

Martin Luther King Jr. 1929-1968

One of the world's most famous peacemakers, Martin Luther King Jr. led the Civil Rights Movement (1960s) in a nonviolent struggle to win equal rights and justice for minorities in the United States. He eventually turned his attention to combating poverty and war, but was cut down by an assassin on April 4, 1968.

“To our most bitter opponents we say: ‘We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. ...

Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you.

But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”

The following facts and quotations are taken from an article “Martin, We Need You Now” by Johann Christoph Arnold (BTC)

He's got his own national holiday, but it seems that every year Martin Luther King's real message becomes more obscured. For most Americans he has been reduced to posters and postage stamps, an excuse for a long weekend once a year. But in these days of heightened fear, acute injustice, and daily warmongering, King's example of nonviolent resistance becomes more relevant than ever before. In fact, unrealistic as it may sound, I believe King's principle of overcoming enemies with love is the only solution to the problems facing us today, both at home and abroad.

This is a passage from King's book *Strength to Love*:

Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power.

King's commitment to love as a political weapon grew out of his faith, but there was a good streak of pragmatism in his thinking as well. He knew that he and other African-Americans involved in the civil rights movement would have to live for decades to come with the same people they were now confronting. If they let their treatment embitter them, it would soon lead to violence, which would only lead to new cycles of repression and embitterment. Rather than breaking down the walls of racial hatred, it would build them higher. Only by forgiving their oppressors, King said, could African-Americans end the “descending spiral of destruction.” Only forgiveness could bring about lasting change.

Breaking the Cycle of Violence: Teacher Info Sheet, Lesson 1

Many in the Civil Rights Movement felt King was far too cautious and ineffectual, and disdained his belief in the power of Gandhian nonviolence. King refused to espouse their less peaceful methods of working for change, but neither did he condemn their tactics outright: "If the oppressed are denied the right to carry out revolution peacefully, how can they be condemned when they turn to violent revolution?"

If anyone had a reason to fear death, it was King. Immensely charismatic and unabashedly outspoken, he put his life on the line for the cause of racial equality time and again. In the end, as we know, he paid the ultimate price.

"No man is free if he fears death," King told the crowd at a civil rights rally in 1963. "But the minute you conquer the fear of death, at that moment you are free." Friends urged him to take fewer risks, but he shrugged them off. "I cannot worry about my safety," he told them. "I cannot live in fear. I have to function. If there is one fear I have conquered, it is the fear of death...I submit to you that if a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live!"