

Smiley: This week, Doc, the group Media Matters released audio from a obviously troubled individual named Byron Williams. You may recall, Doc, he was the guy who got into a shoot-out with police this past July as he was speeding towards San Francisco, remember that?

West: Indeed, indeed.

Smiley: Heavily armed was he, with a high-powered rifle, a shotgun, a handgun and body armor.

According to police at the time, Williams wanted to start a revolution by targeting progressives from the Tides Foundation and from the ACLU. This new audio captured by journalist John Hamilton reveals Williams' affinity for Glenn Beck. Take a listen.

Williams Recording: Beck. Never say anything about a conspiracy. Never advocate violence. Never do anything of this nature. But he'll give you every ounce of evidence that you could possibly need.

Glenn Beck: Grab a torch. I'm going to find these big progressives and to the day I die I'm going to be a progressive hunter.

Voice: You drive a stake through the heart of the blood suckers.

Voice: (**inaudible**) 00:01:03 More and more people are breaking up.

Smiley: So a couple of interesting areas, I think, Doc, to explore here. One would be the comments from Republican New York Congressman Peter King who says quote "words have consequences." And then there's Dana Milbank about Glenn Beck's coded Mormon language, language like, "hanging like a thread" for instance, and lots of talk this week, of course, about the overall power of language.

Let me just start by saying this, Doc, I have never, on this radio show, on my other radio show, on any radio show, on my TV show on PBS, or any other, I have never, ever, publicly spoken about Glenn Beck. I think there is too much attention already given to some of these folks so it's not about casting aspersions on him. I've just got other things I think are more important to talk about than Glenn Beck.

We're talking about this today in part because it's a larger conversation, Doc about whether or not words have meaning and whether or not we're prepared to deal with the consequences of what we say even as we are talk show hosts.

So interestingly, and it might surprise some, I actually side with Glenn Beck on this issue in this way, Doc. I don't want to be held responsible for anything I say on the radio expressing my own point of view. I don't want

to ever accept the fact or believe that my merely expressing my First Amendment right convinces someone to go out and to arm himself with a rifle, a shotgun, a handgun, body armor and start trying to do damage to other people just because he heard Tavis or, as is so often the case, Travis, say something on the radio.

On the other hand, Glenn does use some language sometimes, language like progressive hunting. What is that, progressive hunting? So I want to protect the First Amendment Right for Glenn Beck and anybody else to say what they want to say, even when they're wrong, but I think we've got to be more circumspect in what we say.

West: There's no doubt that Brother Glenn Beck has a right to be wrong, but at the same time I have no problem zeroing in on that Mormon brother when he's mean spirited and cold hearted.

When he uses the language that promotes a certain kind of hatred, a certain folk, he's got to take full responsibility. We can be Libertarians and defend the First Amendment, defend his right to express himself, and at the same time we can be Democrats and say he's got to take responsibility and be accountable for the kind of mean spiritedness that he conveys over the air.

He might shed a tear and cry after he said it, and that's fine, but once he's said it, it has a life and logic of its own. The social fabric in America is very weak; the social fabric in America is very feeble. And when you have cold hearted language being said day in and day out, day in and day out, you're not just misguiding folk, but you're casting a spell over people and they end up doing things that you may have wished that they didn't do, but you have to take some responsibility. Words do have consequences.

Here, one of the rare times I agree with the Right Wing Brother Peter King in New York.

Smiley: Do you think it's fair though, Doc, to connect public rhetoric with political violence?

West: I think there's mediating factors in between, but absolutely. If you are spewing hatred day in and day out and then somebody in the end actually enacts a hateful act and they said they were under your spell, the person who was spewing the hate, don't they take some responsibility?

Smiley: I guess the question is, you are not fond of right-wingers and you just referred to Peter King as a right wing ... that was your phrase ... a right wing congressman. Somebody who's crazy on the left, a crazy progressive, who hears you refer to Peter King as a right wing Republican

Congressman, might then say Cornel West empowered me to do something to Peter King.

West: No. There's no hatred in the term right wing. That is an objective description of his position on the ideological spectrum. They call me left wing, I say, "That's right. I am left wing. I'm deep Democrat, radical Christian and focus on poor and working people."

That's a left wing position. That doesn't mean they hate me. That doesn't mean they have a right to kill me.

But at the same time, we have somehow got to keep alive some level of both civilities in our truth telling as well as responsibility when we're using hateful language.

Smiley: On that we agree. On that we absolutely agree.

West: I'm glad we do agree on that my Brother, but I also observe that Brothers Bloomberg and Patterson in New York want to take sugar sweetened drinks off the list of approved items that poor people can buy with food stamps.

Smiley: Yes. I just saw this.

