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Striving for a Complete Life: The Spiritual Essence of African–Americans’ Food Justice Activism

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Abstract: This essay employs Dr Martin Luther King, Jr’s sermon, “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life”, as an acute lens through which to assess and impart new meanings to African–American activists’ strivings to reach an ideal state of humanness and communal holism as they fulfilled their personal, political, and spiritual missions in the food realm during the 1960s Civil Rights era and the contemporary food justice movement. Narrative analyses of these Black activists’ personal testimonies convey that their discrete journeys to completeness—what Dr King called the ideal state of humanity in its fullness—were not only facilitated by a divine calling but were also conditioned by the enactment of their Christian faith, particularly in reconciling the affective tolls engendered by their participation in lunch-counter sit-ins and by their quests to help alleviate food insecurity among impoverished populations in the American South. Indeed, when these individuals consciously endeavored to master the three dimensions of a complete life—recognize their agency, honor the interconnectedness of humanity, and seek God’s guidance in doing both—were they able to embody their best selves and demand the realization of a truly democratic nation.

Keywords: African–American sermon; African–American activism; civil rights movement; First Fruits Farm; lunch-counter sit-ins; food justice; food access; Nashville Nonviolent Student Movement



Citation: Johnson, Lynn R. 2023. Striving for a Complete Life: The Spiritual Essence of African–Americans’ Food Justice Activism. *Religions* 14: 1361. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111361>

Academic Editor: Carol E. Henderson

Received: 18 August 2023
Revised: 21 September 2023
Accepted: 25 October 2023
Published: 27 October 2023



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1. Introduction

In January 1954, Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr delivered his renowned sermon, “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life”, for the first time to African–American parishioners at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.¹ As various scholars note (Lischer 1997; Miller 1998; Jackson 2008; Dorrien 2018; Harvey 2021), King’s religious oration was inspired by Phillip Brooks’s homily, “The Symmetry of Life”, in which the nineteenth-century abolitionist theologian interpreted the new and glorious Jerusalem that Saint John envisioned descending from heaven in the book of Revelation as “the picture of glorified humanity. . . as it shall be when it is brought to its completeness by being thoroughly filled by God” (Brooks 1881, p. 110). The perfection of this city and humanity was in part attributed to its symmetry, the equal measures of its length, breadth, and height (Brooks 1881).² Like Brooks, King projected this vision of balance and completeness onto modern lives. He (King 1954, p. 153) explained to his audience in Montgomery that the length of life is not determined by its duration but by “the inward concern for achieving our personal ends and ambitions”. The breadth of life, he insisted, extends beyond the self to centralize the well-being of others (King 1954, p. 153). To realize the height of life, the “movement beyond humanity and the reaching up to God” is requisite (King 1954, p. 153). For both clergymen, then, a complete, symmetrical existence akin to that of the new Jerusalem would emerge from the integration of this metaphysical trinity.

King individuated his sermon from that of Brooks’s when he adapted this radiant vision of an integrous, three-dimensional life to his own imaginings of a complete and “ideal humanity” at a time when the increased turbulence of racial segregation reverberated throughout the American republic (King 1960d, p. 572).³ “Three Dimensions of a Complete Life”⁴ can therefore be read as his call for a spiritually informed activism that harnessed

the energy, talents, and ambitions of countless individuals to reconstruct, with divine guidance, a distinct and equitable world for the common good. Viewed in this way, the import of King's address extends beyond its 1950s and 1960s frameworks. For this essay, it serves as a unique lens through which to examine the existential registers of past and present civil rights activists that King's sermon bids to recognize their agency, honor their interconnections with others, and overcome their anxieties through appeals to God as they satisfy the humanistic missions of the socio-political movements in which they participated. In deploying this lens in my analysis of the lives of Dr King, Nashville Nonviolent Student Movement member Patricia Jenkins-Armstrong, and professional athlete turned farmer Jason Brown, I primarily contend that their strivings for completeness undergird the spiritual essence of their food justice activism. Indeed, their discrete journeys to completeness inside and outside of the food domain were not only facilitated by a divine calling but also conditioned by their Christian faith and their love for broader humankind.

As conveyed in various histories of social justice movements (Hoekstra 2015; Edge 2017; Opie 2017; Garth and Reese 2020), food activism embodies personal and public campaigns that link food geographies, access, provisioning, and consumption with human rights. Indeed, African-Americans have consistently led the charge in many of these crusades. For instance, whereas Georgia Gilmore and members of the Club from Nowhere⁵ sold baked goods to fund the Montgomery bus boycott from 1955 to 1956, the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, distributed free breakfast and groceries to underserved Black communities throughout the 1960s as part of their survival programs. The lunch-counter sit-in movement that college students organized in cities such as Greensboro, North Carolina, Atlanta, Georgia, and Nashville, Tennessee, demonstrates African-Americans' determination to rally against segregation laws that prohibited interracial dining.⁶ Moreover, farming initiatives were and remain significant to African-American food activists' praxes. Cases in point include Fannie Lou Hamer's 1969 founding of the Freedom Farm Cooperative in Mississippi (Brooks and Houck 2010; White 2019), the Nation of Islam's farms, food processing, and grocery store operations that provide African-American consumers access to healthy food (McCutcheon 2013), and Leah Penniman's establishment of Soul Fire Farm in 2010 to advocate for food sovereignty in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities (Penniman 2018).

