Reflection

Martin Luther King, Jr., is well-known throughout the world for his leadership role in the U.S. civil rights movement and his belief in non-violent social change. He is probably most remembered for the historical 1963 March on Washington and his accompanying “I Have a Dream” speech.

However, many people have a rather limited understanding of Martin Luther King, Jr.; they think that his speeches and writings dealt only with the civil rights movement in the U.S. and the African-American community. Few people are aware of his broader vision of human rights for all people of the world. Few are aware of his outcries against the militarism, poverty and materialism that plagued the U.S. in the 1960s and that continue to do so, today.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was a man of deep faith and a prophet. And like all prophets, he had a message of relevance for the people of his time. King’s message is relevant still today, and we are called to listen attentively to his message and to respond.

On January 20, 2003, the United States will officially observe the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. As a way of celebrating this prophet’s birth, life, and legacy, we encourage you to learn more about Martin Luther King, Jr. Read the quotations about and by Martin Luther King, Jr. that follow. When you have finished, complete the discussion questions as a group.
About Martin Luther King, Jr.

“He envisioned a nonviolent revolution that would challenge all the values and institutions of our society, and combine the struggle against racism with a struggle against poverty, militarism, and materialism.”
“From Marx to Malcolm and Martin,” Grace Lee Boggs

“. . . King began by challenging segregation, then gradually addressed the broader issues of peacemaking, economic justice, and global cooperation . . .”
“Reclaiming the Dreamer,” Dee Dee Risher, Coeditor

“The nonviolent revolution he envisioned was growing—beyond national borders, but also beyond simple political formulations. It was a spiritual revolution as well. His call was an urgent invitation to turn sharply from our commitment to an ever-ascending, every-stifling, ‘higher standard of living,’ and to set our faces in compassion toward the poor of every color of every land. He was calling us to give our imagination, our skills, our training, our energies, and perhaps our lives to the tasks of eliminating the great human scourges of hunger, exploitation, and war, to find in such work the roots of peace, the roots of our humanity, the presence of God.”
“The Road to Redemption,” Vincent Harding

“For him, the United States could pursue effective peace only as this nation recognized how intrinsically peace is joined to justice, especially justice in the uses and distribution of the world’s common resources.”
“The Road to Redemption,” Vincent Harding

“King knew that the future of our society is bound up with the struggle of the poor for their freedom from want and misery.”
“A New and Unsettling Force,” Cheri Honkala and Willie Baptist

“As a Black man living in the racist United States and as a philosopher, King was supremely conscious of the contradiction between our technological overdevelopment and our human underdevelopment—as he often put it, we have ‘guided missiles and misguided men.’”
“From Marx to Malcolm and Martin,” Grace Lee Boggs

“King . . . challenged not only political and economic systems, but our own internal understandings of ourselves and of the world. He called not just for new structures in power, but new kinds of power, rooted in democratic empowerment of all persons as bearing dignity and possibility.”
“From Marx to Malcolm and Martin,” Grace Lee Boggs

But King spoke of love that is the opposite of fear. It is the ability to stand up and speak the truth, to seek justice in the face of those who have harmed you time and time again, knowing that more likely than not they will hurt you again.
“War is the Enemy of the Poor,” Ewuare Osayande

“Faith played a profound role in the justice work that King did. He argued that any religion that professed to be concerned with the souls of people, but not concerned with the economic and social conditions that disempowered them, was a false religion.”
“Becoming What We Ought to Be,” The Other Side, Irene Monroe

“[King’s] vision was not restricted to the United States. His message and nonviolent resistance to oppression inspire many Africans—and others around the world—as we press for more democratic institutions. His image of universal brotherhood and sisterhood—what he called a ‘world house’—is revolutionary . . .”
“A Citizen of the World,” Lucas Nandih Shamala “Becoming What We Ought to Be,” The Other Side, Irene Monroe

Source: The articles and authors attributed to these quotes can be found in the January/February 2003 issue of The Other Side. The Other Side’s mission is to uphold a Christian vision that nurtures those who thirst for deeper spiritual rooting, long for justice and peace, and work towards a transformed world. www.theotherside.org
The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.

“I learned that the inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice . . . Here I saw economic injustice firsthand, and realized that the poor White was exploited just as much as the Negro.”

“A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death .”
Martin Luther King, Jr., “Vietnam War” speech, 1967

“If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the 20th century.”

“A time comes when silence is betrayal. Men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government’s policy, especially in time of war. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. For we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness so close around us . . . We are called upon to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.”
Martin Luther King, Jr., at the Riverside Church in New York City, 1967.

“If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and even our nation . . . It really boils down to this: All of life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly . . . I cannot be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.”
Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Christmas Sermon on Peace”, December 1967

“The method of nonviolence seeks not to humiliate and not to defeat the oppressor, but it seeks to win his friendship and his understanding. And thereby and therefore the aftermath of this method is reconciliation.”
Martin Luther King, Jr., “Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony,” Address delivered at the American Baptist Assembly and American Home Mission Agencies Conference, July 1956

“Nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation.”
Martin Luther King, Jr., Address Delivered in Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, December 1964

“I am convinced that love is the most durable power in the world. It is not an expression of impractical idealism, but of practical realism. Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, love is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. To return hate for hate does nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Someone must have sense enough and religion enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil, and this can only be done through love.”

“I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity. I choose to live for and with those who find themselves seeing life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit sign. This is the way I’m going. If it means suffering a little bit, I’m going that way. If it means sacrificing, I’m going that way. If it means dying for them, I’m going that way, because I heard a voice saying, ‘Do something for others.’”
Discussion Questions

What insights have you gained about Martin Luther King, Jr., from reading the quotes on pages 2-3?

Which of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s concerns do you think are relevant still today? Why?

Identify and discuss one quote of Martin Luther King, Jr., that has meaning for you.

Why do you think so much attention has been directed towards the racial justice work of Martin Luther King, Jr., and so little attention has been directed towards his work for economic justice and other issues?

Read the poem to the right, written by Carl Wendell Himes, Jr., after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. Explore the meaning of the last three lines: “And besides / it is easier to build monuments / than to make a better world.” How can the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., help us truly build a better world?

Now that he is safely dead
Let us praise him
build monuments to his glory
sing hosannas to his name.
Dead men make
such convenient heroes:
They cannot rise
to challenge the images
we would fashion from their lives.
And besides,
it is easier to build monuments
than to make a better world.

Carl Wendell Himes, Jr.