West: You notice that? They say its part of their efforts to make New Yorkers more healthy. They're concerned about obesity. We know our dear Sister Michelle Obama, the distinguished First Lady, Michelle Obama, has been focusing on this issue.

But isn't that taking it too far? I mean, at what point are they going to say, if you're on food tamps, all you can eat is asparagus and mushrooms? I mean, how far does it go?

Smiley: I hear your point.

As you know, I've done a lot of work over the years on the issue of childhood obesity. I have become passionate about this issue of obesity, particularly amongst our children because I see kids contracting all kinds of illnesses and diseases way too soon, which means their lives are going to be cut short in part because so many things come from being overweight for too long

So I understand and appreciate the sensitivity of the Mayor, Mayor Bloomberg and the governor David Paterson and I want to give Bloomberg credit. I appreciate, Doc, when I go to New York that I don't have to sit amongst a bunch of cigarette smoke to enjoy my meal. He pushed that through.

So that he's done some work, and this is his continuation on that healthy front, so I do applaud him for what he's done on the cigarette issue, but I think that you're right about this.

For me, it's not so much the drink, but the lack of moderation in what we drink. Same thing with our food.

There's nothing wrong with drinking a soft drink every now and then, nothing wrong with eating X, Y or Z every now and then. Our problem as a society is lacking moderation and I don't think you can legislate moderation.

So I think there's got to be a better way to get the message out to help people live healthier and longer lives, but I think you're right about this. That I don't think that telling folk what they can and cannot buy beyond, of course, alcohol and cigarettes. I don't think the mayor has the right approach on this, respectively.

West: For me, the deeper issue, though, Brother, is does the state have the right to tell people what to eat, or even what to smoke. I like the smoker's room in the corner in the restaurants, pipes and all. But for me, if you reach a point where the state is telling, especially poor people that there's certain things they cannot buy, is the state also saying when we have contracts with corporate elites, when we have contracts with various banks, that those bankers can't buy certain kind of yachts and certain kind of cars?

Smiley: I'm playing Devil's Advocate. The difference here is, Doc, is that this food stamp money comes from the state.

West: Exactly. But the same is true of the contracts that these private sector enterprises have to come from our taxes, too. These are government subsidies; these are government contracts that these institutions have. At what point does the state begin to dictate what folk can buy and why begin with poor people?

Smiley: Now, that for me is a central question. Why do we start with poor people, telling them what they can and cannot do? I take your point.

West: I applaud your education or efforts to try to say, "Look, poor brothers and sisters of all colors, when you do have money, buy things that are nutritious." I agree with you, I agree with the mayor, I agree with the governor.

But that's a matter of education and them making judgment. That's not a matter of the state saying, "You have no right to use public money for X and Y.

Smiley: Before we move on, to answer your question which was obviously rhetorical because you know the answer, why start with poor people? The answer is because they're poor people.

West: Burns me up. When I see poor folk treated like that, I just have a righteous indignation, my Brother.

Smiley: I'm with you on that, as you well know.

So, finally, let's recall, the life and legacy, Doc, of the legendary Solomon Burke. He, of course, died on a plane at the Amsterdam airport where he was scheduled to perform with a Dutch band that he was collaborating with.

In the coming days, both you and I have overseas flights coming up. It's a terrifying thought to even think that you could pass away away from your loved ones, family and friends on an airplane. We'll learn more, I'm sure, about the circumstances surrounding his death in the coming days but what about his musical legacy, Doc?

West: Good God. I'll be in that Amsterdam in just a few weeks myself. But no, Solomon Burke, secular preacher in the language of Brother Peter Guralnick, he was one of a kind, man. He fused the deep riches of the church with the sophisticated beat of rhythm and blues and rock and soul. There'll never be another like him, man. Never, ever, ever.

He was never really appreciated in the way that he should have, because, of course, he had Ray Charles, Chuck Barry, and others to compete with.

But in so many ways he was a kind of heart beat of the black musical tradition, the American musical tradition, when it comes to young people in the late 50's, 60's and 70's.

Smiley: You and I were talking on the phone the other night in one of our many, many late night private conversations about the fact that Solomon Burke is a great loss, no doubt about that. But it speaks to a larger issue that we were wrestling with the other night about all of these great soul legends, one by one, who are getting away from us.

West: Isn't that the truth? Theodore Pendergrass. To say his name, there has to be silence. Al Goodman of Ray Goodman and Brown, the moments gone.

Smiley: Luther Vandross ...

West: The great Luther Vandross, but Ron Banks of Dramatics, gone. And it goes all the way back. You know we lost Nina Simone, of course, we lost Alice Coltrane recently. We could go on. There was Hank Jones. We are

seeing the passing of the baton to a younger generation and that older generation had levels of excellence and elegance and levels of depth and substance that we just don't see now. We're moving toward a thinner wave. We've got some talent out there, but it's still a thinner wave than it was before.