This study adds King's, Jenkins-Armstrong's, and Brown's accounts of the theological foundation of their activism in the food domain to this archive of African-American food justice history. In so doing, it reveals, through close readings of their accounts, that kitchen spaces may unexpectedly transform into sites of divine revelation, lunch-counter sit-ins can engender a Black spirituality that preserves individuals' respectability, and a "unique ministry" to feed the hungry may materialize at God's command (Brown and Asay 2021, p. 95). In all, these food justice advocates validate the balance, integrity, and strength accorded one's life when its length, breadth, and height are bestowed equal value and placed in human service.

2. Kitchenscapes: The Locus of King's Divine Revelations Regarding Completeness

King (1954, p. 153) asserted that "life as it should be is the life that is rich and strong all round, complete on every side". The richness and strength of a complete life for King was contingent upon the "due development" of its length, breadth, and height (King 1954, p. 153). In this regard, the anticipated spiritual growth he envisioned entailed the merger of the length of life, which emphasizes a moral "self-interest" and self-love, with the "other-regarding dimension", the breadth of life, where one recognizes human interconnection (King 1960d, p. 398; 1967, p. 572). During his 1967 "Three Dimensions" address at New Covenant Baptist Church in Chicago, King portrayed the confluence of one's length and breadth through his description of the ritualistic care of the body that occurs each morning. In so doing, he began by establishing the fallacy of egocentrism, stating to his audience, "You may think you got all you got by yourself. But you know, before you got out here to church this morning, you were dependent on more than half of the world" (King 1967,

p. 132). After delineating the French, Turkish, and Pacific Islander nationalities who furnish the soap, sponge, and towels used for bathing, King rhetorically steered his audience to their kitchens for breakfast to provide additional proof of human interdependency. He stated:

You reach on over to get a little coffee, and that's poured in your cup by a South American. Or maybe you decide that you want a little tea this morning, only to discover that that's poured in your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you want a little cocoa, that's poured in your cup by a West African. Then you want a little bread, and you reach over to get it, and that's given to you by the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. Before you get through eating breakfast in the morning, you're dependent on more than half the world. (King 1967, p. 132)

This breakfast revelation illuminates for his audience the quotidian expressions of what Martin Buber (1958, p. 26) described as the "I-thou" projection, the direct relationship between the self and others that is based on mutuality and equality.⁷ King borrowed Buber's I-thou philosophy for his sermon to promote an unqualified interest in the well-being of others. Yet, expressing and preserving the I-thou relationship often comes with risks, and thus appealing to God for endurance, which is the pillar of the height of life, is critical.

This third dimension of a complete life adds a layer of divine dependency, where God as an eternal presence provides solace by alleviating the fears engendered during the second dimension of life and augments the talents and ambitions that one recognized in the first. King exemplified this most clearly in his January 1956 "Kitchen Table Revelation".⁸ Once overwhelmed by the death threats he received due to his leadership in the Montgomery Movement, King disclosed:

I was ready to give up. 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. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. . . At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever". Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. (King 1958, pp. 134–35)

King's appeal to God in this moment verifies the power of Christian faith to mitigate the personal suffering that may result from expressing one's love and concern for humanity. King would again invoke his faith not only while incarcerated in Fulton County Jail in October 1960 for participating in a sit-in to desegregate the restaurant of Atlanta's largest department store but also while confined days later in Georgia State Prison at Reidsville for violating the terms of his probation.

3. To "Awaken the Dozing Conscience of Our Community": The Impetus for King's Sitting in and Self-Suffering

King's incarceration in Fulton County Jail and at Reidsville was the punitive consequence of his participation in the 19 October 1960 sit-in at the Magnolia Room, a segregated restaurant in Rich's department store in downtown Atlanta. King claimed in his autobiography that he participated in the lunch-counter sit-in "as a follower, not a leader. [He] did not initiate the thing" but accepted the Committee on the Appeal for Human Rights' invitation to join the protest (Carson 1998, p. 145). Seven months prior to the sit-in, Lonnie King and other college students from historically Black colleges in Atlanta founded COAHR to lead nonviolent efforts to desegregate the city. Dr King agreed to participate in their protest because he "felt a moral obligation to be in it with them (Carson 1998, p. 145). Once arrested for trespassing and sent to Fulton County Jail with the students, King assumed a

leadership role by drafting a position statement to James E. Webb, the judge charged with overseeing their arraignments. In this missive, he (King 1960a, p. 522) explained to Webb that the sit-in protest evolved from “a deep-seated concern for the moral health of [their] community” and that he and the students “[did] not seek to remove this unjust system for [themselves] but for [their] white brothers as well”. With this goal in mind, they were willing to forego bail as long as necessary to bring awareness to the injustices of racial discrimination at Rich’s and at other establishments throughout the city. He wrote, “Maybe it will take this type of self-suffering on the part of numerous Negroes to finally expose the moral defense of our white brothers who happen to be misguided and thusly awaken the dozing conscience of our community” (Carson 1998, p. 145). King’s statement and resolve to endure suffering for the redemption of all highlight the personal and communal empowerment gained by investing in the I–thou relationship. For, the social awakening that King and the students endeavored to effect could, from their perspectives, cultivate mutual and equitable associations in the Atlanta community.

