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Jerry Large

Living as a Good Samaritan, Dr. King's way

By Jerry Large

Seattle Times staff columnist



Don't know what you'll be doing on MLK Day, but Michael Honey will be practicing what Martin Luther King Jr. called "dangerous altruism."

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He'll be putting his beliefs into action out at Bangor, protesting against nuclear weapons this time, but he also has a long history of civil-rights and human-rights activism.

Honey is a professor at the University of Washington Tacoma campus, where he teaches labor and African American history. The subjects are more than academic.

"If you don't know the past, you don't understand your country. You don't understand the world. If you don't understand black history, you don't know the country you live in."

His focus is history from the bottom up, how people change their society. And he's one of those people for whom knowing leads to doing.

He was a conscientious objector during Vietnam. He spent six years working for civil rights in the South in the '70s and was held for three weeks in a 4-by-7-foot isolation cell for protesting false charges against black activists in Kentucky.

Honey has a new book out this month, "Going Down Jericho Road," about King as a champion of labor. It's centered on the Memphis garbage-workers strike in which labor and civil rights were intertwined.

People may think of King as a civil-rights leader or a human-rights or peace leader, but Honey said his work on behalf of labor and union rights mostly is unknown, which is why he wrote this book.

King urged middle-class people to put themselves at risk in service of the working poor. The title of the book comes from a parable King used often, the story of the Good Samaritan who stopped to help a stranger in need along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

It's a role Honey himself has played. Honey, who is white, grew up in a Michigan town where he says there were no black people and no Latinos. But he's an avid reader and news junkie. "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" and alternative newspapers gave him a view of life outside. And the town was near enough to Detroit for events there to make an impact.

Honey says he got politicized while at Oakland University in

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the mid-'60s. He joined Students for Democratic Action, and he made friends with black students. The 1967 Detroit riots happened while he was in college. Thirty-four people were killed by police. "I became a movement person," he says.

He went south after college and worked on Black Panther Party cases. He passed out fliers, organized protests, whatever was necessary. He went to Chicago when Fred Hampton was killed, worked on the Angela Davis case.

He saw a lot of injustice and said to himself, "I know what's going on now, but how did it get this way?"

So he went back to school, this time at the historically black Howard University.

Honey says his experiences deepen his understanding of the topics he teaches, just as it propels him to stay involved. He doesn't believe in academic isolation.

It's like King said about the Good Samaritan. His question wasn't if I stop to help this man what will happen to me? It was if I don't stop what will happen to him? He urged his audience to put themselves at risk, to practice, "dangerous altruism."

Honey celebrates that ideal all year.

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