Smiley: Yeah. For all those reasons we need to celebrate those who have blessed us in so many ways musically, like the late, great Solomon Burke.

Our Hot Stuff conversation continues on our web site, Smiley and West dot com 7 days a week when you can weigh in at any time on these and other issues.

West: And don't forget to sign up for our Speak Out Network and follow us on Twitter at Cornel West or at Tavis Smiley.

West: From PRI, Public Radio International in Princeton, I'm Cornel West.

Smiley: And in Los Angeles, I'm Tavis Smiley.

When Doc and I were setting up this new radio program, we knew we wanted it to be as interactive as possible. We knew that we wanted listeners to have a stake in this program, to get a chance to participate in our dialogue and the response has been absolutely phenomenal, Doc.

On our Facebook pages and our new Speak Out Network on www.SmileyandWest.com, so much feedback, and so during our very first program a few weeks ago we talked about the accusations against Atlanta Bishop Eddie Long.

Well, apparently, Doc, our comments were so provocative that it prompted Linda White from Fresno California, to email us with the subject line, get this "Are you God?" That was her subject line.

West: Wow.

Smiley: So to answer her question, we invited her to be on this week's program to take us to task and so, Linda, we welcome you now to Smiley and West. Good to have you.

Linda: Glad to be on.

Smiley: So you are in Fresno, California. As I said earlier, we're glad to have a chance to talk to you.

Tell me about this subject line. You got Doc's attention and my attention. Are we God, what do you mean by that?

Linda: Okay, when I first heard it, I was listening to the show and then you called the professor or the doctor or whomever, the other guy that was on. Basically, I was talking to him. You asked him the question and I'm going to paraphrase a little bit because I don't have it on my thing anymore.

But you asked him are you disappointed, upset, everything that you named, he said, all of this. And it struck a chord in me, why would you be upset with somebody else's life. He's not accountable to you or to me. But he's accountable to God and that's why I was asking the question, "Are you God?"

Smiley: So, Doc, I was asking the question of you, she's talking about your response. I think Linda wants to talk to you. She ain't trying to take me to task. She's talking to you, Doctor West.

Linda: It wasn't Doctor West either. It was one of the ... I can't remember his name. You guys had brought him on the show and you were talking to him, he's a professor somewhere of divinity. He says that he teaches the bible.

Smiley: Oh, Linda, I know who you're talking about. You were listening to a conversation with Professor Jonathan Walton. So, Doc, she's talking about ...

Linda: Yes. I should have put his name on it.

Smiley: Doc, she's talking about a conversation with Jonathan Walton, former colleague of yours, a student in fact, at Princeton, now a professor at Harvard Divinity School, and so her point is that Jonathan was suggesting that he was all of the above, disappointed, let down, etc., etc., in these allegations against Bishop Long.

Let me take what Linda's saying, Doc, and rephrase it for you to respond to. Linda's ultimate question is why should Jonathan, you, me, anybody be upset with Eddy Long when his life has nothing to do with our lives, when he is not accountable to us.

West: But his life does have something to do with ours. Eddy Long is my brother and I have a deep love for him. I have respect for him. If, in fact, he has done what he's done, then he's deeply disappointed me, because I had expectations for him as a brother and as a human being and as a minister of the gospel.

That doesn't mean he's God. I'd never worship Eddy Long. No, no, no, I only worship God. I don't worship idols, but I do have an expectation of someone who's a brother, who's a pastor, and who is saying things but doing something else. That's what I mean, Sister Linda.

Linda: Okay, so where I am with this, and the reason why I brought it out like I did is because ... I used to live in Texas and I was under this pastor, I'm not going to name his name, but I was under this pastor and one of the members of the church came and told me a whole lot of things.

I took all of those things into my heart. And willing to, that instead of listening to what somebody else say, I'm going to go to him. I gave him everything that was said to me.

He looked at me and he said, "Sometimes Pastors have leather skin. We do this so long until nothing's supposed to affect us. But I'm not going to give you an answer yes or no on the allegations that was given unto you about me. Because if I tell you yes, you're going to stop going to church. And if I tell you no, you're not going to believe me.

That right there changed the whole scope of my life in my way of thinking. That what my thoughts are only my thoughts and what he has done is between him and God.

Smiley: Let me jump in right quick, Doc. I'm just curious. If you went to your pastor with allegations and he said to you I'm not going to tell you yes or no. If I tell you yes, you're going to stop coming to church, if I tell you no, you ain't going to believe me. How would you respond to your pastor telling you that, Dr. West?

West: Well, at first I've got to put myself in the situation of the parents of the boys. If it was my son, I'd want to know what was going on. If it was my child, I'd want to know what's going on. I love my child and I love my pastor, but I want to know the truth.

