AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN
An Autobiography
By Reni David Abernathy
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By Juan Williams

RALPH ABERNATHY spent the most important years of his life as Martin Luther King Jr.'s Sancho Panza, his best friend, his second-in-command in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and even, when necessary, his stand-in. Now when Abernathy might finally have center stage to himself, there is great irony in finding that Abernathy's own life story is the closest that researchers and students will ever get to a full autobiography of King, much closer than the brief account of his own career that King himself wrote.

Unfortunately, this valuable personal portrait of King may be missed in the uproar surrounding Abernathy's revelations about the night of April 3, 1968, the night before King's assassination. Abernathy's account suggests that King separately slept with two women that night—neither his wife—and he writes that he witnessed King striking another with whom he had had an ongoing sexual affair. They fought because the woman was angry at finding King's bed empty when she came to have sex with him at 3 a.m.

That report comes in the middle of a book that offers a very human, realistic look at Abernathy and King. All childhood dedication of King is dismissed here by his best and closest friend and replaced by the reality of King's moral struggle to deal with the pressures of competition, the media spotlight and the civil rights struggle. The book deserves attention for its loving depiction of the true friendship between Abernathy and King, its insider's account of major moments in the civil rights movement and of the personal crises in King's life as he struggled to become a great American leader.

Even so, the book met, there were close parallels between the lives of Abernathy and King. Like King, Abernathy came from a strong, basically middle-class family that enjoyed a certain status in its community despite the realities of Southern segregation. Both families lived well. Abernathy in rural Alabama, King in Atlanta. And, like King, Abernathy had almost no brushes with racial whites as a child. When he did happen into a drunken white man in a grocery store who called him a "nigger" and threatened to hit him if he didn't finish the drunk's last soda, the white grocer threatened young Abernathy, "Don't you touch that boy, he cried. Then he added, 'That's the son of W.L. Abernathy.'

Abernathy's account of his childhood, his family and his time in the segregated Army is a charming memoir. There are beautiful anecdotal touches: Abernathy and his 11 siblings anxiously waiting for their favorite treat—the sugary drops of their parents' evening cups of coffee. In this loving family, young David came to realize that "the preacher, after all, was the finest and most important person around, someone who was accorded respect wherever he went."

Once he left the Army and Alabama State University—where he honed his leadership skills as a sergeant and as president of the student council—Abernathy began to follow the preacher's path. He spoke at various churches in Alabama, and then, at the surprisingly young age of 24, was selected as pastor of the prestigious First Baptist Church in Montgomery. Abernathy's account of his life as a successful young black Southern preacher is a sociological.

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Abernathy had little new to add to the previous accounts of these events, but there is a first-hand quality to his story that sets it apart, better and for worse. This personal account—one man's story, a limited perspective that focuses on Abernathy and King, excluding other players, even those who worked closely with them.

And like Abernathy, whose life had been so comfortable and middle-class, was unused to the hit-and-run competition for leadership in the movement. He does not see himself as the central figure. In his book, he hints at his feelings about his personal contribution to the movement.

For example, a notable absence from these pages is an account of the ceremony where King received the Nobel Peace Prize. Other chronicles of King’s trip to Sweden reveal Abernathy’s desire to be treated as an equal to King and has hurt at the reality that King, not he and not the team, was being celebrated. Similarly, because of Abernathy’s and King’s distance for the young writer. At the time the NAACP’s Committee, there is no mention of this in the book of the sit-in demonstrations by students who were frustrated by the lack of action from King and Abernathy in the late 1950s and who kicked off the ‘50s with defiance, breaking away from King’s leadership. Abernathy makes it plain that he and King took the NAACP’s action.