of Martin Luther King speeches.

Dr. King is best known as the leader of the Civil Rights movement which changed America and the world. We know about the speeches and marches, the legal and political victories, but few of us know about the struggle. His soaring oratory, intellectual depth, political mastery, strategic execution, and visionary leadership make it easy to overlook the spirituality which put his prodigious talents to work not only for rights of Black Americans, but on behalf of the downtrodden poor and economically disenfranchised as well.

6 Key Leadership Qualities  
↓  
to Change The World



We can't grow without struggle

The spirituality of Martin Luther King Jr. has little to do with his religious background, because being religious, where we adhere to the rituals and traditions of a particular religion does not necessarily endow us with spiritual awareness or strength.

Spiritual awareness and strength grow out of struggle, those moments of crisis where we feel the conflict in our soul, when like Dr. King we feel ourselves “faltering and growing in fear” as our once certain confidence evaporates, leaving us without answers, only questions. This moment arrived for Martin Luther King Jr. on the evening when he received that ‘obscure and threatening phone call’ that would test his commitment to the cause.

Questions and Tests  
Are Struggle!

“I started thinking about many things,” he recalled eleven years later. He thought about the difficulties the MIA was facing, and the many threats he was receiving. “I was ready to give up,” he said later. “With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward,” to surrender the leadership to someone else.

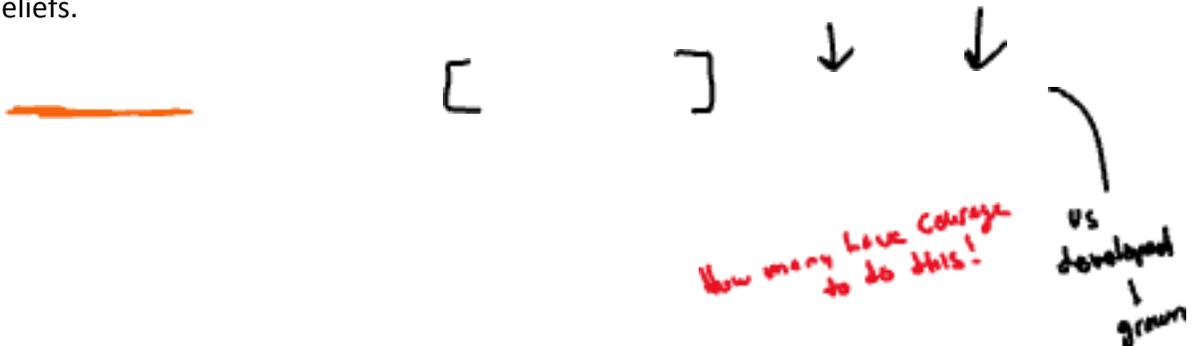
[Bearing The Cross by David J. Garrow](#)

Dr. King describes the type of leadership pressure unique to leaders who actually lead, who fight for the causes and speak the truths that produce the type of difficulties, criticisms, and even threats which accompany those who seek to change the world. Once experienced these pressures will lead anyone to consider giving up and surrendering leadership.

???

Whether we consider ourselves secular or religious every person and leader will experience a “Crisis of the Soul.” Faced with the pain of difficulty, criticism, and threat, we will consider giving up and surrendering leadership. In some cases, we are broken by the experience, and begin to question or even consider ~~abandoning~~ even our most deeply held principles and beliefs.

Broken leaders...



These “broken moments” occur when our “inherited religion,” those values we received from parents, teachers, coaches, clergy, professors, mentors, or admired corporate leaders are tested by suffering and adversity.

In these broken moments,” these crises of the soul, we are forced to think for ourselves and decide what we really believe, which is exactly what Martin Luther King Jr. had to do on the eve of a critical moment in the Civil Rights movement where his choice would likely determine their success or failure.

I didn't have to worry about anything. I have a marvelous mother and father. They went out of their way to provide everything for their children ... I went right on through school; I never had to drop out to work or anything. And you know, I was about to conclude that life had been wrapped up for me in a Christmas package. Now of course I was religious, I grew up in the church. I'm the son of a preacher ... my grandfather was a preacher, my great grandfather was a preacher, my only brother is a preacher, my daddy's brother is a preacher, so I didn't have much choice, I guess. But I had grown up in the church, and the church meant something very real to me, but it was a kind of inherited religion and I had never felt an experience with God in the way that you must, and have it, if you're going to walk the lonely paths of this life. That night, for the first time in his life, King felt such an experience as he sought to escape the pressures the MIA presidency had placed upon him.

[Bearing The Cross by David J. Garrow](#)

— Think for self?  
— Force us to think for ourselves

Dr. King discovered what all who experience a “Crisis of the Soul” learn, which is that no one can think for you, believe for you, be courageous for you, or defend you from the deepest fears and anxieties which inhabit the soul. This is why he describes leadership as a choice to “walk the lonely paths of this life.”

What follows are 7 discoveries about the way Dr. King allowed his “Crisis of the Soul” to transform his life. Follow them and we can do what he did, which was to in one night so deepen his spiritual awareness and strength that he found the capacity to hold on to rather

than abandon his beliefs, and once certain about his beliefs to be able to confidently assume the mantle of leadership not because it was convenient but because it was destiny.