It seems to me as Christians, we know that we're just trying to love our crooked neighbors with our crooked heart, so we know that the persons that we are loving are themselves cracked vessels.

But I still want to know the truth. Wouldn't you want to know, Sister Linda, if that was your son?

Linda: When the truth comes out, I will still have to love him because he's my brother.

West: Oh, no, I agree with that, but ...

Linda: Right now, I'm enveloping him; I'm praying for him, my heart is for his family the most and the boys' parents, because the boys' parents do have a right to know what happened.

Smiley: Linda, Doc's question is, though, if it were your son and you went to the pastor and asked him about these allegations, if you were the parent of

one of these boys and Eddy Long said to you, Bishop Long said to you, I'm not going to tell you yes because you're going to stop coming to church, I'm not going to tell you no because you ain't going to believe me.

If it were your son, how would you then respond? Since you raised these parents, Linda?

Linda: My response to him would be then you're going to have to allow me to know that whatever you're saying right now because it is not a truth if you're not going to tell me and I'm not going to be able to accept what you're saying, then I'm going to remove myself out of that place until I find my truth.

But this is why I'm is because those are not my children, but I do have a son that has had to deal. I do have a son. So my son came back to me, because I wanted to be angry, but he taught me this, that your heart that loves God is still got to love the problem. You can't separate, you cannot separate the act from God.

So all of it is in God and God is the only one that can really take it and make it right. But when we take it as a people and spread it everywhere, even when the truth comes out, nobody's going to believe it anyway.

Smiley: Last word for you, Doc.

West: I think that the truth is a painful thing and we can love people in the midst of their truth, but if people are doing things that are painful and hurtful, not only should people know, but in the end maybe they shouldn't be in these positions of authority in the first place.

That's a major consequence with which we have to come to terms. And if they're not in that same position, we can still love them, but it just means you can't be saying one thing and doing something else.

Smiley: Linda, I think the one thing that you, Doctor West and I agree on is that at the end of the day, what we all want to know is the truth.

Linda White from Fresno, California. Thanks for dialoging with us here on Smiley and West. We appreciate you sharing your insights.

Linda: Thank you.

West: From PRI, Public Radio International in Princeton, I'm Cornel West

Smiley: And in Los Angeles, I'm Tavis Smiley. Much scholarship has been done over the years about the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but for the first time ever, there's an entire book, Doc, on his prayer life. "Never To Leave Us Alone," The Prayer Life Of Martin Luther King, Jr. is

written by Vanderbilt University Professor and King scholar Lewis V. Baldwin. King's close aid Wyatt T. Walker, who wrote the forward says, "Baldwin discovers the mystique of Martin King, Jr., and he carefully examines the key to King's strength of spirit against seemingly impossible odds."

We are pleased to welcome Professor Baldwin to this program. He joins us from the campus of Vanderbilt in Nashville, Tennessee. Prof. Baldwin, welcome to Smiley and West.

Baldwin: Thank you so much, man, it is an honor to be invited to with you guys.

Smiley: Doc and I are honored to have.

West: We salute your work. We know that you are the definitive scholar when it comes to examining the cultural and spiritual sources of King's ministry and his witness and especially the centrality of the black church.

What is it about this recent text? You've written so many other powerful texts.

Baldwin: I guess you can look at Never To Leave Us Alone as the culmination of years of scholarship and reflection on the spirituality of Dr. King and how he translated that spirituality into efforts for social change and social transformation.

Smiley: Let me start, Dr. Baldwin with the title. It comes, of course, from Hebrew's 13:5, Never To Leave Us Alone, why that passage for the title?

Baldwin: I based that title on an experience Dr. King had in early 1956 during the Montgomery bus boycott. He received a call from a racist who threatened his life and threatened to blow up his home and he retreated to his kitchen, warmed some coffee, and poured his heart out to God.

He indicated that he was faltering, he felt inadequate, that he was in a spirit of bewilderment, felt that he couldn't on. At that point he said he heard the voice of God saying, "Martin Luther, stand up for rights, stand up for justice, stand up for peace. Lo, I will be with you always even unto the end of the world.:

So it was a transforming encounter he had with what he called his Cosmic Companion or the Supreme Personality.

So the title of the book is based on that vision in the kitchen that he had in early 1956 during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

West: I know that so many sermons of Martin where he was would always end, “He promised to never me, never to leave me alone.” Over and over again. That verse meant so much to him.

But that presupposes that he’s wrestling with loneliness.

Baldwin: Exactly.

West: He’s wrestling with the calling; a prophetic witness that left him isolated oftentimes finding it difficult to trust others, sometimes even his friends. Tell us more about Brother Martin’s struggle with loneliness.

