

THE GREAT AMERICAN DREAM

EDITED BY
DR. ROBERT FOMER



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“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that”

-

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Foreword

Only a few voices have been powerful enough in galvanizing scores of people to fight for justice. Yet, even fewer have managed to single-handedly silence the tyrannies of history. Martin Luther King Jr., was no doubt the champion of the latter.

In recent years, the Black identity has been greatly questioned. The history of America is laden with the remnants of Black slavery. Even after the Emancipation, thousands of young black men and women still remained victims of racial discrimination and severe marginalization.

The Civil Rights Movement is still fresh in our memory. The great leaders, like King and the Big Six who put their lives at risk and fought for the ordinary African-American to gain access to jobs, have the right to vote, and live as a free man is still alive in the collective Black memory.

Revisiting the words of King under today's tumultuous circumstances is a dire need. In today's day and age it can be quite difficult for an African-American to find their voice and their identity. Living in a time where we are currently seeing the greatest fruits of modern human civilization, why is it that the Black man is still suffering?

Exactly fifty-six years later after King's life-giving and incredibly moving speech, the question begs, what happened to King's Great American Dream? Have we forgotten and forsaken our past? King's vision of America is a place, where his children could walk freely without being judged by the color of their skin. It is a place where justice will prevail, and every Black person will have the basic right to vote, seek education, housing, and a decent job.

Even when Blacks do have these basic rights, they are still suffering. They still don't have the political power to express their concerns. Many young black kids today aren't even properly acquainted with their intense, politically engaging history of the 1960s.

In order to reclaim our roots, our social and political structures, we must reflect on King's Great American Dream. Only then can the existing Black community of America achieve their true stature, identity, and voice.

This book, therefore, is a spiritual reminder and an honest companion to every Black person looking to find their voice in a world of hopelessness and indignity. Here's to every dreamer and every fighter of justice; let us all find our meaning of life, in King's dream.

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1. Where is King's Dream? – A Look Back into the Civil Rights Movement



Image Description: Martin Luther King at the Civil Rights March at Washington, DC, 1983

Fifty-six years after the era of the Civil Rights Movement and the fight for suffrage, the events of the past are still fresh in our political, cultural, and collective history.

Today, every single African-American living in the United States carries a social and historical identity, laden with the oppression their ancestors bore. Up until the 1960s, the Black man was not free. It was the profound struggles of people like Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, Rosa Parks, and many more who took to the streets with a firm goal of winning the African-American his most basic citizen rights. It was a total fight for justice.

However, now instead of using this historical identity to practice accountability, most Blacks have adopted an attitude of indifference. In the 1960s, when all the African-American communities united together and experienced powerful sentiments that drove their efforts for justice, the social climate was completely different.

There are still many pieces of evidence that indicate extreme black unemployment in places like Kansas and Oklahoma, along with growing racism in America under the recent political moves by the administration. But, before we point fingers to external forces, we need to realize our own shortcomings. There is a reason why the Black identity is becoming a greater chaos every day. What does it really mean to be Black in America?

Many symptoms of racism today are reminiscent of the cruel discrimination that happened in the 1960s in America. It seems that the black condition today is still despondent. Even now, an average black child is twice as likely to grow up in a home where the parent was unable to finish school due to time spent in jail and lack of equal opportunities.

Yet still, a black woman is four times more likely to bear a child without receiving any prenatal care at all, while her child is nine times more likely to become a homicide victim. Even now, many blacks living in African-American ghettos are still deprived of basic healthcare, housing, unemployment, and social amenities.

The use of painful pepper sprays, collapsible batons, and tasers might just be the modern versions of billy clubs that murdered the likes of Rodney King. Sadly, racist policing is still a bitter reality and is responsible for gunning down innocent black lives.

Steven F. Lawson, in “Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941”, writes that even when the mobilization of Black politics reached its heights in the 1970s, in the years after that, America headed back to Conservative politics. The 1960s may have been a period where the blacks could openly speak about racial discrimination but a decade later, the conservative politics and growing hatred became a major threat to these hard-earned black civil liberties.

The social giant and activist leader, Martin Luther King Jr., may not be with us today, but his words and precious life lessons will forever remain with us. In order to claim back the dignity and respect, we need to re-read the pages of history and seek inspiration from one of the biggest social efforts of the 20th Century – The Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement fought for equal rights for African-Americans. At a time when they were kicked out of parks, schools, and buses, this movement spoke about equal employment opportunities, decent housing and education, and most importantly, the right to vote.

The champions of this movement stood by equal rights for black women and sought complete liberty to gain access to public spaces. It furiously defended the right to walk freely on the streets, and to live the same life as a White American.