King confirmed in a press interview two days following his arrest that the sit-in and the incarceration of the protesters did indeed impact the moral conscience of national and global citizens. He (King 1960b, p. 527) affirmed, “My personal staying power is buttressed by the courage and dedication of my fellow jail-mates and the concern that has been shown around the nation and the world for this moral stand we have taken”. The owners of Rich’s dropped the charges against King and the students once they realized that the protesters were steadfast in their collective decision to remain incarcerated and that their business would suffer a great financial toll given the community responses. Although De Kalb County officials released the student protesters, the sheriff remanded King into custody because Judge J. Oscar Mitchell “construed [King’s] ‘trespassing’ at Rich’s department store to be a violation of his probation” (D. L. Lewis 2013, p. 126). As a result, Mitchell imposed an unappealable sentence of “four months on a hard labor gang because [King] had a previous arrest for driving with an out-of-state license” (Hampton and Fayer 1990, p. 68).

Hours after the sentencing, Georgia officials transported King to the state prison at Reidsville, which was over two hundred miles from Atlanta and thus from his family. In his account of his transference, King described the angst of being unaware at the time of his destination. He divulged, “That kind of mental anguish [was] worse than dying, riding mile after mile, hungry and thirsty, bound and helpless, waiting and not knowing what you’re waiting for. And all over a traffic violation” (Carson 1998, p. 147). To withstand these circumstances, King appealed to God and found comfort in his belief in divine purpose. In a letter dated October 26, which he wrote to Coretta from Reidsville prison, he advised his wife to “be strong in faith” and relayed, “I am asking God hourly to give me the power of endurance. I have the faith to believe that this excessive suffering that is now coming to our family will in some little way serve to make Atlanta a better city, Georgia a better state, and America a better country” (King 1960e, pp. 531–32). As a result of Senator Robert Kennedy’s intervention in the matter, Georgia officials released King from prison six days after his arrival. Across the country, civil rights activists bore witness to King’s suffering and found it imperative to continue nonviolent direct-action campaigns to actualize the dream of a better nation.

4. On Attempts to Complete a New Democracy: The Nashville Lunch-Counter Sit-In

Over the years, Dr King adapted the homiletic content of “Three Dimensions of a Complete Life” to address the import of civil rights activism in the establishment of an American democracy that would, like the new Jerusalem, be “new in structure, new in outlook, and new in character” (King 1954, p. 152). The achievement of this modern republic relied on resolving the race problems that segregation laws protracted. When delivering his sermon to a congregation at the Unitarian Church in Germantown, Pennsylvania, King (1960d, p. 575) averred that the seeds of these racial conflicts germinated in an existential field, as many whites selfishly endeavored to maintain their economic and political privileges by

investing in a system of racial division that “substituted the I–it relationship for the I–thou relationship”. The I–it relationship denies equality with and objectifies others, nature, and spiritual beings since it presumes “natural separation” (Buber 1958, p. 36). King (1960d, pp. 574–75) expressed his unease about this untenable relationship. He professed to his audience, “I am absolutely convinced that the problems we face today in the southland grow out of the fact that too many of our white brothers are merely concerned about the length of life rather than the breadth, concerned about their so-called way of life”. He subsequently challenged the myopathy of this self-centered disposition and contemplated a remedy for the white anxiety this short-sightedness induced. He (King 1960d, p. 575) surmised, “If only they would add breadth to length, the other-regarding dimension, the jangling discords of the South would be transformed into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood”. Although King specifically indicted white Southerners in this statement, he held all citizens accountable for altering the state of national affairs. He (King 1960d, p. 575) imparted to the Germantown audience that “[all] men of goodwill have a moral obligation to work assiduously to remove this cancerous disease from the body of the nation”. If these men did not perform the excision, the country’s demise would be inevitable. Eleven months preceding his visit to Germantown, King presumed the historical recording of this national death in his “Three Dimensions” sermon at Friendship Baptist Church in Pasadena, California. He (King 1960c, p. 400) stated, “Historians will have to say that America died because too many of her people were concerned about the length of life and not concerned about the breadth of life”. Essentially, King suggested that the life and integrity of a democratic nation was reliant on the complete integration of the lives that form its constituency.

The mission of the civil rights movement was to inject new life into the nation and to preserve the constitutional rights of all its citizens, primarily through nonviolent direct action. African–American minister James Lawson, like King, believed that assimilating Mohandas Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence in his Christian-based teachings and his mental conditioning of civil rights activists would ensure the humanistic fulfillment of the movement’s agenda. In December 1959, he, along with Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, Andrew White, and others, would implement this philosophy in what Lawson called a “Gandhian experiment” in Nashville, Tennessee (Nelson 2017). They determined to recruit and train college students from historically Black institutions, specifically Fisk University, American Baptist Theological Seminary, and Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial University, to desegregate department store lunch counters in the city’s business district. Lawson recalled in a documentary interview, “It was especially Black women in Nashville coming to our workshops week after week who said let’s begin downtown. That’s where there is great indignity, white/colored signs over everything, and mistreatment from white people in the downtown area” (Nelson 2017). He emphasized to these young activists that the objective was not to “blow up Nashville downtown” in response to such indignities, but to make every commercial area of these businesses accessible to all without exceptions (Hampton and Fayer 1990, p. 54). Hence, these activists received carefully devised training “to help them to begin to discipline themselves, to work together as a unit using nonviolence instead of violence” (Nelson 2017). This is because Lawson believed that the disciplined and pacifist Black body held greater agency in the face of white-supremacist aggressions.

