Celebrate Black History

OUT OF THE MOUNTAIN OF DESPAIR,
A STONE OF HOPE
About Dr. King

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: BIOGRAPHY

Overview
During the less than 13 years of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s leadership of the modern American Civil Rights Movement, from December, 1955 until April 4, 1968, African Americans achieved more genuine progress toward racial equality than the previous 350 years had produced. Dr. King is widely regarded as America’s pre-eminent advocate of nonviolence and one of the greatest nonviolent leaders in world history. Drawing inspiration from both his Christian faith and the peaceful teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. King led a nonviolent movement in the late 1950’s and 60s to achieve legal equality for African-Americans in the United States. While others were advocating for freedom by “any means necessary,” including violence, Martin Luther King, Jr. used the power of words and acts of nonviolent resistance, such as protests and grassroots organizing, to achieve seemingly-impossible goals. He went on to lead similar campaigns against poverty and international conflict, always maintaining fidelity to his principles that men and women everywhere, regardless of color or creed, are equal members of the human family. Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, Nobel Peace Prize lecture and “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” are among the most revered orations and writings in the English language. His accomplishments are now taught to American children of all races, and his teachings are studied by scholars and students worldwide. He is the only non-president to have a national holiday dedicated in his honor, and is the only non-president memorialized on the Great Mall in the nation’s capital. He is memorialized in statues, parks, streets, squares, churches and other public facilities around the world as a leader whose teachings are increasingly-relevant to the welfare of humankind.

Some of Dr. King’s most important achievements include:

* In 1955, he was recruited to serve as spokesman for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which was a campaign by the African-American population of Montgomery, Alabama to force integration of the city’s bus lines. After 381 days of nearly universal participation by the black community, many of whom had to walk miles to work each day as a result, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in transportation was unconstitutional.

* In 1957, Dr. King was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization meant to provide new leadership for the burgeoning civil rights movement. He would serve as head of the SCLC until his assassination in 1968, a period during which he would emerge as the most important social leader of the modern American civil rights movement.
In 1963, he led a coalition of numerous civil rights groups in a nonviolent campaign aimed at Birmingham, Alabama, which at the time was described as the “most segregated city in America.” The subsequent brutality of the city’s police, illustrated most vividly by television images of young blacks being assaulted by dogs and water hoses, led to a national outrage resulting in a push for unprecedented civil rights legislation. It was during this campaign that Dr. King drafted the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” which as the manifesto of Dr. King’s philosophy and tactics is today required-reading in universities worldwide.

Later in 1963, Dr. King was one of the driving forces behind the March for Jobs and Freedom, more commonly known as the “March on Washington,” which drew over a quarter-million people to the national mall. It was at this march that Dr. King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, which cemented his status as a social change leader and helped inspire the nation to act on civil rights. Dr. King was later named Time magazine’s “Man of the Year.”

In 1964, at 35 years old, Martin Luther King, Jr. became the youngest person to win the Nobel Peace Prize. His acceptance speech in Oslo is thought by many to be among the most powerful remarks ever delivered at the event, climaxing at one point with the oft-quoted phrase “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.”

Also in 1964, partly due to the March on Washington, Congress passed the landmark Civil Rights Act, essentially eliminating racial segregation in the United States. The legislation made it illegal to discriminate against blacks or other minorities in hiring, public accommodations, education or transportation, areas which at the time were still very racially-divided in many places.

The next year, 1965, Congress went on to pass the Voting Rights Act, which was an equally-important set of laws that eliminated the remaining barriers to voting for African-Americans, who in some locales had been almost completely disenfranchised. This legislation resulted directly from the Selma to Montgomery March for Voting Rights lead by Dr. King.

Between 1965 and 1968, Dr. King shifted his focus toward economic justice — which he highlighted by leading several campaigns in Chicago, Illinois — and international peace — which he championed by speaking out strongly against the Vietnam War. His work in these years culminated in the “Poor Peoples Campaign,” which was a broad effort to assemble a multiracial coalition of impoverished Americans who would advocate for economic change.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr’s decade-and-a-half of social leadership ended abruptly and tragically on April 4th, 1968, when he was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. King’s body was returned to his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia, where his funeral ceremony was attended by high-level leaders of all races and political stripes.

Later in 1968, Dr. King’s wife, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, officially founded the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, which she dedicated to being a “living memorial” aimed at continuing Dr. King’s work on important social ills around the world.
Birth & Family

Born at noon on Tuesday, January 15, 1929 at the family home in Atlanta, Martin Luther King, Jr. was the first son and second child born to the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., and Alberta Williams King. Also born to the Kings were Christine, now Mrs. Isaac Farris, Sr., and the Reverend Alfred Daniel Williams King, now deceased.

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s maternal grandparents were the Reverend Adam Daniel Williams, second pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, and Jenny Parks Williams. His paternal grandparents were James Albert and Delia King, sharecroppers on a farm in Stockbridge, Georgia. He married Coretta Scott, the younger daughter of Obadiel and Bernice McMurtry Scott of Marion, Alabama, on June 18, 1953. The marriage ceremony took place on the lawn of the Scott’s home in Marion, Alabama. The Rev. King, Sr. performed the service, with Mrs. Edythe Bagley, the sister of Coretta Scott King as maid of honor, and the Rev. A.D. King, the brother of Martin Luther King, Jr., as best man.

