

**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Brotherhood Breakfast**  
**By Michael Josephson**  
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I am so grateful and honored to have this opportunity to speak to you today about one of my lifelong heroes, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

This event has a long and distinguished legacy. This is the 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Brotherhood Breakfast sponsored by the Los Angeles YMCA. The first was held just three years after Dr. King's assassination -- way before it was common to celebrate the life, work, and principles of this extraordinary American leader.

I mentioned that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of my heroes. He's in good company. The others are Abraham Lincoln, Mohandas Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt, and a hero of another sort, the only one I've met, John Wooden.

The dictionary defines a hero as "a person noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose, especially one who has risked or sacrificed his or her life." On a personal level, a hero is someone we hold in especially high esteem. For me, Martin Luther King, Jr. is both a national and personal hero.

Read his speeches and weigh them in the context of his time. Study his actions and his ability to resist enormous pressures from those who thought he was going too far as well as those who thought he wasn't going far enough. It's evident he was an extraordinary inspirational leader with uncommon vision and strength.

Dr. King didn't simply talk about his dreams. He went to the battle lines time and time again to fight for them, and what he did made a difference. He devoted his too-short life to bring us to a more compassionate and just world where, in his words, people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. He was murdered before he reached the age of 40 in the midst of that fight.

Last year I wrote a commentary called "It's Time Again for Heroes" that I want to share:

"When I was very young, it was important to have heroes, someone to look up to and admire. And I had plenty. I admired cowboys, baseball players, and presidents. But by the time I got to college, I saw the world through a much more cynical lens. Everyone had flaws. Hero-worship was naive. The white-hat warrior for truth and justice was replaced by the anti-hero, flawed but interesting characters motivated by crass but human motives.

"This cynicism still darkens our world view. Today, many young people don't have heroes. Instead we have celebrities and superstars, men and women of accomplishment but not necessarily character.

“Maybe the events of September 11 will wake us up to the reality that cynicism, not heroism, is the false illusion and that we’ve always had plenty of heroes; we just haven’t paid any attention to them.

“I don’t just mean those who sacrifice their lives for others in great acts of valor. We also have everyday heroes, seemingly ordinary men and women who live noble and worthy lives, who overcome their fears, help their neighbors, and love their kids.

“Longfellow wrote:

*Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And departing, leave behind us,  
Footprints on the sands of time.*

“There are lots of parents, teachers, coaches, cops, soldiers, and firefighters who are also leaving their footprints in the sands of time. Take a moment to appreciate them. Then dedicate yourself to becoming one of them.”

Dr. King is a hero on a grand scale. His courageous pursuit of the noble purpose of civil justice, even at the ultimate cost of his own life, surely is worthy of appreciation, admiration, and a special day of commemoration.

I know of no better way to convey the full texture of Dr. King’s mind and message than to use his own words. Often the cadence enhanced his content as he became the conscience of the nation.

In one of his earliest writings in 1958 he said, “Government action is not the whole answer to the present crisis, but it is an important partial answer. Morals cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. The law cannot make an employer love me, but it can keep him from refusing to hire me because of the color of my skin.”

Four years later, he added, “It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that’s pretty important.”

One of Dr. Martin Luther King’s greatest character strengths was his sense of personal responsibility. He understood the importance of personal action even when it required sacrifice. In his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, he wrote: “Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle, the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”

He ratcheted up his call to action and personal accountability when, paraphrasing Gandhi, he said, “To ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it.”

Dr. King was a man of action who taught that passivity and apathy are unacceptable options. He insisted that we are accountable not only for what we do, but for what we don't do. He agreed with Edmund Burke's observation that "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

Among Dr. King's historically significant contributions was his advocacy of and adherence to nonviolence while, at the same time, engaging in aggressive confrontation of and resistance. He often combined the powerful reasoning of a philosopher with the charismatic leadership and stirring oratorical skills of a preacher to educate the nation about the nature of moral civil disobedience and the fallacy of "the end justifies the means" arguments.