### 1) Embrace Your Crisis of the Soul

But that night, unable to be at peace with himself, King feared he could take it no longer. It was the most important night of his life, the one he always would think back to in future years when the pressures again seemed to be too great.

[Bearing The Cross by David J. Garrow](#)

“King feared he could take it no longer” describes the prevailing emotional response of those who experience a Crisis of the Soul. We want to run, give up, get away, do whatever it takes to ease the pain. *Quitting!!!*

Rather than [run away] we must each learn to [run to] not away from our crises of the soul. This requires meeting our crises with the faith that our “anguish of the soul” (Psalm 6:3 NIV) will result in a transformation from the inside out, that our necessary suffering (I Peter 1:6 NASB) will lead to the type of growth in character that produces spiritual awareness and strength (Romans 1:3-5 NLT).

Allowing this process to complete its work (James 1:4 NIRV) will help us look back on our Crisis of the Soul in the same way Martin Luther King did, as the most important experience of his life, “one he always would think back to in future years when the pressures again seemed too great.”

## 2) Don't Be Afraid of Spiritual Experiences

"It was around midnight," he said, thinking back on it. "You can have some **strange experiences** at midnight." The **threatening** caller had **rattled** him deeply. "Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house."

[Bearing The Cross by David J. Garrow](#)

**Crisis of the Soul** are "strange experiences." Life feels out of control. Stress increases as our heart, mind, body, and soul all experience the threats that rattle us emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually.

There is a [threat matrix] for each of the crises we can experience in life. Understanding these 4 crisis states can help us face them with courage, in the knowledge they are temporary, and though painful for the moment, once we emerge from them we are better than when we entered.

Emergence → Renewed, Reinvigorated, Reimagined

- 1) **Situational Crisis** – the most common form of crisis is situational. We face a difficult even impossible set of circumstances. Although we are usually unprepared it is the experience which adds to our capacity to face future situational crises, because once we face circumstances beyond our control and capacity, we develop the ability to handle them in the future.
- 2) **Crisis of Faith** – this type of crisis is one which tests our most deeply held beliefs. Some examples of a crises of faith have to do with loss; losing a loved one in their youth, which makes us question the goodness of God; divorce which makes us question our capacity to be successful in any marriage relationship; betrayal when someone we

trusted deceives us, which makes us question whether we can ever trust another person. In short, a Crisis of Faith makes us question our belief in anything or anyone.

3) **Identity Crisis** – there are at least 3 points in our lives when we are certain to experience an Identity Crisis. The first is during [the untangling](#) of our Adolescent and Teen years; the second during [The Defining Decade](#), our Twenties; the third is [Mid-life when we assess](#) how things turned out, then draw conclusions about whether this is the life we hoped to live. These are the three most common stages of life where an Identity Crisis can be expected, each one asking the question, “Who am I and is this who I truly want to be?”

4) **Existential Crisis** – even when we know who we are or who we want to be, there ~~is~~ are a set of unasked questions which can plunge us into an Existential Crisis. The questions surfaced by this type of crisis ask about our existence (Matthew 16:26 NLT). Why do I want to be who I am? What is the purpose of my life? Why should I put myself through all of this to get whatever it is I am chasing? What will happen if I accomplish all I aim to accomplish but end up unhappy?

*Fight for our Soul - Disputing Meaning of life!*

### 3) Know What Matters Most

I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born.... She was the darling of my life. I'd come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife, who was over there asleep. And she could be taken from me, or I could be taken from her.

[Bearing The Cross by David J. Garrow](#)

**Soul crises are about making decisions.** The clarity necessary to make quality decisions is based on what is most important to us. In other words, we have to “Know What Matters Most.”

As a father of children with disabilities I was faced with a soul crisis early in their lives. The reality of this crisis came clear on a car ride. At the time, significant travel was part of my job description, and this car ride took place in one of the cities where I was invited to speak.

My reputation was as someone who resisted travel. This was because as a new parent with my wife we were building something I had never seen built before, which was a family with disabilities.

Driving along the leader who had invited me in to speak began to question my resistance to travel. He peppered me with questions aiming to unearth my motivations. The humorous part of the conversation was that each question he asked he then proceeded to answer, saying this same thing in a variety of ways, “all the rest of us travel and we are fine what makes you different, why are you so afraid?”

Until that moment of pressure to conform defending my perspective never really occurred to me, so my response was extemporaneous, “We are both fairly young with young children. All of our co-workers have young families as well. How can you say you or they are fine, because we won’t know what happens with our families until our kids have grown up, only then will we know the effect of our presence or absence? I am betting on being present.”

In this moment, as we rode along, my words were motivated by the visual images of my family in my head. There was no question about what matters most. My family was more

important than travel because my family was more important than my job, since without my family what value could I really bring to any job. *- Surprise myself writing this*

When we experience a Soul Crisis we will be forced to decide what matters most, and that decision will echo in eternity ([Gladiator](#)). *Aweome Movie*

#### 4) Choose Confidence over Insecurity

And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer. **I was weak**. Something said to me, you can't call on Daddy now, he's up in Atlanta a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can't even call on Mama now. You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, **that power that can make a way out of no way**.

