



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Beyond the Dream

Youth Essay Contest Reading

Before responding to the essay prompt, you must read all three excerpts. Together, they introduce parts of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s work, ideas and personal sacrifice that are often less emphasized in familiar retellings of his life.

King's Work, Victories, and the Work Still Ahead

Context

By 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had spent more than a decade helping lead campaigns against segregation and racial injustice. Those campaigns had helped produce enormous change. The Montgomery Bus Boycott helped end legally segregated city buses. The Birmingham Campaign helped build national pressure for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Selma campaign helped create momentum for the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The movement had won major victories. But King did not believe the work was finished.

By 1967, he was asking harder questions about why Black Americans remained disproportionately poor, unemployed and confined to inadequate housing even after major civil-rights laws had been passed. His attention increasingly turned toward the structures that produced inequality.

Selected passage from *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1967)

Begin with his discussion of poverty and continuing through his questions about the economic system, the “edifice which produces beggars” argument, and the connection he draws among racism, economic exploitation and militarism.

Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: “A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together.” This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together—[B]lack and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.

However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also

dwellers. Equality with whites will not solve the problems of either whites or Negroes if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty and in a universe doomed to extinction by war (p.177).

Nothing could be more tragic than for men to live in these revolutionary times and fail to achieve the new attitudes and the new mental outlooks that the new situation demands (p. 180).

One of the great problems of mankind is that we suffer from a poverty of the spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually. Every man lives in two realms, the internal and the external. The internal is that realm of spiritual ends expressed in art, literature, morals and religion. The external is that complex of devices, techniques, mechanisms and instrumentalities by means of which we live. Our problem today is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external (p. 181).

As you read, consider: What does this excerpt reveal about how King's thinking had expanded beyond changing discriminatory laws?

The Human Cost of the Work

Context

The King remembered in photographs can seem almost fearless. But King did not describe himself that way.

In January 1956, during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King was only 27 years old. He was a young pastor, husband and father. His family was receiving repeated threats. Late one night, another caller threatened to kill him and harm his family. King could not sleep. He went into his kitchen alone.

Selected passage from King's account of the kitchen-table experience in *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958)

King's account of sitting alone, thinking about Coretta and their infant daughter, admitting his fear, considering whether he could leave the movement, praying after reaching the end of his own strength, and ultimately deciding to continue.

One night toward the end of January I settled into bed late, after a strenuous day. Coretta had already fallen asleep and just as I was about to doze off the telephone rang. An angry voice said, "Listen, n---, we've taken all we want from you; before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery." I hung up, but I couldn't sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. 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. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. “I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

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 (pp. 124-125).

Three days later, King's home was bombed while Coretta Scott King and their baby daughter were inside. They survived.

As you read, consider: How does knowing about King's fear, exhaustion and doubt change or deepen your understanding of his courage and sacrifice?

What King Was Fighting for When He Died?

Context

Twelve years after that night in his kitchen, King's work had expanded considerably. In the final years of his life, he spoke increasingly about poverty and economic inequality. In late 1967, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference began organizing the Poor People's Campaign, which sought economic security for poor Americans across racial lines.

In 1968, approximately 1,300 Black sanitation workers in Memphis went on strike after years of low wages, dangerous working conditions and racial discrimination. King went to Memphis to support them.

This matters because King is often remembered for how he died without equal attention to what he was fighting for when he died.

Selected passage from *I See the Promised Land* (April 3, 1968)

The section addresses the sanitation workers, economic power and collective action, continuing through King's commitment to the struggle and his awareness of the danger facing him.

It's alright to talk about “long white robes over yonder, “ in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's alright to talk about “streets flowing with milk and honey,” but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.

Now the other thing we'll have to do is this: Always anchor our external direct action with the power of economic withdrawal. Now, we are poor people, individually, we are poor when you compare us with white society in America. We are poor. Never stop and forget that collectively, that means all of us together, collectively we are richer than all the nations in the world, with the exception of nine. Did you ever think about that? After you leave the United States, Soviet Russia, Great Britain, West Germany, France, and I could name the others, the Negro collectively is richer than most nations of the world. We have an annual income of more than thirty billion dollars a year, which is more than all of the exports of the United States, and more than the national budget of Canada. Did you know that? That's power right there, if we know how to pool it.

And so, as a result of this, we are asking you tonight, to go out and tell your neighbors not to buy Coca-Cola in Memphis. Go by and tell them not to buy Sealest milk. Tell them not to buy--what is the other bread?--Wonder Bread. And what is the other bread company, Jesse? Tell them not to buy Hart's bread. As Jesse Jackson has said, up to now, only the garbage men have been feeling pain; now we must kind of redistribute the pain. We are choosing these companies because they haven't been fair in their hiring policies; and we are choosing them because they can begin the process of saying, they are going to support the needs and the rights of these men who are on strike. And then they can move on downtown and tell Mayor Loeb to do what is right.

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord (*A Testament of Hope*, pp. 282-283, 286)

King was assassinated the following evening, April 4, 1968. He was 39. But the Memphis sanitation strike did not end when King died. The workers continued, and later that month the city reached an agreement that included union recognition and wage increases.

King, the Movement, and How We Remember Him

King mattered enormously. His leadership, strategy, voice and sacrifice mattered. But the victories of the Civil Rights Movement were never his alone. They were achieved through movements involving local organizers, students, churches, civil-rights organizations and thousands of ordinary people.

King acknowledged this himself. Reflecting on Montgomery, he explained that he had not started the protest and had instead responded when the community called on him to serve as a spokesperson.

His assassination did not end the work because the work had never belonged to one person.

How Did King Want to Be Remembered?

King is often presented through a small number of familiar images and phrases, especially the March on Washington, the “I Have a Dream” speech and his commitment to nonviolence. Those are real parts of his story, but they are not the whole story.

Two months before his assassination, King preached “The Drum Major Instinct” at Ebenezer Baptist Church and imagined what he would want said at his funeral. He did not want the focus placed on his awards or status. He wanted his life remembered through service, love, justice, peace and commitment.

“I just want to leave a committed life behind.”