Baldwin: I think it was quite a struggle. Dr. King often had a self-imposed day of silence where he actually dealt with that loneliness. You can be surrounded as you well know by people, by supporters and still have this feeling of loneliness.

This is why he had the self-imposed day of silence. He would retreat to a hotel, rent a room, and engage in a rigorous discipline of think time and also pray and meditate. That, I think gave him the strength and the energy to come out and to meet the expectations, the enormous expectations that people had of him.

You’re right. These feelings of loneliness were there, but he always had this sense of divine companionship, or as he called it, Cosmic Companionship.

Smiley: I’m fascinated by this line of questioning that Dr. West has taken us in and I appreciate it. I’m wondering, though, Dr. Baldwin, how it is that Dr. King masked that loneliness so well. I think if you talked to the average American they don’t know that King was lonely, they don’t know that King was depressed, they don’t know that King had to fall on his knees and pray for strength.

I don’t think that most of us think that. We think of Dr. King, we see this happy figure standing in the march on Washington declaring that I have a dream and this part of Martin is not something that most people are familiar with.

Baldwin: There’s almost that air of invincibility.

Smiley: Exactly.

Baldwin: I understand quite well. He was able to mask that. Dr. King knew that if he exposed his limitations, his feelings of inadequacy to his followers, that that could have a negative effect on them. So he always carried himself in a way that affirmed to people, that gave the impression that he was on top of things, that he was secure. That was important, he felt, because he

wanted to keep people dedicated, involved in the movement and he had to present a certain image before the people.

But a lot of people never knew what went on on the inside, the feelings of inadequacy from time to time.

You have to understand that he was under a lot of pressure in the movement. Threats against his life, sometimes he received 40 telephone calls a day, threatening his life, threatening his family and he had to carry that kind of burden.

He had to carry the burden of leadership, and that can be a burden. People don't realize what was going on on the inside of Dr. King, and this is why I think he had to retreat to his sacred places as I would call them, or his praying grounds to engage not only in this rigorous discipline of think time, but to pour his heart out to God and to be renewed and reinvigorated, and re-empowered if you will.

Smiley: What was Martin praying for? It's one thing to talk about his prayer life, but obviously it's important to pray for the right things and to pray in the right way. Tell me more about what he was praying for and what his prayer process was. How did he call out to God?

Baldwin: He prayed for strength, his own personal strength, for guidance and direction in the movement he also prayed for world peace. He prayed for guidance in the struggle for economic justice in the struggle to overcome racial barriers, segregation in the society.

He prayed for discipline and courageous leadership in the movement. He prayed for what he called the least of these. Those who were in poverty, who had no jobs, who were devoid of medical care, who were ill housed.

His prayer, of course, had this social dimension. He majored in intercessory prayer. That is praying for others. His prayers were always relational and that, I think, is very, very important.

West: Brother Martin's prayers seem to be in stark contrast to so many of the prayers these days which are let's make a deal with God or shaking one's pin cup in the face of God, give me, give me, give me.

He's praying for humility. Give him an inner security. He's praying for courage, he's praying for a sense of sustaining himself and his integrity in the face of that which is coming at him which allows him to hold at arm's length any bitterness or bigotry, any cruelty or cynicism, any revenge or resentment

That's what I'd call spiritual maturity.

Baldwin: Spiritual maturity. There was always that personal dimension there, right. Praying for humility, praying for guidance, direction, but as I said, the prayers were relational. They were intercessory prayers. They were prayers of persuasion.

Not only do you pray for others, you pray for others to be inspired in the crusade for equal rights and social justice in the struggle for human dignity and peace.

Smiley: It reminds me actually of the late, great James Washington's classic conversations with God where you actually have a rich tradition of black prayer that was both about personal fortitude, but also social concern for the least of these.

How does Martin's particular prayer life fit into that larger tradition that the late, great James Melvin Washington laid (**inaudible**) 00:08:50

Baldwin: Well, I think there's no question that it fits in quite well. And I've indicated in the book that Dr. King drank from the wellsprings of that black craft tradition and he also built on that tradition. He reclaimed the language of freedom and deliverance from slave prayers.

He also made prayer useful and relevant to a movement of non violent direct action.

He also was able to intersect in the movement people from different religious backgrounds, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, who had not been exposed to the black prayer tradition.

So for the very first time Protestants, Catholics and Jews, white Protestants, Catholics and Jews, were exposed to the prayer circle, to prayer pilgrimages, prayer rallies that Dr. King employed in the context of the movement.

Smiley: That begs the question, Dr. Baldwin, whether or not Dr. King then ever incorporated prayer traditions from other religions into his prayer life.

