

THE LOYAL DEVIANTS: MARTIN LUTHER & MALCOLM X

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In reading some of Erikson's publications, one is drawn to considerations about the concept of a great man: what goes into his making, and what makes him great. If we approach these questions in accordance with Erikson, we will turn first to man's personal history, and regard with particular scrutiny the revealing conflicts that characterize his most decisive struggle for a meaningful identity. Next we will look to his era or age—its historical disposition and its most exaggerated conflicts. For it would appear that the great man is in tune with his age, that his conflicts are the very conflicts reverberating throughout his age, and that mastery over his most acute personal crisis is his ethical apprenticeship for historical artisanry. His mastery affirms fidelity and competence enough to endow his age with the gift of the great man: a new faith. I think that, under the light of Erikson's method of investigation, the history of Malcolm X reveals much about the making of a great man, and the nature of his unique gift. When the analogy proves fruitful, I will draw upon Erikson's speculations and conclusions about young Martin Luther.

Regarding Erikson's proposed eight ages of man, he feels that the fifth age is often the most crucial in determining how consequentially an individual history will intersect with world history. Each of the ages reveals "in temporary exaggeration different aspects of essentially inseparable parts of a personality" (3), and each hinges on the outcome of the previous ones. Whenever a crisis is not resolved, much of one's energy is fixed in focus on one's failure, rather than released for future ventures and adventures. Because

the identity crisis may herald the greatest single opportunity for self-devotion or self-repudiation, it is often the most traumatic, bringing to the surface as it does all the loose ends of one's past conflicts. For the great man, its resolution can release an uncanny energy, accompanied by a new faith strong enough to move historical as well as personal mountains. The Adolescent Age also has its counterpart in the development of nations. In discussing the justification for Huck Finn's adolescence, Ralph Ellison writes, "Adolescence is the time of the 'great confusion,' during which both individuals and nations flounder between accepting and rejecting the responsibilities of adulthood." (5).

I think it was Malcolm X's entry into the Nation of Islam that marked his confirmation as a man released from the sway of guilt and inferiority, diligently dedicated to the best in himself as a religious and political leader, and to bring out the best in others. It marked an era of personal and historical rebirth.

Malcolm's earlier years were overridden with failures common to the twentieth century black man, which intensified and prolonged his struggle for identity. He seems to have been treated the best of all the children by his belligerent father, and worst by his mother, all on the basis of his light skin color. At a time when trust in one's mother is critical, he may well have suffered from her need to beat the white out of him. Little is said of Malcolm's infancy in his autobiography, but he does mention that his youth in Omaha was characterized by a disrespect for religion—the institution Erikson sets in social correspondence as his first age of man.

Malcolm's father had been what many whites and blacks called an "uppity" back-to-Africa preacher. At the age when a child needs a parental voice and touch to encourage autonomy and condone self-will, Malcolm's father was killed. The home held together for only a short time under the destitution and destructive welfare "gifts" that unraveled the mother's pride and hastened her psychosis.

Though Malcolm suffered the brunt of many of the family frustrations, he managed somehow to keep a certain distance from the tension, and aggression, and he learned early that "crying out in protest (an autonomous act) could accomplish things." (1). He did not seem to suffer from self-restraint without self-esteem, as did the overdisciplined Luther. In fact, after his mother entered the mental hospital and Malcolm was sent to reform school, he felt confident of his abilities to sniff a situation out, and outthink others. In *Death at an Early Age* Kozol points out that autonomy often is not the black child's stumbling block. Unlike the middle class white child, he suffers from being deprived of a normal youthful dependence.

In reform school, when Malcolm was 13, he was indeed the brightest pupil in the class, the prize "pink poodle." However, at this particularly inopportune time a white teacher figuratively castrated him, tainted him with racial guilt, and stunted his cultivation of dreams about future roles. Malcolm made the mistake of confiding in a Mr. Ostrowski that he wanted to become a lawyer. Mr. O. said a number of things to the effect that Malcolm should "be realistic" and consider carpentry. It was thus that the external world confirmed Malcolm's deepest latent fears. It bound his arm with the black band, and young Malcolm realized that his dreams—which had sustained and preserved him until now—could not penetrate the existing world. With heavy racial and moral overtones he writes, "It was then that I began to change—inside." (1).

It is my feeling that until this age of Initiative vs. Guilt, Malcolm had emerged remarkably unscathed. His following ages, however, were to offer the most tortuous tests of all. After his schooling, Malcolm moved to Boston and then to Harlem, and, in accordance with the guilt and submerged rage he must have felt, he sought a sense of adequacy. But in his "homeboy" naivete he defined his success by symbols loaned to the black world by the white. The most glorified artery of apprenticeship open to the black youth encounter-

ing the tools and techniques of his generation was "hustling." Malcolm hustled masterfully—women, drugs; "everything in the world [was] a hustle" for him. In his quest, he indulged in the most degrading initiation a black person seeking fulfilment can assent to: he burned his flesh and hair with lye, to wear that oh-so-white-like conk, and donned his credit-bought zoot-suits, in order to fit into an ironically anti-black but "cool" black world. Addicted to cocaine, he shunned the good black Laura and committed armed robbery with the white "goddess" Sophia. He was sentenced to ten years in prison, with a fatalistic feeling that his future had been determined by his "skin color rather than his value as an apprentice." But any rage he might have had was etched painfully in impotence and ignorance.

The period between an anticipation of worldly roles and their selection is called a moratorium. At this time, the great man especially is like a patient—sick without a meaningful cause, faith, or direction, yet too full of energy to submit to a negative identity, or a commitment to what one is not. Just as Luther's postponement was spent in the rigid discipline of a monastery, so Malcolm passed his moratorium in a prison. And Luther's mastery of silence in the monastery also has its counterpart in Malcolm; for during his first prison years he watched, listened, and learned in silence, his own opinions in awesome limbo.