"We will never have peace in the world," he wrote in *The Trumpet of Conscience*, "until men everywhere recognize that ends are not cut off from the means because the means represent the idea in the making and the end in process. Ultimately you cannot reach good ends through evil means because the means represent the seed and the end represents the tree."

His 1963 *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* lays out the case for civil disobedience: "I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law."

What's so important here is his recognition that morally justified civil disobedience requires the acceptance of consequences. He believed that if he was to make the point he wanted to make, he had to go to jail. And he was willing to do so.

Yet it is his August 28, 1963, address at the March on Washington that is most moving and most remembered:

"And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!'"

"I have a dream," he added, "that one day, on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

But our celebration today must be about more than sharing eloquent rhetoric. It should honor the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by reminding us of the issues and principles that drove him and the work that has yet to be done.

Dr. King's central themes were human dignity and freedom, social justice, and the elimination of racism and bigotry. These are still very real issues, both here and throughout the world.

In this country, the disease of racism and discrimination against what were commonly called Negroes began with slavery. Yet, I think most Americans tend to view slavery and the practice of kidnapping human beings from their homeland so they could be sold and owned as property as remote ancient history.

If we have not personally experienced an event, including the horrors associated with slavery or pervasive discrimination, it can be hard to establish and maintain the kind of emotional connection that is necessary to engage the conscience.

I had no real emotional notion of the staggering evil of slavery and the toll it took on individual human lives until Alex Haley's magnificent book *Roots* became a public television sensation. It's one thing to know about and even hate the abstract concept of slavery. It is quite another to understand and empathize with the intense and continuous suffering to individuals associated with these human practices.

And even though I lived through the modern civil-rights movement led by Dr. King, I find it hard to believe that was only decades ago to the month that George Wallace, after being elected governor of Alabama, declared in his inaugural address, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!"

Many in my generation have forgotten, and many in the younger generation never knew, how prevalent ugly and pervasive institutionalized segregation and uninhibited racial bigotry still were even in the Fifties and Sixties.

In addition to private forms of bigotry that kept black people out of certain neighborhoods and apartments, jobs, and graduate schools, there was in the South widespread government sanction for discrimination. Poll taxes were designed to prevent them from voting while many states passed laws prohibiting intermarriage and allowing local governments to forbid black Americans from going to certain schools, riding in the front of a bus, using public swimming pools, or drinking fountains.

American consciousness was raised in the Sixties by a small army of leaders and authors who didn't always agree on tactics but shared an active hatred for racism: James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, Michael Harrington and, of course, Dr. King himself.

Listen to the words and feel the depth of conviction and pain revealed by them and allow these insights to reach your consciences as well as your mind.

Revealing deep resentment, James Baldwin in 1962 wrote, "At bottom, to be colored means that one has been caught in some utterly unbelievable cosmic joke, a joke so hideous and in such bad taste that it defeats all categories and definitions."

Ralph Ellison expressed a similar frustration differently: “I am an invisible man. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids -- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.”

Finally, we should take note of what textbook writer Michael Harrington said in his breakthrough book, *The Other America*: “To be a Negro is to participate in a culture of poverty and fear that goes far deeper than any law for or against discrimination....After the racist statutes are all struck down, after legal equality has been achieved in the schools and in the courts, there remains the profound institutionalized and abiding wrong that white America has worked on the Negro for so long.”

Thankfully, and in no small part due to Dr. King’s efforts, we are a different country today. There is far more justice and far less racism, but it would be a great mistake to believe the work is done.

I’m reminded of Jack Nicholson’s classic line in *A Few Good Men*: “You can’t handle the truth!” The truth is, there are all sorts of pockets of bigotry in American society. Victims not only include African-Americans but Jews, Native Americans, gays, women, Arabs, and Hispanics. There are plenty of new frontiers to challenge the next generation of Martin Luther Kings.

As monumental as were Dr. King’s efforts and achievements in pursuit of social justice, civil liberties and racial harmony, his legacy goes well beyond these issues. Lessons from his life inspire and guide our own search for significance.

One of these lessons is that it really is important how we live our lives. His life and death teach us how much more meaningful and worthy our lives can become when our concerns go beyond the desire for success to a desire for significance.

