son lives with the fears of the consequences for his personal life he can never do anything in terms of lifting the whole of humanity and solving many of the social problems which we confront in every age and every generation.

At MMFR: Sync Sound 48.

23 Mar 1956

From Samuel DuBois Cook

23 March 1956
Baton Rouge, La.

Cook, a philosophy professor at Southern University in Baton Rouge, had been King’s classmate at Morehouse, serving as student body president as well as a founder of the campus NAACP branch. After remarking on their similar training in philosophical theology, Cook declares that King had “achieved that rare combination of social action and love.”

Dear M. L.,

It has been a long time, much too long in fact, since we have conversed. When you spoke at Southern, I had returned to the Army for discharge; hence I missed seeing you. From a variety of sources, however, I understand you were really great—which, of course, is precisely what I expected.

Congratulations on your many accomplishments since you left the “house.” Especially do I want to congratulate you for having won your doctorate in a most difficult area, philosophical theology. Since I have read considerably the works of Brunner, Barth, Niebuhr, Buber, Ferre, and Tillich, I have some appreciation of the dimensions, depth, and wonder of philosophical theology. Incidentally, my dissertation deals with ethics and democracy. I have chapters in it on “Christianity and Democracy,” “The Neo-Orthodoxy of Reinhold Niebuhr,” and “The Neo-Thomism of Jacques Maritain.” Hence there is a parallel element in our inquiries subsequent to our graduation from Morehouse.

Busy people seem always to emit excuses or at least explanations for writing as
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well as for failures to write. Mine is the immediate social context of the sequence of events in Montgomery. Hence this is a letter of the spirit.

My mind, heart and spirit go out to you and to all the others for heroic efforts in behalf of human dignity and freedom. Freedom is not a gift but an achievement. Historically and morally speaking, it is the fruit of struggles, tragic failures, tears, sacrifices, and sorrow. Likewise, social changes, if more than accidental occurrences, if constitutive of moral goodness, are products of imaginative constructions and presuppose the will to make the “is” conform to the “ought.” Morris R. Cohen, in The Meaning of Human History, notes, with great truth, that one of the tragic lessons of history discloses that “good causes are more often defeated by negligence in the pursuit of the right than by positive forces of evil.” 5

The tragic lesson of American Negro history is not so much rooted in the activity of evil spirits but the inactivity of men of goodwill—in their willingness to yield instead of fulfill. Your activity and that of others similarly located reveal a radical departure, a new orientation.

I have read with avidity the newspaper accounts of happenings. Your indictment and conviction depress me greatly. Yet your moral heroism offers deep and sustaining consolation. Moreover, I am confident that the federal courts will, without hesitation, nullify the conviction. Ultimately, the state of Alabama is trying to tell free men in a free society (ideally) that they must be slaves, that they must negate rather than affirm their essence. You have inserted, if I may use a phrase of Emil Brunner, a big “No” in the state’s “Yes.”

The history of human freedom is the history of human struggles. You have achieved that rare combination of social action and love. When one acts on the presupposition of love, who can condemn, who can fail to admire? History knows of many who have traveled your present journey. Witness Socrates, the Christians under the pagan Roman Empire, Ghandi, or Thoreau in America. This is noble company, noble indeed. They attest to the gruesome conquest of freedom.

You know, I am teaching political philosophy. I read the other day anew the Aristotelian dictum that the cause of our love is dearer to us that the object of our love. Our cause is certainly just and it is closer to our hearts than integration. For our cause is grounded in the secret cravings of the human spirit.

Please give my best regards to Mrs. King, and, when you see them, your father, mother, sister and brother.

Your pal,

[signed] Sam
Samuel DuBois Cook

TLS. MLKP-MBU: Box 91.