The March on Washington is regarded as one of the most famous events of this movement. Attended by *more than* 250,000 people -men and children, black and white -this was where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his immensely celebrated speech, “I have a dream...”. This event was a climax and a fiery response to the growing injustices and inequality of African-Americans in the USA. Its main purpose was to enforce a legislation rooted in the equal civil rights for both Blacks and Whites. The march spoke loudly and fiercely about equal opportunities.



Image Description: March on Washington, 1963

Organized and curated by Martin Luther King Jr. himself, along with the greatly esteemed Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph, the March on Washington was a symbol of freedom and equality. To the modern Black person, this event is a huge inspiration to begin anew. The Blacks are not victims. They are one of the most resilient peoples of the world, and in unity, have the power to change.

It is important to note here that the Civil Rights Movement wasn't just dominated by Black presence. Although few in number but immensely passionate were some White Americans who joined the social movement.

Leslie W. Dunbar, a White civil rights activist during the 1960s, lobbied in private organizations to garner support for black voter registration. His social and political goals were to reduce hunger amongst the African-American children, and stand by King's Poor People's Campaign. Although, not a well-known figure, Dunbar is still an unsung hero of the Civil Rights movement.

He is likened to the fearless journalist and known liberalist, Ralph McGill who spent his entire life reporting against segregation in America. In fact, he was mentioned by King in his account, "Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963)", as being one of the "few white persons" who truly empathized and understood the essence of the civil rights movement.

With great leaders like Whitney Young fighting till their last breath to end employment discrimination, John Lewis, one of the 13 Freedom Riders, and James Farmer who founded CORE (Congress for Racial Equality), there is no question that the 1960s was a revolutionary time. Together with Martin Luther King Jr. and the Big Six, 1960s America witnessed powerful slogans in the favor of racial equality, justice, and equal employment under the principles of Christianity.



Image Description: Carter and King Jazzing Orchestra during the Harlem Renaissance of 1920s

This social movement was also greatly fueled by the mighty Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s. Representing, the golden age of African-Americans, it helped in many aspects, define the culture and meaning of the black urban society.

Also known as the “New Negro Movement”, it paved the way for major cultural, social, and political changes that served as the main catalysts of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s-60s. The Great Migration evoked cultural creativity in the black community and produced some very notable works like the “Harlem Shadows” By Claude McKay, and paved the way for unabapologetic writers like Langston Hughes.

When it comes to historical sages and inspirations, there is no end. It is true that to change the conditions of today a lot of work must be done. And, the biggest efforts will have to come from the ordinary Americans – not just Blacks, but all Americans, if we really want to see this country flourish.

There have been major improvements in Black conditions today that are essentially the reason why we must not lose hope. Back in the 1960s, white Americans were quick to encourage violence against the protesters of Black Rights. The modern face of black rights, famously referred to as Black Lives Matter (BLM), is fighting a different fight. A forbearer of the Civil Rights Movement, the BLM is now reclaiming the black rights and civil liberties of the 1960s that were quickly forgotten a decade later.

While today Blacks have basic citizen rights and other amenities, what is lacking is a firm will and motivation to direct our lives in a constructive manner. Knowing that some of the most important political figures of this country like Barrack Obama are Black, equality is clearly not an elusive subject anymore.

It is very much a part of reality and is achievable. The biggest advantage of today's age comes with the power of social media and technology. The reach and effectiveness of social media campaigns have greatly helped many Black rights movements in finding their ground and raising their voice.

For every reason to lose hope, there are countless reasons to not give up. Martin Luther King Jr., has shown that as Christians, we must hold onto our faith if we truly want any change. The Civil Rights Movement is one of the biggest historical evidences to unite all Americans in becoming dreamers and real instruments to transform this country for the better.

All is certainly not lost. The great vision of King where the people of America live in equality, unity, and brotherhood, is indeed possible. The Great American Dream is not far.

2.

I have a Dream

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”.

Martin Luther King’s famous address during the March on Washington still resonates with every Black person even today. “I have a dream...” was not just a flaming call against racial violence; rather it is the anthem to change our hopeless circumstances. Without question, King’s dream is rooted in the American Dream. And by all means, the American Dream is the culmination of total equality and justice in opportunities and in all spheres for the citizens of America.

The purpose of this march was to expose the deep roots of racial inequality in America and its subsequent effects on economic and social discrimination against the Blacks. Reflecting on his speech, one can quickly realize that faith was the main driving force. King’s struggles have always been inspired by the holy principles of Jesus. His life’s biggest slogan has been what Jesus spent his entire life preaching, ‘Love thy neighbor as yourself’. Healing comes with letting go of hate. “Love your enemy” is what Jesus said, and Martin Luther Jr. was one of the most avid followers of this principle.