Indeed, Lawson was deliberate in outlining the critical methodology of nonviolence for his workshop attendees so that they could reach this disciplined state. The methodology included assessing the problems of segregation, intelligently negotiating with business owners and government officials who upheld segregation in eating establishments and elsewhere and devising an effective plan of action to desegregate these spaces despite violent physical and verbal backlash (Lawson 2022). Furthermore, Lawson insisted that the end task would be to evaluate the socio-political and emotional outcomes of their activities that could provide for national and personal healing (Lawson 2022, p. 42). To effect this methodology, he and Smith conceptualized specific campaign strategies, which included “sit-ins, poster walks, economic boycotts, marches, and parades if necessary” to

upend the discriminatory practices of the downtown businesses (Nelson 2017). However, for the sake of efficiency and practicality, they chose sit-ins as the primary technique of resistance. The activists also concluded that these protests would precede any negotiations with the business owners and local government officials because the talks could delay action (Cornfield et al. 2021, p. 479).

In addition to articulating the pragmatism and psychology of this nonviolent strategy, Lawson directly appealed to the activists' religious sensibilities. As he recalled:

In Nashville, I interpreted Jesus as a nonviolent practitioner and the Bible as a critic of violence, which is there but often hasn't been picked up by conventional people and by the churches. And these are all youngsters; these are all people, clergy, students, housewives who were baptized people of the church. So, it seemed to me that the very important thing [was] to use their Christian thought and commitments in a fashion that enabled them to see what they were doing out of that context. (Nelson 2017)

By situating the Nashville lunch-counter sit-in campaign within the framework of Christian thought, Lawson supported King's position in his "Three Dimensions" sermon at Friendship Baptist that individuals' contributions to the "upbuilding of humanity. . . [have] cosmic significance" (King 1960c, p. 398). This spiritually informed food activism attracted Patricia Jenkins-Armstrong to the campaign, which would become known as the Nashville Nonviolent Student Movement. Although Jenkins-Armstrong and other activists tested the business practices of downtown department stores in December 1959, by requesting food and leaving once denied service, they officially began to sit-in at these establishments' lunch counters in February 1960, five months preceding the sit-in at Rich's department store in Atlanta. It was through her dogged determination to help close the door on segregation in Nashville with other activists and to accentuate the humanity of all people in the process that Jenkins-Armstrong would eventually realize a complete life before her death in January 2023.

5. Traversing the Jericho Road to Completeness: The Dangerous Altruism of Patricia Jenkins-Armstrong

At the time Jenkins-Armstrong attended Lawson's weekly training workshops on Tuesday evenings in the basement of Clark Memorial United Methodist Church in Nashville, she was 17 and enrolled in Tennessee Agricultural & Industrial State University, which is known today as Tennessee State. Recalling the import of these sessions in a 2015 interview with Dave Hoekstra, she stated, "Our training was significant. In some way, Jim Lawson was able to transcend to us about being nonviolent. The principles of Gandhi and Jesus Christ were what the training was all about. I don't know how we were able to do that at our young age. A lot of us had a real commitment that we were going to make a change" (Hoekstra 2015, p. 113). Jenkins-Armstrong's statements align with both King's and Brooks' descriptions of the developing self-consciousness present in the first dimension of completeness (length of life) and the "other-centeredness", the central concern of the second dimension (breadth of life), that this new awareness can birth. For at a "young age", she discovered, as Brooks described in his "Symmetry of Life" sermon, her own "special powers and dispositions" (Brooks 1881, p. 112). In recognizing her compassion for others and her commitment to social justice, she voluntarily underwent the intensive training needed to fulfill her ambition that extended outward. It is at this stage of recognition and mobilization that King would assert Jenkins-Armstrong's living begins. In his address at New Covenant Baptist Church, he (King 1967, p. 127) submitted that "a man has not begun to live until he can rise above his own individual concerns to the broader concern of all humanity".

The divine guidance transmitted through the tenets of Christian theology that were part of Jenkins-Armstrong's training under Lawson fortified her agency to transcend her personal ambitions to shift the racial climate in Nashville with her contemporaries. Lawson stressed that it was because of the student activists' orchestrated efforts that Nashville

“became the first city that began the pulldown of [the white/Black] signs of tyranny. . . and then opened up restaurants, the train station, and the bus station” (Nelson 2017). Although Jenkins-Armstrong marvels “how [they] were able to do that” (Hoekstra 2015, p. 113), it may be argued that she had already solved the mystery of this rumination: it was through the “reaching upward toward God”, honoring the height of life, that she and others were able to endure the “Jericho Road” to equality and social relevancy, particularly as African-American citizens.

In multiple iterations of his “Three Dimensions of a Complete Life” sermon, King described the Jericho Road as a site of unpredictable violence; it was “a dangerous road”, as made evident in Jesus’s parable of the Good Samaritan and by his own travel experience along this route from Jerusalem to Jericho in 1959 (1960c, pp. 399–400; King 1960d, p. 574; 1967, p. 128). He explained that “[during] the days of Jesus that road came to a point of being known as the ‘Bloody Path’” (King 1967, p. 129). King would transfigure the biblical Jericho Road into an apt metaphor for the tumultuous journey to equality in America. In so doing, he conveyed that the precarious terrain of the pathways to equality incites fear, which exacerbates one’s weariness about assisting in the elevation of others clearly injured along its waysides. But like the Good Samaritan who provided aid to the man wounded and robbed while traveling the Jericho Road in the biblical story, the people of his time, in King’s opinion, must ask these questions among themselves: “What will happen to humanity if I don’t help? What will happen to the civil rights movement if I don’t participate?” (King 1967, p. 130).