Four children were born to Dr. and Mrs. King:
Yolanda Denise (November 17, 1955, Montgomery, Alabama),
Martin Luther III (October 23, 1957, Montgomery, Alabama)
Dexter Scott (January 30, 1961, Atlanta, Georgia),
Bernice Albertine (March 28, 1963, Atlanta, Georgia)

Upbringing & Studies

The son, grandson, and great-grandson of Baptist ministers, Martin Luther King Jr., named Michael King at birth, spent his first twelve years in the Auburn Avenue home that his parents, the Reverend Michael King and Alberta Williams King, shared with his maternal grandparents, the Adam Daniel Williams and Jeannie Celeste Williams. After Rev. Williams’ death in 1931, his son-in-law became Ebenezer Baptist Church’s new pastor and gradually established himself as a major figure in state and national Baptist groups. The elder King began referring to himself (and later to his son) as Martin Luther King.

During his undergraduate years at Atlanta’s Morehouse College (1944 to 1948), King gradually overcame his initial reluctance to accept his inherited calling. Morehouse President Benjamin E. Mays influenced King’s spiritual development, encouraging him to view Christianity as a potential force for progressive social change. He was ordained during his final semester at Morehouse, and by this time King had also taken his first steps toward political activism. He had responded to the postwar wave of anti-black violence by proclaiming in a letter to the editor of the Atlanta Constitution that African Americans were “entitled to the basic rights and opportunities of American citizens”. During his senior year King joined the Intercollegiate Council, an interracial student discussion group that met monthly at Atlanta’s Emory University.

After leaving Morehouse, King increased his understanding of progressive Christian thought while attending Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania from 1948 to 1951. Initially uncritical of liberal theology, he gradually moved toward Reinhold Niebuhr’s neo-orthodoxy, which emphasized the intractability of social evil. Even as he continued to question and modify his own religious beliefs, he compiled an outstanding academic record and graduated at the top of his class.

In 1951 King began doctoral studies in systematic theology at Boston University’s School of Theology. By the time he completed his doctoral studies in 1955, King had refined his exceptional ability to draw upon a wide range of theological and philosophical texts to express his views with force and precision. His ability to infuse his oratory with borrowed theological insights became evident in his expanding preaching activities in Boston-area churches and at Ebenezer, where he assisted his father during school vacations.

During his stay in Boston, King also met and courted Coretta Scott, an Alabama-born Antioch College graduate who was then a student at the New England Conservatory of Music. On 18 June 1953 the two students were married in Marion, Alabama, where Scott’s family lived.
The Bus Boycott Sparks a Movement

Although he considered pursuing an academic career, King decided in 1954 to accept an offer to become the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. In December 1955, when Montgomery’s black leaders, such as Jo Ann Robinson, E.D. Nixon, and Ralph Abernathy formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to protest the arrest of NAACP official Rosa Park for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man, they selected King to head the new group.

In his role as the primary spokesman of the year-long Montgomery bus boycott, King utilized the leadership abilities he had gained from his religious background and academic training to forge a distinctive protest strategy that involved the mobilization of black churches and skillful appeals for white support. With the encouragement of Bayard Rustin, Glenn Smiley, William Stuart Nelson and other veteran pacifists, King also became a firm advocate of Mohandas Gandhi’s precepts of nonviolence, which he combined with Christian social gospel ideas.

After the United States Supreme Court outlawed Alabama bus segregation laws in Browder v. Gayle in late 1956, King sought to expand the nonviolent civil rights movement throughout the South. In 1957 he joined with C. K. Steele, Fred Shuttlesworth and T. J. Jemison in founding the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), with King as president, to coordinate civil rights activities throughout the region. The publication of Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story further contributed to King’s rapid emergence as a national civil rights leader.

King’s rise to fame was not without personal consequences. In 1958 King was the victim of his first assassination attempt. Although his house had been bombed several times during the Montgomery bus boycott, it was while signing copies of Stride Toward Freedom that Izola Ware Curry stabbed him with a letter opener.

Laying the Groundwork for Nonviolent Change

One of the key aspects of King’s leadership was his ability to coalesce support from many types of organizations including labor unions, peace organizations, southern reform organizations, and religious groups. As early as 1956, labor unions, such as the United Packinghouse Workers and the United Auto Workers contributed to the MIA and peace activists such as Homer Jack alerted their associates to the activities of the MIA. Activists from southern organizations such as Myles Horton’s Highlander Folk School and Anne Braden’s Southern Conference Education Fund were in frequent contact with King. In addition, his extensive ties to the National Baptist Convention provided support from churches all over the nation; and his advisor, Stanley Levison insured broad support from Jewish groups.

