

# UNDERSTANDING THE MAN

## INTERVIEW THREAD THREE: AS A MINISTER

### RICHARD FERNANDEZ

“One of the aspects of Doctor King’s life that has not been very well examined and has not been paid attention to a lot, because his public life was so very important to us, is the way in which his own intellectual and spiritual life developed. Many people know that he was raised in the home with a fire and brimstone father, and that for a lot of reasons this did not appeal to him as he got older into high school and college. But, having said that, he wasn’t quite sure what else was out there. And between college and seminary up in Pennsylvania, he kept struggling with, ‘Where am I in the theological universe?’ He was very much attracted to Mahatma Gandhi, and actually took a trip to India during that time. He was also attracted to a professor in New York by the name of Reinhold Niebuhr, who was a great theological thinker. Niebuhr was not a pacifist, Gandhi, of course, was. When he left [Crozer Theological] Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania to go to Boston University School of Theology for a doctorate degree, he was still wrestling with ‘Where am I as Doctor King the preacher going to be?’ And at BU he ran into a group called the Personal School of Theology. And the Personal School actually believe that when you cry, God cries, when you laugh, God laughs, when you’re pleased, God is pleased. And he was really taken with that.”

“I don’t remember during his active ministry following the seminary at BU, him ever uttering a word about — a critical word about someone’s theological position being different than his own. He was such a universalist. That wasn’t in his repertoire, that the God he worshiped loved all people, accepted all people, and that’s what he was committed to doing, even though he wouldn’t get near the hellfire and brimstone again for himself.”

### HARRY BELAFONTE

“Everything about Doctor King was somewhat off-center for me. Here was a man possessed with this intellect, with this cranium, that was bubbling over with information and need; he had a need to be understood. Also, he, he — his humility, nothing about him assumed anything. He wasn’t trying to be loved or disliked, he wasn’t trying to be a leader, he was want — he was the first person I’d ever met that had been touched by history, and had been touched by life, to be on the mission that he ultimately chose to take and to bring with him this sense of do-ability. Even now I struggle with trying to describe much that first meeting. Everything about him was on a —unfamiliar, but the way in which he stated his case, the way in which he stated his vision for what he was to do, even the expression of the great doubt as to his capacity to fill what he felt history was demanding of us and of the movement and of black people, whether or not he was the right choice to take on such a responsibility. But as long as the compass was pointed at him, he did not shy away from taking on the challenge and our task was to help him succeed.”