In formulating plans for a sit-in campaign, Jenkins-Armstrong and members of the Nashville Nonviolent Student Movement answered these questions as they endured the bodily and spiritual risks in their endeavors to bring about new social conditions that went beyond interracial dining in the South. King explained the significant choice of lunch-counter sit-ins:

Almost every Negro had experienced tragic inconveniences of lunch-counter segregation. He could not understand why he was welcomed with open arms at most counters in the store but was denied service at a certain counter because it happened to be selling food and drink. In a real sense the “sit-in” represented more than a demand for service; it represented a demand for respect. (Carson 1998, p. 139)

Civil rights activist Ella Baker (1960) shared King’s sentiment and asserted that the lunch-counter sit-ins were “concerned with something much bigger than a hamburger or even a giant-sized Coke”.⁹ Jennifer Jensen Wallach (2019, p. 125) explains that “being denied the right to consume [these foods] on equal terms amounted to an assault on the Black protesters’ claims of national belonging”. Of course, white citizens who defended segregation in Nashville did not offer the service and respect that the student activists sought. Instead, they violently denigrated them as these students sat peacefully at the food counters of McLellan’s, Walgreens, S.H. Kress, Woolworth’s, and Harvey’s department stores. Jenkins-Armstrong recounted:

We would order food, but they wouldn’t give it to us. . . They would close down the counters. If someone pulled us off the counter, we had to go limp. We had spotters. The spotters would run to the First Baptist Church and say that one group had been arrested. The second group would take their place. People would call us names. They would pour ice on our heads. We could not react”. (Hoekstra 2015, p. 105)

In addition, angry whites spat on Jenkins-Armstrong, and she suffered a concussion “in front of W. T. Grant’s store on 5th Avenue. A man knocked [her] out” (Hoekstra 2015, p. 113). The calm resolve that she maintained in the face of such violence and demoralization exemplifies what Lawson considered an expression of Black spirituality, one that “[senses] that I’m not going to allow your hatred to cause me to get in the ditch with you. I’m not going to allow you to pull me so low that I hate you in return” (Nelson 2017).

Despite the training in Christian nonviolence that gave her “the mental equipment for a dangerous altruism” in this Jericho Road moment (King 1960d, p. 574), Jenkins-Armstrong testified to the imprint of this Black spirituality in her consciousness when she detailed the lingering psychological impact that her participation in the sit-in campaign, and the later Freedom Rides, had on her life. In the alimental realm, she recounted that once arrested and “crowded into jail downtown. . . [the police] would give [them] oatmeal and grits”, and she refused to eat those foods ever since (Hoekstra 2015, p. 113). Sit-in activists received basic and often inedible provisions while incarcerated; thus, food was a mechanism for disciplining the body. Jenkins-Armstrong’s refusal to consume grits and oatmeal in a contemporary context, therefore, registers her continued resistance to the control and traumatization of the Black mind-body. Even more significantly, she credited her religiosity and involvement in the church for mitigating the resentment that she held towards whites who sustained such dehumanizing racialized practices. She confessed, “At first, I was angry at Caucasian people. . . There was a time I would never consider talking about this because it brought up too many emotions. . . [but] by going to church and steady reading the Bible, I was able to overcome my anger. I don’t have anger anymore. . . You can’t have soul if you hate” (Hoekstra 2015, p. 117). Christian practice enabled Jenkins-Armstrong to claim the “soul force”, a “sense of rightness and righteousness”, that her nonviolence training accentuated (J. Lewis 1998, p. 78). This soul force not only sustained her through the bloody path of racial antipathy, but also placed her and, by extension, the country on a new route to “symmetrical completeness” (Brooks 1881, p. 126).

Jenkins-Armstrong’s acknowledgment of no longer harboring anger towards whites underscores her spiritual rootedness and fulfills the final requisite of James Lawson’s methodology of nonviolence—the follow-up stage where one “engages in healing and reconciliation” (Lawson 2022, p. 42). In his book, *Revolutionary Nonviolence: Organizing for Freedom*, he (p. 48) advised, “You must do the healing that needs to be done. If it’s nonviolent action, it will cause a lot of people to change their lives—not all, but some. And you need to corral those feelings and help those feelings get expressed”. By participating in both civil rights work and engaging in spiritual work for the sake of completeness, Patricia Jenkins-Armstrong changed the course of her life and those of many others, even individuals who resisted the calls for national unity. For, once the mayor of Nashville, Ben West, conceded that he felt that segregation was wrong, six of the downtown merchants also conceded by finally opening their food counters to African-Americans on 10 May 1960.

In his autobiography, King asserted, “Spontaneously born, but guided by the theory of nonviolent resistance, the lunch-counter sit-ins accomplished integration in hundreds of communities at the swiftest rate of change in the civil rights movement up to that time” (Carson 1998, p. 137). For King, the successes of nonviolent direct action would continue by virtue of what he advised in the closing remarks of his “Three Dimensions of a Complete Life” sermons: it would be by activists’ assertions of faith and their maintenance of a rational love of self, of others, and of God that they could eventually realize a complete and true democracy.