Baldwin: Yes. Dr. King, of course, as you well know, when it comes to interfaith issues or interfaith influences, I think Dr. King is a figure that we have to look at. He learned from Gandhi. Gandhi, as you well know, prayed a lot, it was part of his self-purification.

Dr. King, in fact, embraced the four steps of non-violent, direct action campaigns from Gandhi. First you study the facts to see that injustices exist; secondly attempts at negotiations; thirdly, self purification; and fourthly, non-violent direct action.

That third step, self purification means, of course, that you engage in fasting, in prayer, non-violent work shops. It speaks of ways in which the disciplines of prayer and non-violence interacted and influenced each other in Dr. King's personal life and also in the context of the movement.

Smiley: Since you mentioned Gandhi, let me play a clip from a conversation I had earlier this year, in fact, with Arun Gandhi. He's the grandson of Mohandas K. Gandhi.

Baldwin: I know him. Yes.

Smiley: He told me the story, Dr. Baldwin and Dr. West, of King's trip to India, back, of course, in 1959, when King went into this room in Bombay where Gandhi used to spend a lot of his time in prayer. Here's Arun Gandhi talking about King in the same room where Gandhi spent so much time praying.

Arun Gandhi Clip: There is a house in the central part of the city which was used by my grandfather whenever he came to the city and that place is now turned into a museum and a library.

So Dr. King and his family and others who joined him, all came there to that museum. The unique thing about this museum is that on the second floor, they have a room which my grandfather used whenever he lived in that house.

That room is very sparsely furnished. There is literally no furniture, just a little mat in one corner on which he slept and where he sat and worked. Nobody is allowed to enter the room but you can look into the room through a glass panel.

When Dr. King came there and he looked into the room, he felt that urge to go inside and sit and meditate for a little while.

So he asked the Director if he could get special permission to go inside. Because he was a guest of the government and a very important person, the Director opened the room and allowed him to go in alone.

So he went in and sat down and he dismissed the rest of the group and said that I will join you whenever I'm ready. Then soon it was time for the museum to close and Dr. King was still not out of the room. So the Director went to ask him when he was planning to leave because they wanted to close up and go home.

And Dr. King shocked her by saying that he's not going anywhere, he's going to stay the night there.

The Director was totally flabbergasted and she said, how can you stay the night here? This is a museum, we don't have any facilities and Dr. King said, well, I don't need all that. If Gandhi could live here, I can live here. If he could sleep on the floor, I can sleep on the floor. I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying here the night.

So he spent the whole night there and came out the next day around 10:00 and he announced to the Director and all the people who were there at the museum that now I feel morally strong enough to go back and lead my countryman in civil rights movement.

Smiley: So Dr. Baldwin, what do you make of the fact that Martin insisted on having his party, his travelling party, go back to the hotel so that he could stay in this room all night by himself, praying on the floor, in the same space, that Gandhi prayed in?

Baldwin: Again, I think Dr. King saw this as sacred space. As you well know, Gandhi was not only an intellectual source for Dr. King, he was a spiritual influence on Dr. King.

And I think when Dr. King went to India in 1959, he went there not only to learn about Gandhi, to get a feel for the kind of issues and struggles that Gandhi was involved in, but I think he wanted to touch base with Gandhi as a spiritual figure.

He visited Gandhi's grave and he also engaged in prayer. He did some fasting in India, and I think he was trying to develop himself spiritually.

Coretta Scott King says that King actually was impressed with Gandhi's dress. Gandhi had surrendered the 3-piece suit and put on the garments of the untouchables.

West: Rejected the western clothing.

Baldwin: It made it clear to him that coming out of the black church tradition you can't possibly do that in America.

I think he was trying to touch base with the spirituality of Gandhi. He went there and it was a spiritual pilgrimage for him. That was important and I think it was important for him to have this sacred space and to spend some time alone praying and meditating and perhaps fasting because this was part of his strength that he needed. Part of the strength and the courage that he needed to return to America to continue a struggle that was rapidly expanding because after the Montgomery movement we know the Civil Rights movement gained national and international prominence and Dr. King's leadership became increasingly more important.

West: You know Brother Tavis rightly noted a very delicate issue having to do with Brother Martin wrestling with despair. Almost reminds me of Jacob in the 32nd chapter of Genesis wrestling with the Angel. In the midnight alley emerging with a new name Israel God Wrestler.

That King who wrestled with the depth of despair at the end that tended to be much more intense than it was before. How did he somehow muster a joy in the face of this despair, or in the end was he if not overwhelmed by despair, was he pushed against the wall in such a way that even his prayer life in a certain sense had tremendous difficulty in sustaining him.

Baldwin: I think we need to take a new look at Dr. King, because even in the midst of all of the pressure that he faced, the threats against his life, humor was very important to him. He told a lot of jokes.