Image Description: Martin Luther King Jr. Delivering “I have a dream”

King's speech is an immortal address that should be revisited again and again to seek inspiration and encouragement. There is a special charm and wisdom that oozes out of every single word he spoke in his speech. Before King could talk about the unspeakable injustice of his people, he took a moment to pay a celebrated tribute to Jesus.

The importance of faith and the beautiful values of forgiveness are an inspiration for all of us in seeking justice. Hate cannot fight hate. It will only provoke a bigger fire. Only love can defeat it. Only forgiveness and sincere selflessness can quell the burning flames of hatred.

And, this was the biggest lesson King taught us. To quote his esteemed words, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies."



Image Description: Leaders coming together for the Civil Rights March in Washington, 1963

The 1960s was a time when the Blacks didn't have access to the most basic public spaces without being lashed or ridiculed for the color of their skin. It was a time where a black child was shown the gun when he expressed his wish to hold a book. Yet, a King rose. A leader emerged from this same nation to remind his people that "the bank of justice is not yet bankrupt".

In the most desperate circumstances, Martin Luther King Jr. inspired his followers— from different backgrounds and religions, Black and White – with the Great American Dream. Being God's children, we are fully capable of turning things around in our favor. As long as we hold fast to the tenets of Faith and keep Jesus in our hearts, change is possible. Only faith can curb the anger and frustration of Blacks today and transform it into a constructive goals, guided by faith.

King truthfully spoke, “We must forever conduct our struggle on the high place of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protests to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.”

There was a sudden urgency in his cause, which he communicated with brilliant articulation. Violence was never his way. And, this is the second most important rule for the Black community.

Our people— black artists, poets, workers, humanitarians – need to work hard, earnestly and constructively. And, Martin Luther King Jr.’s life is a living testament of what unshaken bravery, strong principles of discipline, and the power of forgiveness can do.

The command of Jesus is heavy and urging us to take action. With countless challenges and upheavals, one after the other, we must return to the wisdom and principles of Christianity, seek forgiveness and realize the Utopian dream of a just world, as instructed by King.

However, the ability to love your enemy is incredibly difficult. It takes an immense amount of grace, and sometimes even the biggest of hearts are unable to do this. However, the command of Jesus is not an impractical call to peace. It is one of the most fundamental necessities of our survival. Martin Luther Jr. rightfully declared Jesus to be a practical realist. He saw the bigger picture and knew at once that the answer to racial violence is not more violence. It is unconditional love and the ability to do something constructive with our lives.

3.

The Monumental Role of Faith



Image Description: Role of Christianity in King's Struggles

The day of the Washington March in August 1963, the main organizer, A. Philip Randolph, presented Martin Luther King Jr. as “the moral leader of our nation”. The role of faith indeed spoke volumes in King’s life. Being a pastor of the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, there is no doubt that his civil rights activism was always embedded in the core principles of Christianity. During the chaotic and tumultuous times of the 1960s, the Church was the safest haven for the persecuted African Americans.

When King mentioned us as “God’s children” and remarked on the “beautiful symphony of brotherhood” in his speech, he was referring to the brotherhood of Christianity. All through his life, he resorted to peaceful, non-violent protests even if it meant that he had to languish in jail countless times. Even when the court had prohibited the 1963 Birmingham protests, his unshaken principles of justice led him to the streets along with his followers, despite being sent to jail.

There is no doubt that religion wasn’t just an organizing tool for him, it was in every way his prime motivation during the civil rights activism. King’s non-violent policy of protests, calls for justice and hard work in the Black community stem from the compassionate tenets of Christianity and the practical wisdom of Jesus.

People like Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Ralph David Abernathy were not just politically motivated leaders during the Civil Rights Movement. They were religious leaders of the Christian faith who were actively involved in the

Church. Abernathy was a minister turned activist and one of King's closest allies. He was the one who primarily motivated people for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the rest is history (Palmer, 2013).

Abernathy, while remaining a Southern pastor, later founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the late 1960s. Bernard Lee, another pastor in Virginia, was a member of King's most inner social circles. Being a student activist in his youth, he grew up to become King's most trusted right-hand man, escorting him through heavy crowds. All these prominent members of the Civil Rights Movement were in fact deeply religious and members of the Church. The fight against Black oppression fueled its inspiration and resources from the everlasting wisdom of Christianity and its physical manifestation – the Church (Logan McCullen, 2013).