6. The Bread(th) of Life: Envisioning a New Politics of Food Access

The lunch-counter sit-ins that occurred in Nashville, Atlanta, and other southern cities during the 1960s illuminate both the racial injustices and economic inequalities inherent in legalized segregation. Indeed, within the culinary geographies of these nonviolent protests, the hovering shadow of food insecurity projected the race-based and financial disparities among some of the participants on each side of the social divide. In her examination of the 1963 Jackson, Mississippi sit-in, Wallach (2019, p. 125), for instance, conveys that “[for] activists like Anne Moody who had known extreme hunger, the abundant food on display in these restaurants also served as a potent symbol of racial difference”.¹⁰ In making this claim, she infers that “the white hecklers were so confident in their ability to access food whenever they wanted it that instead of preserving it, they weaponized it, using it to assault rather than feed bodies” (Wallach 2019, p. 125). King (1958, p. 90) recognized

that the “inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice”, as revealed through these moments of terror and food justice activism. Once he learned from his mother about “segregated eateries and lunch counters when he was only six” and when in his adult life he was relegated to segregated dining cars while traveling in the U.S. did King “first [think] seriously about access to food and the privilege to eat as being not only practical necessities, but also basic human rights” (Baldwin 2016, p. 130).

In his elaborations on mastering the breadth of life dimension in his sermons, King avowed that the alleviation of global hunger begins with a recognition of the interconnectedness of humanity; this recognition would evoke individuals’ and governing bodies’ empathy and resolves to provide nutritional relief. Once recounting the “depressing moments” of bearing witness to impoverished, food-insecure people living on the streets of Calcutta and Bombay, India, in 1959, King rhetorically asked congregants in Germantown and Pasadena, “How can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes millions of people going to bed hungry at night?” (1960c, p. 401; King 1960d, p. 576).¹¹ Moreover, he critiqued governments’ business models of food access that prioritized surplus food storage rather than relieving the nutritional deficiencies of destitute populations within their jurisdictions. He (King 1960d, p. 577) related, “I thought of the fact that we spend millions of dollars a day to store surplus food, and I started thinking to myself, I know where they can store this food free of charge—in the wrinkled stomachs of the hundreds of thousands of millions of people all over the world who are hungry”.¹² The national and international governments’ insistence on denying the presence of starving people while fortifying their stores of food is resonant with the resolve of the wealthy farmer in the biblical parable of the rich fool that King explicated in his “The Man Who Was a Fool” sermon.

In this sermon, King interpreted the allegory of the rich fool found in the gospel of Luke¹³ through the lenses of modern life and activism, as he once again identified egocentrism as the folly of those who “didn’t make contributions to civil rights” and, like the wealthy farmer, “looked at suffering humanity and wasn’t concerned about it” (1961, p. 413). Instead of sharing the abundance of his harvests, the farmer in the Bible decided to construct huge barns and declared, in King’s words, “I’m going to store my goods and my fruit there, and then I’m going to say to my soul, ‘Soul, thou hast much goods, laid up for many years. Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry’” (King 1961, p. 413). However, at the “height of his prosperity, the farmer dies” (p. 413). In his interpretation of this parable, King emphasized that the farmer’s primary interest in his increased materiality and personal comfort depleted his spirituality and obscured the fact that “wealth is always the result of the commonwealth” (p. 415). He stated that the farmer “talked as if he could plow the fields alone. He talked as if he could build the barns alone. He failed to realize the interdependent structure of reality” (p. 415). King surmised that the farmer was blind to the existential crisis that always results from the collapse of the two realms of human existence—the “within” (the spiritual self and ends) and the “without” (the “material stuff necessary for our existence” (p. 414)). God therefore rendered the rich man a fool because he did not sustain the “line of distinction between ‘his’ and ‘him’” (p. 414). In other words, the farmer’s life was incomplete upon his death since he never endeavored to transition from the stage of immoral self-regard. Content with his self-centered ambition, he chose to direct his attention, faith, and love towards himself and his accumulations instead of towards others and God.

7. No Rich Fool on the Farm: The Emptiness of Jason Brown’s Completeness

King’s (1961, p. 414) message regarding human interdependency in relation to food access and honoring the “line of demarcation between [one’s] life (read: within) and [one’s] livelihood (read: without)” manifests in the autobiographical narrative of Jason Brown. In 2012, Brown made the life-altering transition from being a lineman on the fields of the National Football League to being a farmer in the agricultural fields of rural North Carolina. In his memoir, *Centered: Trading Your Plans for a Life that Matters* (Brown and Asay 2021),

he described the moment when he acknowledged a divine calling that did not involve prolonging his tenure as a professional athlete. He (Brown and Asay 2021, p. 94) explained to his wife Tay, “God is telling me that I need to sell our home in St. Louis and move back to North Carolina. . . He is telling me to purchase some land there. . . He wants me to be a farmer”. In conveying this revelation, Brown situated God’s calling on him to be a cultivator of the land in order “to feed His sheep” (p. 77) in opposition to the “call of the American Dream” to which society more readily proclaims, “You must answer” (p. 63). Unlike his professional football career, which was for him a sound “business decision” that would provide financial security and social mobility, farming would clearly pose great challenges because he lacked fundamental knowledge in agricultural production (p. 77). Although he “had been so good at [football]” that he became a star player, on the North Carolina farm, he was a novice (p. 77). Following the divine call certainly was a testament to his faith as he “accepted his tools and limitations” (King 1967, p. 124) as an emergent farmer and began his journey to completeness.