A man such as Luther or Malcolm X, emerging from the shackles of crisis, needs "to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting while it confines him." (6). It is as Ella and Reginald sow the first seeds of Islam and faith in Malcolm's hardening spirit, that he gains strength to master the tools of his age: literacy and oratory. Relentlessly, compulsively, insatiably, he studies, teaching himself to read, write, and debate with exceptional dexterity. His lessons are his medicine, his work his cure. Malcolm acknowledges as he begins to embrace Islam:

I was going through the hardest thing and

also the greatest thing for any human being to do; to accept that which is already within you and around you.

The acceptance Malcolm's work initiated was the recognition of a personal and social history, exaggerated neither in its understanding of accomplishment or of failure, set in the context of the existing world. Whereas Malcolm might have reverted to a mute or unethical existence, instead, the very dangers he had sensed forced him "to mobilize capacities to see and say, to dream and plan, to design and construct in new ways."

Confident in his commitment, he begins to realize his destiny in terms of black brotherhood and a white enemy. Erikson mentions John Henry, who has tremendous appetites and will not commit himself to any role that cannot satisfy him. So Malcolm learned that it need not be his fate or the fate of any self-actualizing black man to be dedicated to an "identity predetermined by the stigma of his birth." For the black man to fulfill his identity, he *must deviate* from the confines of the white establishment's ghetto, and be loyal to his highest human aspirations. He recognized the devil incarnate in the white man, who rules a world full of spiritual sickness and moral indulgence, that defies and defiles all that is black and virtuous. Emerging from his arduous identity crisis, Malcolm did discover a temporarily consoling world of black and white; but he had, through self-analysis, so grappled with his personal ghosts and devils that the lines of his historical perspective can later soften to a revelatory humanitarianism.

As his new identity offered him a new faith—meaning both a devotion and a repudiation—so it gave him the words with which to reach out to his fellow black sufferers through the debasement of a caste-bound culture. He offered a self-imposed and meaningful form to the black man's suffering, through various religious rigors and abstinences. With these sacrifices he encouraged a self-regenerating

trust in Allah as a source of strength unto autonomy—even for the most desperate drug addict. For the black man to “stand up on his own feet,” he related a black history—a glorious drama from which to draw racial pride. He offered the Islamic definition of marriage, to give solidarity and mutuality and intimacy to love; and a value of daily industry, self assertion, and revolution, if necessary, to convert the black man’s racial guilt into defiance of whites.

Not only did the great man’s suffering sharpen his sensitivity to a kindred pain in his age, but it also encouraged the trust of the age in the man. Just as Luther spoke of Faith after he had emerged from the bowels of religious doubt, so Malcolm spoke of Faith and Activism after he had arisen from the depths of his own decadence and impotence. A society in virtual “patienthood” (8), disparaging the dream of individual lives converging with the path of history, might well be moved when such a man as Malcolm affirms, “Once he is motivated, no one can change more completely than the man who has been at the bottom. I call myself the best example of that.” (1).

It seems as though the age most poorly resolved in the young Malcolm and Martin has the most acute affect in the struggle of their identity crisis, and corresponds to the historical disposition of their age, as well as its major spiritual and political conflict. Martin’s development had the most critical holdback in the transition from Infancy to Early Childhood, from Faith to Autonomy. A quest for personal faith and autonomous, internal, individual union with a loyal Father can be seen as the central conflict of his Identity Crisis. Luther wrote:

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that the justice of God is that righteousness by which, through grace and sheer mercy, God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn.

Likewise, Martin's Medieval Age had one foot in the dark ages of mistrust and mysticism and another in the autonomous, anthropocentric Renaissance. And his particular society was ruthless in the cradle of a dissipating spirituality that prohibited meaningful self-assertion or rebirth, in order to satisfy the business of the Church.

I think Malcolm's development had the most critical holdback in its transition from Initiative to realization of a meaningful social role: during his "hustling" days. A quest for a faith in the black man and his ability to utilize his strength industriously at any cost, embodied the central conflict of his identity crisis. Likewise his astringently technological age (and ours) is fraught with the trauma of "Who am I?", "Where can I fit in an alienating or role-impooverished society," "What can I do to bring quality and equality into men's lives"—an age hankering for what Erikson calls "political rejuvenation." (2). And Malcolm's particular society—the black culture—was and is increasingly restless in the chains of a white world that refuses to:

integrate the timetable of the (black)
organism in the structure of social
institutions. (3)

Erikson might consider the Black Muslim Malcolm, with his newlyfound identity, a mere novitiate to the post-Mecca Malcolm, who framed his racial concern so artfully in a Universal Ethics. But I regard the post-Mecca period as a second rebirth, occurring within Malcolm's age of greatest Integrity, Generativity, faith, and absorption with all history, and all men. Malcolm might have been humbled, but his individuality was not inundated by the system of Islam. It was from his Black Muslim pulpit that the young great man began to contribute "an original bit to a new emerging life style." (2).

It seems safe to conclude that, generally, suffering and conflict accompany the breakthrough of a great man, as well as an amazingly resilient will to override defeat—at any

cost—in the service of personal fulfillment. The internal struggle is so great and so socially relevant that its resolution emits, through the turmoil of an age, a defiant cry of a new reverence. Erikson says that “if there is any chance at all, it is in tumultuous historical reality, at least ethically cared for.” I must agree, and add that the true Maintenance Men of the world are the loyal deviants who dare to dig out an identity from the darkest mines of their age.

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