The Civil Rights Movement, therefore, was also fighting for religious freedom and the liberty to pray in the Church without fear. In fact, during the 1960s-70s, there wasn't a single African-American neighborhood that didn't give some financial, moral, or spiritual support to the Civil Rights Movement (Moon, 288).



Image Description: Another Picture of the Washington March with religious and political leaders

The Church was an everlasting pillar of stability, hope, and motivation. It not only strengthened the inter-community bond between the African-Americans, but also consolidated their relation with God. They increasingly sought God for victory during the Civil Rights Movement. Following the 1980s, famous Churches in Georgia, Alabama, Oklahoma, and Tennessee became historical landmarks of civil rights activism (Moon, 288).

The call of faith essentially shaped most of King's efforts in the Civil Rights Movement. He didn't simply decry injustice in his public speech, but repeatedly painted a brighter future for his listeners and all of us with the help of faith.

He asserted his moral authority in the following words, "With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope....With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up to freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

However, even when the Civil Rights Movement was a joint effort of both Black and White leaders (like Eugene “Bull” Connor, Richard Russell, and George Wallace), there was still a need of the Black Church in directing the main tenets of the Civil Rights Movement. The white society of America wasn’t always ready to accept black slaves in the Church.

According to Marvin Andrew McMickle in “An Encyclopedia of African American Christian Heritage”, there is a documented record of one slave recounting, “the white folks would come in when the colored people would have prayer meeting and whip each every one of them.”

The Black Church dates back to 1758 in racially segregated America and has always been present in every important event for the fight against Black oppression. Although the Black Church was divided into seven denominations, they have always been majorly united against White supremacy and the fight for total justice (Eric Lincoln, 1990).

In “Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Non-violence, and the Civil Rights Movement”, Allison Calhoun-Brown states that throughout the history of slavery and racially segregated America, it was essentially the Black Churches that were the real safe haven of the African-Americans. The Churches helped build solid grounds of the black civil society and fostered politics, arts, music, and education. Even the religious landscape of the great Harlem Renaissance was mostly Christian in faith.

The Civil Rights Movement found its voice through the grounds already prepared by the Black Church in America. The Black church offered free space for the black community to gather and develop a deeper rest and identity as a whole group. (Brown, 2000)

There is no doubt that the Church and tenets of Christianity have a key role in the Civil Rights Movement, and for that reason, in order to change the social reality of today, faith is our biggest weapon.

The Past vs. The Present

As of current times, there is a great disparity between the attitudes of young Black adults today as compared to the spiritual steadfastness and strong presence of the Church during the civil activism of the 1960s. They may go to Church every week and recite the holy commands of the Bible, but their lives are not a reflection of the true Christian principles that were one of the greatest motivations of the Civil Rights Movement.

Although the recent focus on Conservative politics and the emergence of Trump America has worsened racial issues, there is something we must realize. The Black Church leadership of the 1960s flourished in an entirely different social landscape. The spiritual fervor and the community needs were entirely different. Issues of racial violence and segregation are what primarily defined the civil rights activism.

The Church became the focal point of political, sociological, and economic meetings in the light of racial oppression. However, now, in the post civil rights era, we have access to all the basic rights and amenities that leaders like King risked their lives for.

Now, the social climate of going to the Church is different— in the sense that more than being a spiritual and intellectual need, it has turned into a casual choice, just like other life decisions. In the 60s, the Church was the only option left, but now it is nothing more than weekly congregations.

Dr. Otis Moss III, Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ and a preacher to black teens, explains that in order to engage the current black youth, the religious communities have to change the way they connect in the congregations. The message of justice, compassion, hard work, and forgiveness will always remain the same. However, it must be delivered in a way that can be understood by younger pastors and young black teens. (Danielle Cadet, 2013)

In this case, technology is a crucial weapon. It has opened up numerous opportunities for black young pastors that their forefathers couldn't even imagine during the Civil Rights Era. The new black generation that is growing up in America is increasingly trying to find a voice and identity of their own. Our religious communities, political leaders, along with the ordinary Black man, must realize that change is still possible.

All we need is a revival of faith. The Church never left us. The faithful struggles of King and the profound inspirations of Civil Rights leaders are still ingrained in our historical memory. All we need to do now is follow the principles of Christianity and integrate it with the modern needs of today. While each generation will have to find their own voice, victory is only possible when they have sages and leaders of the past, like Marti Luther King Jr., to inspire them.