Although practical in his mind, Brown’s economic-based decision to pursue athletics, akin to the determination of the allegoric rich fool to hoard his surplus crops, consigned him to the selfish dimension of completeness, the length of life. He later recognized that his “identity and self-esteem were wrapped up in football” (p. 79), and he reflected, “I was the center of my own existence. I had my mansion. I had my eight-figure NFL contract. I had what the world says to value. And, ironically, I’d taken my eye off the ball” (p. 74). Brown’s concentration on displaying his individual talent to garner praise from spectators reduced his public persona to simply a rich entertainer. The call from God to become a farmer who provisioned the hungry catalyzed a moment of self-redemption for him, one that demanded his exit as “the center of that tiny, self-contained world of sport” (p. 74) and his entrance into a world of “other-centeredness” as King ascribed the breadth of life stage.

In his “Three Dimensions” sermon, King (1960c, p. 398) insisted that “[once] we discover what we were made for, what we are called to do in life, we must set out to do it with all our strength and all the power we can muster up”. As Brown diligently embarked on the journey to fulfill his divine appointment, he found that his complete life conversion required him to experience a spiritual state of “emptiness”. In her analysis of Charles Johnson’s short story, “Dr King’s Refrigerator” (Johnson 2005), Chandler (2013, p. 339) describes emptiness in Buddhist philosophy as transformative since it involves the personal “release of material desire” and egotism, which subsequently facilitates a broader “focus on the interconnectedness we share with all earthly beings”. By way of example, she reads Johnson’s fictional depiction of King’s revelation regarding human interconnection that would be foundational to his “Three Dimensions” sermon as inspired by the clearing of his cabinets and fridge of various sourced foods while looking for a midnight snack to satiate his hunger. She (Chandler 2013, p. 339) argues, “As Martin empties their contents, he learns how to see the food for what it really is; not something that is meant to fulfill his selfish, physical desires, or something merely contained within cultural, ethnic, or social boundaries. Instead, he learns how to see the food as a reflection of his spiritual connection to all of humankind”. Brown came into a similar consciousness as the fictionalized King once he followed God’s command to “POUR IT ALL DOWN THE DRAIN”—the career that made him the highest paid player in the league, the mansion, and the other expensive acquisitions—to establish First Fruits Farm (Brown and Asay 2021, p. 81).

Brown’s conversion narrative, which highlights his emptiness in the founding of First Fruits Farm with Tay, also reads as an intertextual revision of the rich fool biblical parable that King interpreted in 1961. Unlike the wealthy farmer who decided to store his copious harvests in his large barns and live out his days in comfort, Brown relinquished his lucrative career and expressed his care about food accessibility as a human right when he chose to donate the first fruit of his seasonal harvests. He explained that the biblical verses about the first fruit inspired “the basis of [their] new covenant with God. Whatever land God would give [them, they would] use to grow food. And [they] would give away the first fruits of the land—the first and the best—to people in need” (pp. 98, 99). When a representative

from the Society of St. Andrew contacted him about gleaning his fields to provide food to local churches and food banks to provision for the hungry, he honored this covenant. He (p. 138) assured her, “You’re not going to just pick up the leftovers. You’re going to have the best. In fact, you are going to have it all”. Brown’s commitment to his divinely appointed service to others tamped down any inclination that could arise for him to craft an economic plan for his farm (as he did with his football career decision) that was more profit-driven than spiritually driven.

As a farmer, Brown expressed his belief in the spirituality of human interconnection through food, not only when he provisioned local organizations with the first fruit of his initial harvest in 2014 but also when, through the charity of others, he received the bumper crops that made this harvest possible. Once failed investments and embezzlement ravaged his revenue stream of the millions of dollars he earned while in the NFL, Brown acknowledged that he could afford neither a modern tractor nor seeds to begin farming. A neighboring farmer, Len, whom Brown had previously asked about planting sweet potatoes and who had no knowledge of Brown’s financial predicament, helped to find a resolution to Brown’s crisis of confidence about whether he could conduct his agricultural ministry without the funds. In an act of care, Len contacted Dave and Allen Rose, experienced sweet potato growers with a thriving business, and once they learned about the intentions of First Fruits Farm, the Rose brothers donated “USD 5000 worth of transplants”, which Len tasked his workers to plant, unbeknownst to Brown, in five-acres of First Fruits’ fields. This “miracle”, as Brown termed it, because it came without costs to him, resulted from his decision to follow God’s command to “walk in faith” (p. 132).

Walking in faith would also be important in sustaining the Brown family’s basic needs, given their financial precarity. Brown (p. 124) stated, “Even in our relative poverty, even when it seemed as though we couldn’t afford it, we’ve given our harvest away”. These continual offerings, as expressions of their love for suffering humanity, led to other blessings for his family and the farm. After news outlets publicized his post-football career and First Fruits, Brown received letters from people nationwide who offered praise and support. And it was through the generosity of one such individual that he finally secured a modern, air-conditioned tractor to replace the age-old wheezing and growling Allis-Chalmers that he prayed to God daily would continue to operate (p. 3).

The emptying of Jason Brown, both the voluntary and involuntary release of his material comforts and ego in reverence to God, shaped his experience of the integrous, three-dimensional life that King characterized as completeness. In assessing his life’s journey, Brown (p. 160) concluded, “Success is nice, but I wasn’t called to be successful—at least not how the world defines it. I wasn’t called to be comfortable. I was called to be faithful”. His defiance of the American Dream’s prosperity narrative by becoming a Christian servant signals his newly directed attention not only on the I–thou relationship but also on “Thee”—God (p. 160). For, as he placed his service over selfishness in provisioning the hungry, Brown simultaneously recognized God as his companion and provisioner through time and circumstance.

