



Honoring the King Holiday with a Commitment to Ourselves

By Christopher D. Cathcart

The federal holiday honoring the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has been a part of our national landscape now for more than 27 years. Each January, we look forward to the many public and private celebrations observing the life and legacy of this remarkable man, and now, through the efforts of some dedicated folk, we will soon be able to visit the King Memorial in the nation's capital.

As for the special day itself, I still remember how, as a young Howard University student in the early '80s, I proudly joined in the demonstrations in support of the King holiday legislation. Making the long trek from Howard's campus to the steps of Capitol Hill to hear speeches by Jesse Jackson, the late Coretta Scott King and, of course, Stevie Wonder made me feel a part of history, a part of helping this nation open its eyes and pay a just and lasting tribute to one of our true heroes.

More than that, I hoped this annual time of reflection would offer us an opportunity to look back on Dr. King's life and review the many sacrifices he and those who struggled along side him made so that this country could live up to its goals of equality and full citizenship for all – an effort still unfinished.

I thought we'd use this time to look at the man's life beyond the famous "I Have a Dream" speech and drink in his countless other speeches and writings where he challenged the powers of convention with a peerless eloquence. Or review how he boldly spoke out against the Vietnam War, a move he made knowing full well it would distance him from his civil rights base, and move him even more squarely into the crosshairs of those seeking to silence his voice. (Imagine that, a leader who stood up for what he believed was right without regard to his own welfare or politically standing, man those were the days.)

This holiday was supposed to be a time of remembrance and recommitment for those of us old enough to have been alive when Dr. King was helping change America, and education for the ever-growing number of young people who were born and raised well after that fateful day in Memphis in 1968. Unfortunately, as many of us painfully know, today the holiday is often appropriated for less noble ends.

In some circles, the commercialization of the observance borders on the absurd. Leading corporations dedicate month-long advertising campaigns, even offering discounts and other special promotions in "honor" of King Day. And many day-to-day folk now look forward to the long weekend as a chance to schedule ski trips, romps to the beach, or some romantic getaway.

Most disturbing, however, is the fact that for some it's simply another day off from work, another chance to do – God help us – nothing. Today, the pride and struggle that went into demanding America recognize Dr. King's birthday is often lost in our relentless trivialization of holidays in general. I gave up counting all the promotional emails I've received recently informing me of some great "MLK Weekend" party I should add to my list of social outings.

If we are not careful, and as the generations that still can remember the King era pass on, we may see the complete historical re-write of the man, his times and the work he committed much of his life to, and ultimately died for.

If we allow ourselves to get too complacent, too comfortable with this special “day-off,” soon kids will be playing “March on Washington” video games, or simply reading that one paragraph about Dr. King in their history books, while barely paying attention to the obligatory annual showing of the “I Have a Dream” speech footage.

And here’s the kicker – this is happening on our watch, in our time, in our faces. And while it is a fact that there are many organizations, businesses and individuals doing a wonderful job of keeping the real meaning of the man and this holiday relevant, the tide is steadily rising in the other direction.

The effort to stem the flow can’t come solely from our leaders and organizations, nor should it. It has to come from individuals who, in their own unique ways, carry on Dr. King’s legacy every day. The holiday must serve to ensure we never forget Dr. King and his work, and, more importantly, remind us of the work still to be done.

President Barack Obama has asked us to commit to a day of service to honor this special holiday. In truth, this day should serve as a yearly reminder that service is a way of life; that the “dream” we all hold dear will only be realized if we all do what we can, with what we have, wherever we are to make a difference.

**This piece is an adaptation of an earlier article.*

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