He did not surrender to a kind of pessimism. He told a lot of jokes, had a lot of fun, that kind of thing, and I think he was able to do that because he felt this sense of divine companionship and I don't think he ever reached a breaking point because of that.

West: But that humor that you talk about, though, that strikes me as closer to the blues which is tragic comedy. Jesus never laughs in the biblical text. So that the laughter and the humor that associates with the blues, that Chekhov or King at the latter stages of his life compared to the biblical text where laughing is at a minimum, how do you reconcile those two realities?

Baldwin: I don't think it's a matter in King's life of reconciling them. I think you have to look at the culture out of which he came and that is humor had always been a kind of compensatory mechanism. He was able to laugh at himself. He was able to laugh at the struggles he was going through. And that provided him I think with a kind of strength to endure.

James Weldon Johnson has talked about laughter and humor in the African American experience as you well know and how this has served as a kind of compensating mechanism.

Smiley: Was there laughter in his prayers, though?

Baldwin: No. No. Not in his prayers. I think that was a serious side of his spirituality, but I don't think you can divorce humor completely from his spirituality.

West: But humor is serious, too. Humor is serious to the comic.

Baldwin: Yes, humor is serious, but there are passages in the bible that talks about God laughing. I think King understood that laughter was a part of his

capacity to survive and to sustain himself in a movement that placed so many demands on his time and his energy and resources.

Smiley: We live in a country where we are told and taught at least Dr. Baldwin that there is a separation, or should be between church and state and yet I get the sense that Martin didn't necessarily see it that way, that is to say that there was a direct link between his prayer life and his call for certain public policies.

Baldwin: Exactly. I get calls all the time from people who say was Martin Luther, Jr. a civil rights leader, was he a preacher, or was he inspired by politics or motivated by politics or was he motivated by his faith? I always say that this is a false dichotomy, that Dr. King saw civil rights as an extension of his ministry, that he saw political involvements as an extension of his ministry so he never made that kind of false dichotomy between religion and politics or between faith and public life.

It's important to keep that in mind. He said that as a minister I am a prophet and as a prophet I'm called by God to speak to the social issues of our times and I'm called also to act in such a way as to eliminate many of the social evils in our times such as racism, such as economic injustice and poverty, such as war and human destruction, such as religious bigotry and intolerance.

West: Does that mean that for Martin, then, the flag was subordinate to the cross, that patriotism was subordinate to unarmed troops and unconditional love?

Baldwin: I really think that the cross is central to Dr. King's thoughts. Not the flag as you well know.

West: Which one has more weight, though? The cross or the flag?

Baldwin: The cross. The cross has more weight. There's no doubt about it because Dr. King, as you well know, one of the principles in his thought was the idea of redemptive suffering. That society could be changed and even transformed through the exercise of redemptive love and redemptive suffering.

So the cross is eminently more important than the flag.

Smiley: Since you raise this notion of this formulation of the cross vs. the flag, I'm wondering how it is, Doc, that you think that anyone in the public square today who would dare to be as bold about putting prayer at the center of the public debate would be received or not by the public.

West: I think there would be a radical suspicion because people would see it as an act of manipulation where there are so many politicians who view religion through a michaelvelian lens. Religion is something to use and manipulate in order to give one the appearance of being religious or even quasi holy as opposed to exemplifying that religious commitment in your life.

Martin had a gravitas in who he was and is witness itself so he didn't have to talk about his prayer life in that way.

But of course he's a prophet rather than a politician so that makes a difference.

Smiley: Does that make sense to your Prof. Baldwin.

Baldwin: I agree whole heartedly with Dr. West. The only people we see putting prayer at the center of public policy issues today and prayer at the center of what's going on in terms of activism in the public square are people on the right.

In that case you find what Dr. King would call a misuse of prayer or an abuse of prayer. Because prayer is put to the service of disempowering people, of disenabling people because these people on the right are concerned about the kinds of policies that disenable and disempower.

Smiley: Let me ask real quick, then, so why is it that the right has taken that as a strategy and those on the left have not?

Baldwin: That's a good question and I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing because as I said, what you see on the right, I think, is an abuse of prayer, or what Dr. King would call an abuse of prayer.

Smiley: But prayer's always a good thing so if there not employing it, they have one less weapon that they're using.

Baldwin: Yes. Exactly right. I think people on the left need to not let people on the right control this religious values debate. That's what's been going on in our culture. I think we do need to ... and I say that in the last chapter of my book ... that we do need to learn from Dr. King about how prayer might be useful in the context of a social movement. How prayer might be useful in our quest for the kind of social policy that liberates people and that empowers people.

I think there's a lot that we on the left need to learn about prayer and its role in social movements.

