

IN HIS OWN WORDS: The Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

In this year which marks the 59th anniversary of the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the 20th anniversary of his tragic death, it is fitting that we listen again to his words—that we might be re-inspired, re-dedicated, and re-committed to the principles and values of our religious heritage which made his life a thing of lasting beauty.

If Dr. King were still with us in the flesh, how would he address the issues that still confront his people today? For your reading pleasure and information, we have selected passages from some of Dr. King's writings and speeches that seem to speak most pointedly to these issues.

In these days when there are multiple signs of hopelessness in the Black community—crime, drugs, suicide, among others—Dr. King's words of faith and hope may yet instill peace within our hearts and lead us out of the darkness into the light.

Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. When our days become dreary with low-hanging clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a great benign Power in the universe who is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.

Strength to Love (1963)

At least a part of the darkness and hopelessness is due to what Dr. King called "a tragic breakdown of moral standards, and the midnight of moral degradation."

It is also midnight within the moral order. At midnight colors lose their distinctiveness. For modern man, absolute right and absolute wrong is a matter of what the majority is doing. Right and wrong are relative to likes and dislikes and the customs of a particular community. We have unconsciously applied Einstein's theory of relativity which properly described

the physical universe, to the moral and ethical realm.

Strength to Love (1963)

The materials of the Assault On Illiteracy Program (AOIP) are designed to help rebuild the self-esteem and sense of worth that was so deliberately and systematically stripped from Blacks generations ago, but which still remain unredressed to such a large degree today.

Dr. King spoke to this issue in an article which was published in *Worldview* in 1972.

The tendency to ignore the Negro's contribution to American life and to strip him of his personhood is as old as the earliest history books and as contemporary as the morning's newspaper. To upset this cultural homicide, the Negro must rise up with an affirmation of his own Olympian manhood. Any movement for the Negro's freedom that overlooks this necessity is only waiting to be buried. As long as the mind is enslaved, the body can never be free. Psychological freedom, a firm sense of self-esteem, is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery. No Lincolnian emancipation proclamation or Johnson civil rights bill can totally bring this kind of freedom. The Negro will only be free when he reaches down to the inner depths of his own being and signs with the pen and ink of assertive manhood his own emancipation proclamation. And, with a spirit straining toward true self-esteem, the Negro must boldly throw off the manacles of self-abnegation and say to himself and to the world, "I am somebody. I am a person. I am a man with dignity and honor. I have a rich and noble history...."

"A New Sense of Direction"

AOIP has brought together more than 90 national Black-led organizations into a coalition that is waging a massive assault on illiteracy in the Black community. Dr. King also stressed the im-

portance of organizations within our communities. These words, published in 1967, are equally applicable today.

We need organizations that are permeated with mutual trust, incorruptibility and militancy. Without this spirit we may have numbers but they will add up to zero. We need organizations that are responsible, efficient and alert. We lack experience because ours is a history of disorganization. But we will prevail because our need for progress is stronger than the ignorance forced upon us. If we realize how indispensable is responsible...organization to our struggle, we will create it as we managed to create underground railroads, protest groups, self-help societies and the churches that have always been our refuge, our source of hope and our source of action.

New York Times Magazine (1967)

Our buying power as a community is still not fully understood nor effectively utilized by us. The boycott was one of the most powerful and effective weapons of the civil rights movement. Dr. King insisted that we must

Always anchor our external direct action with the power of economic withdrawal. Now, we are poor people, individually, we are poor when compared 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.

*Martin Luther King:
A Documentary...Montgomery to
Memphis (1976)*

Dr. King believed passionately that the political future of the Black community depends upon our ability to develop genuinely independent and representative political leaders. He also urged Blacks to master the complex and intricate art of political alliances. We maintain that Jesse Jackson is eminently qualified on both fronts. His Rainbow Coalition not only witnesses to the fact that he has mastered the art of political alliances, but also testifies to the fact that he is genuinely independent. Perhaps we are already beginning to take Dr. King's advice to

Create leaders who embody virtues we can respect, who have moral and ethical principles we can applaud with an enthusiasm that enables us to rally support for them based on confidence and trust. We will have to demand high standards and give consistent, loyal support to those who merit it. We will have to be a reliable constituency for those who prove themselves to be committed political warriors in our behalf. When our movement has partisan personalities whose unity with their people is unshakable and whose independence is genuine, they will be treated in white political councils with the respect those who embody such power deserve.

New York Times Magazine (1967)

We hope you will make a collection of Martin Luther King Jr. "pearls of wisdom" for yourself. The books listed on Page 2 will be a starting point.

Happy Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday. We would love to hear how you spent the day in remembrance of Dr. King.