The Way forward

With a sincere effort to draw inspirations from King's life and the Civil Rights Movement, here are some take-aways for all of us to fulfill King's dream together. The first lesson is determination and persistence. The Black people today have to show enthusiasm, involvement, and a constructive approach to achieve the American Dream. We must work with earnest determination, both in our individual capacities and together, to bring social, economic, and political equality to our country.



The fight to be better citizens, more empathic and forgiving human beings, and responsible Americans requires a deep spiritual connection with God. God commands us to live as disciples of Christ and serve humanity with love and compassion. The American Dream is only possible with complete dependence on God.

We need to rise above being victims and turn our history into our strength. Every American can become a dreamer with a power to succeed against the odds. Our struggles and principles of life should be in line with what King once told thousands of people at the Holt Street Baptist Church in 1956, "The strong man is the man who will not hit back, who can stand up for his rights and yet not hit back".

This goes to show that even when we protest for our rights, our ways should be strictly peaceful and non-violent, as were King's. The only way to repair a broken society is to heal it with compassion and love. Non-violence was the greatest and the most constructive practice of the Civil Rights Movement.

Remembering the 21st of January as Martin Luther King Jr. Day, let us celebrate this day to promote equality for all Americans, regardless of their color, creed, or background. Let us preach the importance of this day in educational and cultural institutions. Our children should grow up knowing the indispensable struggles of King against racism and injustice. It is wonderful to see that in recent years, the federal bodies have marked this day and encourage all Americans to earnestly volunteer in citizen action groups.

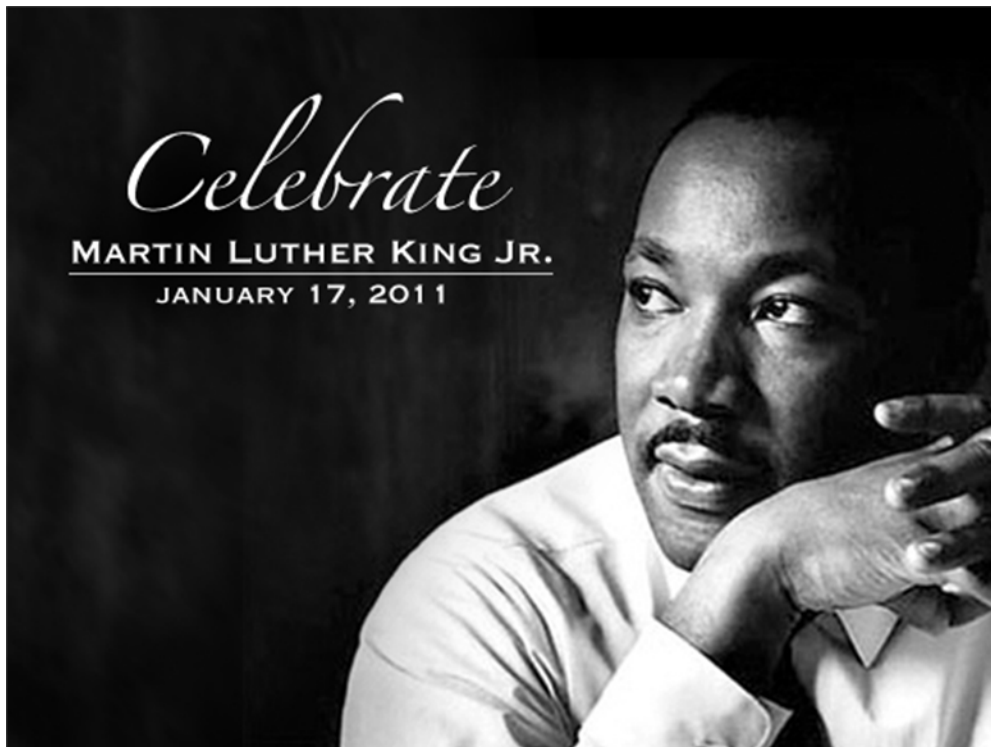


Image Description: Martin Luther King Jr. Day

We need to become the best students in schools, the best leaders in our professions, and most hard-working people in our personal lives. As role models of the future generation, and as citizens of America, everything that we do in our social, political, academic, and personal lives should be done with utmost hard work and spirituality.

Our way of life needs to be constructive if we really want to beat the corrupted system. With great lessons of non-violent, determined leadership of King and the luminaries of the Civil Rights Movement, we need to become better human beings every day.

America is the “home of the brave and land of the free”, and being citizens of this country, we must unite, putting aside our differences, to fulfill the American Dream. The 1960s was a struggle of freedom and equality; now it’s the struggle to reclaim that dignity. It is time to dream again.

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