West: I think you're absolutely right. It brings to mind our dear friend Brother Glenn Beck who talks about inheriting the mantle of Martin Luther King,

Jr. and I say to myself, prayerfully, that's like inheriting the mantle of Beethoven, but you haven't started piano lessons yet.

Baldwin: Exactly.

West: I pray for our Mormon brother, but I say, come on, now, Brother Beck, get serious.

Baldwin: Exactly. I don't hold with that kind of approach to religion and prayer and moral values that I see with Glenn Beck. I think he is deluding himself if he thinks what he's involved in actually amounts to an advancement of what Dr. King was involved in, advancement of the civil rights movement.

Smiley: The flip side of Glenn Beck would President Barack Obama who as we know has a bust. When he became President, he took a bust of Winston Churchill out of the Oval Office and put in the Oval Office a bust of Dr. King.

So there sits now, again, in the Oval Office for the first time ever in the history of this country, a bust, a permanent bust of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I raise that only because, again, he's the flip side of Glenn Beck and there are all kinds of questions about the President's prayer life, articles and conversations about that. He and his family still have not, to this moment at least, joined membership to a church in the Washington DC area.

Because the President does have such a bully pulpit is there something for the President to learn about that bust, moreover about the prayer life of Martin King that might help him?

Baldwin: I think the President has had a prayer life over the years. We know that his trip to Israel he prayed at the Wall in Israel, he has said over and over that prayer is a very important part of his daily routine so I think prayer is important to the President.

West: George Bush had a prayer life, too. It's got to be manifest in your priorities. King died organizing poor people. The sanitation worker, he died opposing a war that was killing innocent people, the way the drones are killing innocent folk in Somali and Yemen and Pakistan so that the prayer has to be connected to a practice of compassion for the least of these.

Baldwin: That's right.

West: Or we fall into any kind of prayer life of anybody. You know what I mean? And so even when I think about Martin staring at our dear Brother President Barack Obama, I hope that he sees in Martin's eyes the

suffering of indigenous people, the suffering of poor people, the suffering of those folk in Arizona who are being terrorized right now, the suffering of the gay brothers and lesbians being marginalized, the suffering of working people who are being overlooked and begins to highlight their suffering as opposed to the concern about the investment bankers.

Baldwin: I agree wholeheartedly, but I think we have to understand also that President Obama is in a different position. King was a civil rights activist, a social activist. He could take risks. He could take on issues that were very controversial, but when you become President of the United States, you don't have that privilege and I think he's, in many cases, is doing the best that he can, but you've read Ryan Hode Neva, I'm sure, Dr. West ...

West: Oh, yes.

Baldwin: Neva talks about the political life and how politics makes us tend to compromise as opposed to taking risks and I think this is the problem that President Obama is confronting.

Smiley: But in the end, Prof. Baldwin, isn't that what Martin's prayer life was all about? Knowing that the way you get empowered to take risks is through prayer. Impact the power of prayer.

Baldwin: Exactly. I think there's much that the President can learn from Dr. King's prayers and Dr. King's prayer life, but I still say that when you are in a particular position like the President, it's very difficult to translate this kind of prayer life into practical reality.

West: Are you saying it's difficult to be a Christian in the Oval Office?

Baldwin: Yes. It's very, very difficult, and I don't ...

West: Would it be difficult to be a Christian on the corner? (over talk) 00:28:15

It's difficult to be a Christian in ethics.

Baldwin: That's right. I'm quickly coming to the position that politicians can't really be Christians.

West: Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa.

Smiley: We've got another subject matter here.

Baldwin: Exactly because Christianity demands radical discipleship. This is what Dr. King was about. Radical discipleship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer when God calls us, he bids us come and die. And I think when you are the President of the United States, or when you're involved in politics, you can't take on

that kind of ethic. The ethic is an ethic of compromise and not radical discipleship.

West: It's harder for a rich man to get through the eye of a needle, right?

Baldwin: Yes.

West: You're saying it's harder for a politician to meet the Christian criteria, but all things are possible so we know that Barack is a Christian but at the same time, what kind of Christian. That's what you're talking about.

Baldwin: Exactly. That's exactly what I'm talking about and when you read Dr. King, Christianity involves radical discipleship.

West: That's right.

Smiley: Professor Baldwin, you have given us a great deal to think about and who knew at the very end of the conversation you'd drop that kind of bombshell? About Christians and politicians. Good lord.

West: That bust in the Oval Office takes on a whole new meaning now, Brother.

Smiley: And that's why we say the conversation continues 7 days a week on Smiley and West dot com where you can sound off on any conversation you hear on this program.

For now, we want to thank Lewis V. Baldwin, Professor of Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. The new text is called "Never To Leave Us Alone," The Prayer Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Professor Baldwin, an honor to have you on the program, sir.

Baldwin: It's an honor to be invited.