[Bearing The Cross by David J. Garrow](#)

Once we know what matters most, we must begin to live our lives accordingly. In my case this meant acting on the belief that building my family life in the right way would enhance every other endeavor I pursued.

Anyone who has made choices like this knows they require confidence, **because insecurity cannot sustain a priority, principle, value, or conviction**. The insecure are blown here and there by every wind of resistance (James 1:6 NIV), while those who are confident know how to navigate life in such a way that we turn **[** the winds of resistance into the power that fills our sails as we travel on this ocean we call life (II Corinthians 5:7 AMP). *] Not sure about phrasing*

Choosing confidence over insecurity is more than developing **[** a psychological capacity to process life without anxiety, it means finding a source of confidence invulnerable to the turbulence caused by the winds of life, whether that source be my choice of God, or some other belief system uncompromised by the human weakness of self-reliance. Without this type

of confidence it will not matter if we know what matters most, we will never possess the internal strength to act on our convictions.]

## 5) Let Vulnerability Do Its Work

And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it ... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, 'Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak.'

[Bearing The Cross by David J. Garrow](#)

Martin Luther King is underrated because too little is known or discussed about his personal depth and life journey to become who he was meant to be. In truth, without his experience in Montgomery he would never have discovered his potential.

His discovery came through the vulnerability of expressing his emotions, those feelings of weakness and inadequacy which were causing him to lose his courage. What can we learn from MLK? Simply this, vulnerability is not weakness, but an essential part of the process necessary to develop the spiritual awareness and strength to become the person we are meant to be.

Brené Brown, one of the foremost authorities on vulnerability says, "To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe feeling is weakness."

Vulnerability isn't good or bad: It's not what we call a dark emotion, nor is it always a light, positive experience. Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness. To foreclose on our emotional life out of a fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living.

[Daring Greatly, Brené Brown](#)

My attitude toward vulnerability in my earliest years including my twenties and early thirties is best described by the words of Brené Brown who said, "armoring up before a vulnerable experience is attractive to me."

"Armoring up" is going on defense, something I did because I was "emotion phobic" another Brown concept. I didn't believe emotions solved problems, in fact, it was my position that emotions simply caused pain.

Since breaking free from the misconception that vulnerability is weakness my thinking has become less rigid, my conversations less defensive, and my resistance to personal growth and change has decreased. As a result, like Martin Luther King I have begun to discover a level of spiritual awareness and strength I never knew was possible.

How do you feel about vulnerability? Who are the people with whom you have a vulnerable relationship? Would you describe yourself as "emotion phobic" or someone who "armors up," and if so, what can you do to let vulnerability do its work?

## 6) Find Your Inner Voice

Then it happened: And it seemed at that moment that I could hear **an inner voice** saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.'... I heard the voice of Jesus saying still 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, never to leave me alone.

[Bearing The Cross by David J. Garrow](#)

The more we lean into our soul crisis the closer we will get to developing our inner voice, the capacity to know and communicate "who we are" and why we are here."

— not crazy  
but  
necessary  
↓  
An Intense  
Compass

Yikes!  
Happy Hollister!

Without  
vulnerability  
we  
will  
resist  
change

One of my favorite posts on Lead Different was on lessons we can learn from Bruce Springsteen about discovering our voice. Whether you like Springsteen or not his journey is a detailed description of what Martin Luther King describes above and you can read it [here](#).

King + Springsteen 😊

## 7) Run Toward Your Destiny

That experience gave King a new strength and courage. “Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared.” He went back to bed no longer worried about the threats of bombings. The next morning he went down to the Montgomery courthouse and was convicted of the Thursday speeding charge. He was fined \$10, plus \$4 in court costs. Fred Gray filed notice of appeal.

— more expensive today

Martin Luther King emerged from his Soul Crisis with “new strength and courage” as his “fears began to go” and his “uncertainty disappeared,” then “no longer worried about the threats of bombings” he ran toward his destiny. What is particularly daunting is it meant going to court and being convicted, something that was just the beginning of the suffering and injustice he would face on the way to changing the world.

— never easy

It is unlikely we will face jail and assassination like Martin Luther King, so it should be that much easier for us to run toward our destiny, to let go so we can grow to be the person we know in our hearts we should be. This process of letting go is exactly what it means to embrace our soul crisis so we can develop the spiritual awareness and strength to pursue and fulfill the destiny to which we have been called.

## Conclusion

We must see each crisis in our lives as a moment of decision, a chance to change course, renew, reinvent, and rebuild, because while crisis is defined by Oxford Dictionary as a time of “intense difficulty, trouble, or danger,” it is also described as a turning point “when a difficult or important decision must be made.” In fact, the Greek word for Crisis means to “decide or decision.”

As this pandemic begins to slowly resolve itself, each one of us has the opportunity like Dr. King to address the crises in our lives and fulfill the scripture which best describes his triumph over fear from Psalm 31:7 (TLB) which says, “I am radiant with joy because of your mercy, for you have listened to my troubles and have seen the crisis in my soul.”