Alfred Nobel had the extraordinary experience of reading his own obituary. It changed his life and enriched the world. It seems his brother died, and a Swedish newspaper printed Alfred’s death notice by mistake. Although the article was complimentary, describing Mr. Nobel as a brilliant chemist who made a fortune as the inventor of dynamite, he was horrified to be memorialized in such utilitarian terms. Determined to leave a more positive legacy, he bequeathed his considerable wealth to establishing the Nobel Prizes to acknowledge great human achievements.

Although few of us can create something as momentous as the Nobel Prize, we can all live lives that earn a eulogy our children and parents would be proud of.

In the hurly burly of everyday living, it’s hard to keep perspective. Money, position, pride, and power seem so important -- until they’re not. At the end of their life, no one says, “I wish I’d spent more time at the office.”

If you want to know how to live your life, just think about what you want people to say about you after you die -- and live backwards.

Several years ago I came across a poem by a woman named Linda Ellis. It's called "The Dash."

*I read of a man who stood to speak at the funeral of his friend.  
He referred to the dates on her tombstone from the beginning to the end.  
He noted that first came her date of birth and spoke the following date with tears.  
But he said what mattered most of all was the dash between those years.*

*For that dash represents all the time that she spent alive on earth.  
And now only those who loved her know what that little line is worth.  
For it matters not how much we own -- the cars, the house, the cash.  
What matters is how we live and love and how we spend our dash.*

*So think about this long and hard. Are there things you'd like to change?  
For you never know how much time is left that can still be rearranged.  
If we could just slow down long enough to consider what's true and real,  
And always try to understand the way other people feel.*

*And be less quick to anger and show appreciation more,  
And love the people in our lives like we've never loved before.  
If we treat each other with respect and more often wear a smile,  
Remembering that this special dash might only last a little while.*

*So when your eulogy's been read with your life's actions to rehash,  
Would you be proud of the things they say about how you spent your dash?*

A second lesson from Dr. King's life is that we all have a fundamental responsibility to recognize and seek to close the gap between the "is" and the "ought." When President John F. Kennedy observed that "life is not fair," he was accurately reporting on moral shortcomings of the real world. He wasn't saying it's okay for any person or institution to be unfair.

Finally, Dr. King's life reminds us of the important role adversity plays in our life. Once more, I'd like to share with you a radio commentary dealing with this situation.

"No one wants pain, troubles, or hardship, but it's absolutely inevitable that we all will have plenty of each. And they won't always come in forms we prefer, doses we think are manageable, or at times of our choosing. Adversity is never welcome, but it's not necessarily our enemy.

In fact, our character, more than anything else, will determine the quality of our life. And it will be shaped by how we deal with adversities -- from everyday dislikes, difficulties, and disappointments to deaths and personal disasters.

Shakespeare said, "Sweet are the uses of adversity/Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,/Wears yet a precious jewel in his head." Adversity's precious jewel is cut by the chisels of confidence and competence, forged in a process of confronting and overcoming difficulties.

The path to achievement and fulfillment often passes through the aggravations and hazards of life's thorny underbrush. Once we learn that adversities are simply obstacles, not prisons, we can develop the courage, patience, perseverance, and the will to solve problems we cannot avoid and bear pains we cannot relieve.

As the blade is sharpened by friction with a harder stone, so is character strengthened through struggle and striving. Nietzsche put it another way: "What doesn't destroy me makes me stronger."

This poem by an unknown author reminds us that what we need is not always what we want:

*I asked for Strength  
And God gave me Difficulties to make me strong.*

*I asked for Wisdom  
And God gave me Problems to solve.*

*I asked for Prosperity  
And God gave me Brain and Brawn to work.*

*I asked for Courage  
And God gave me Danger to overcome.*

*I asked for Love  
And God gave me Troubled People to help.*

*I asked for Favor  
And God gave me Opportunities.*

*I got nothing I wanted  
But I received everything I needed.*

There is only one truly appropriate way to honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. That is to conscientiously assure that our personal attitudes and actions advance his work.

The night before he was killed, he uttered these prophetic words: "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. 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 seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we, as people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not fearing any man."