8. Conclusions

At the end of his “Three Dimensions of a Complete Life” sermons, King identified faith and love as the essential hallmarks of a complete life. At Friendship Baptist in Pasadena, he (King 1960c, p. 405) assured his audience that “if you catch [faith], you will be able to rise from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope”. To the congregants at the churches in Montgomery, Germantown, and Chicago, he emphasized obedience to the divine commandment to love oneself, others, and God. For in so doing, they would realize “in [their] individual lives, in [their] national lives” the promise of a new and “ideal humanity” that St. John envisioned (King 1960d, p. 579). Indeed, Dr King’s, Patricia Jenkins-Armstrong’s, and Jason Brown’s food activism embodied this spiritual imperative that sustained their beliefs in justice for all as well as an unrelenting drive to achieve the wholeness characteristic of the new Jerusalem. In defying segregation policies that

prohibited interracial dining and alleviating communal food insecurity through agricultural production, these activists would experience both the power of faith and a love that was more than “interaction between individuals” but a “potent instrument for social change and transformation” (King 1958, p. 97).

Undoubtedly, African–Americans’ food justice activism continues not only to inspire socio-political and personal progress but also to illuminate the connections among African–Americans’ spirituality, health, and livability. Contemporarily, one recognizes this trajectory, for example, in the efforts of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, a grassroots organization that uses urban agriculture to fight food insecurity. This organization’s community gardens provide both healthy food and safe, healing spaces “where [African–American women of the community] are able to exercise, reflect, meditate, and farm as a stress reliever” (White 2019, p. 220). The concern for the wholistic health of members of the Black community is also resonant in the teachings of African–American naturopaths such as Queen Afua and Dr Laila O. Afrika. Like Dr Alvenia Fulton, who opened “a combination health food store, restaurant, and herbal pharmacy” on the Southside of Chicago in the 1950s (Opie 2008, p. 166), Queen Afua (1993) and Dr Afrika (1983), advance a liberatory dietary politics which insists that a natural food diet would ensure African–Americans’ physical and spiritual well-being. Dr Afrika (1983, p. 14) even argues that health is “a human right” and that shifting the African–American diet from European-based to an African wholistic one is an “overlooked revolution”. Ultimately, African–Americans’ food justice activism articulates a soul force that has commissioned and sustained the fight for freedom, equality, and survival of the corporate whole, as Dr King advocated in his “Three Dimensions of a Complete Life” sermons.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Dr King delivered various iterations of this sermon on multiple occasions, and as part of other sermons he wrote throughout the 1960s. This essay focuses on those delivered in Montgomery, Alabama in 1954; Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1960; Pasadena, California in 1960; and Chicago, Illinois in 1967.
- ² St. John’s vision of the “New Jerusalem” appears in verses nine through twenty-seven in the twenty-first chapter of Revelation. When describing the “holy city”, John states that it “has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal” (NRSV 1989, p. 1008).
- ³ Lischer argues that King adopted the “biblical text, tone, and a concept for a sermon along with a generic outline consisting of three ‘places’” which he “amplified with proofs unlike those used by Brooks” (Lischer 1997, p. 98).
- ⁴ Throughout the remainder of my discussion, I employ the truncated title “Three Dimensions” sermon to reference King’s work.
- ⁵ Frederick Douglass Opie explains that Georgia Gilmore and other women who sold baked goods to support the Montgomery bus boycott called their group the “Club from Nowhere” so that “they could earn money for the movement without raising the suspicions of white officials and members of the Klan” (Opie 2017, p. 61). The result of naming the club as such was that whites who purchased the baked goods did not realize that the money would go to the movement.
- ⁶ For a comprehensive history of the lunch-counter sit-in movement, see Melody Herr’s *Sitting for Equal Service: Lunch-Counter Sit-ins, United States 1960s* (Herr 2011).
- ⁷ Buber (1958) asserts, “The relation to the Thou is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between I and Thou”. In other words, the I–thou recognizes the existence of the whole person in what he calls the three spheres of relationship: the relationship to others, nature, and spiritual beings. Any preconceived ideas or expectations about these relationships may jeopardize an I–thou relationship from forming. King also applies Buber’s philosophy to his analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan in his “Three Dimensions” sermon. He states that the Samaritan was a great man because he “could project the “I” into the “thou””.
- ⁸ Scholars have also called King’s spiritual revelation his “Kitchen Vision” (Baldwin and Anderson 2018, p. 5).

- ⁹ Jennifer Jensen Wallach elaborates on the significance of Baker's use of Coke and hamburgers in her speech. She states that "Coke and hamburgers were, and still are, powerful symbols of American culture and affluence" (Wallach 2019, p. 125).
- ¹⁰ In her autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Anne Moody detailed her experience of poverty and hunger as a child. She recalled that her mother lacked money to purchase food because of her father's gambling habit and that they most often subsisted on beans and bread. (Moody 1968, p. 29).
- ¹¹ In the July 1959 edition of *Ebony* magazine, King speaks of food insecurity in India and the United States in an article entitled "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi" (King 1959, vol. 5, p. 231).
- ¹² In his sermon, "The Man Who Was a Fool", King (1961, vol. 6, pp. 416–17) makes this same case, as he discusses the condition of food-insecure people that he witnessed while traveling in South America during the summer of 1960.
- ¹³ The biblical allegory of the rich fool is found in the twelfth chapter of Luke, verses 13–21.

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