King’s recognition of the link between segregation and colonialism resulted in alliances with groups fighting oppression outside the U.S., especially in Africa. In March 1957, King traveled to Ghana at the invitation of Kwame Nkrumah to attend the nation’s independence ceremony. Shortly after returning from Ghana King joined the American Committee on Africa agreeing to serve as vice chairman of an International Sponsoring Committee for a day of protest against South Africa’s apartheid government. Later at a SCLC sponsored event honoring Kenyan labor leader Tom Mboya, King further articulated the connections between the African-American freedom struggle and those abroad: “We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality”.

During 1959 he increased his understanding of Gandhian ideas during a month-long visit to India sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. With Coretta and MIA historian Lawrence D. Reddick in tow, King met with many Indian leaders, including Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Writing after his return, King stated, “I left India more convinced than ever before that nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.”
I Have a Dream, Washington, D.C., 1963

Excerpt:

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.” But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check — a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. They have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

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.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. 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 transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with a new meaning, “My country, ’tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim’s pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.”

And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!

Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California!

But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia!

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring. And when this happens, 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 of 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 the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”
Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech,
Oslo, Norway, 1964

Excerpt:
I accept the Nobel Prize for Peace at a moment when twenty-two million Negroes of the United States of America are engaged in a creative battle to end the long night of racial injustice. I accept this award in behalf of a civil rights movement which is moving with determination and a majestic scorn for risk and danger to establish a reign of freedom and a rule of justice…

After contemplation, I conclude that this award which I receive on behalf of that movement is profound recognition that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time — the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression…

If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love…I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind. I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the “isness” of man’s present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal “oughtness” that forever confronts him.

I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsom in the river of life unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality…

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land…

Today I come to Oslo as a trustee, inspired and with renewed dedication to humanity. I accept this prize on behalf of all men who love peace and brotherhood. I say I come as a trustee, for in the depths of my heart I am aware that this prize is much more than an honor to me personally. Every time I take a flight I am always mindful of the man people who make a successful journey possible — the known pilots and the unknown ground crew.

So you honor the dedicated pilots of our struggle who have sat at the controls as the freedom movement soared into orbit… You honor the ground crew without whose labor and sacrifices the jet flights to freedom could never have left the earth.

Most of these people will never make the headlines and their names will not appear in Who’s Who. Yet when years have rolled past and when the blazing light of truth is focused on this marvelous age in which we live — men and women will know and children will be taught that we have a finer land, a better people, a more noble civilization — because these humble children of God were willing to suffer for righteousness’ sake.

I think Alfred Nobel would know what I mean when I say that I accept this award in the spirit of a curator of some precious heirloom which he holds in trust for its true owners — all those to whom beauty is truth and truth beauty — and in whose eyes the beauty of genuine brotherhood and peace is more precious than diamonds or silver or gold.
Early the following year he moved his family, which now included two children, Yolanda and Martin Luther King, III, to Atlanta in order to be nearer SCLC headquarters in that city and to become co-pastor, with his father, of Ebenezer Baptist Church. The Kings’ third child, Dexter, was born in 1961, and their fourth, Bernice, in 1963.

King’s decision to move to Atlanta was partly caused by SCLC’s lack of success during the late 1950s. Associate director Ella Baker had complained that the SCLC’s Crusade for Citizenship suffered from a lack of attention by King, though SCLC leaders hoped that with King now in Atlanta, programming would be improved.

During 1963, King reasserted his preeminence within the African-American freedom struggle through his leadership of the Birmingham campaign. Initiated by SCLC and its affiliate, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, the Birmingham demonstrations were the most massive civil rights protest that had yet occurred. With the assistance of Fred Shuttlesworth and other local black leaders and with little competition from Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other civil rights groups, SCLC officials were able to orchestrate the Birmingham protests to achieve maximum national impact. King’s decision to intentionally allow himself to be arrested for leading a demonstration on 12 April prodded the Kennedy administration to intervene in the escalating protests.

A widely quoted “Letter from Birmingham Jail” displayed his distinctive ability to influence public opinion by appropriating ideas from the Bible, the Constitution, and other canonical texts. During May, televised pictures of police using dogs and fire hoses against young demonstrators generated a national outcry against white segregationist officials in Birmingham. The brutality of Birmingham officials and the refusal of Alabama governor George C. Wallace to allow the admission of black students at the University of Alabama prompted President Kennedy to introduce major civil rights legislation.

King’s speech at the 28 August 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom attended by more than 200,000 people, was the culmination of a wave of civil rights protest activity that extended even to northern cities. Closing his address with extemporaneous remarks, he insisted that he had not lost hope: “I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream… that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’” He appropriated the familiar words of “My Country ’Tis of Thee” before concluding, “when we allow freedom 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 of 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 the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last’”.

Although there was much elation after the March on Washington, less than a month later, the movement was shocked by another act of senseless violence. On 15 September 1963 a dynamite blast killed four young school girls at Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. King delivered the eulogy for three of the four girls, reflecting, “They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, and the philosophy which produced the murders”.

King’s ability to focus national attention on orchestrated confrontations with racist authorities, combined with his oration at the 1963 March on Washington, made him the most influential African-American spokesperson of the first half of the 1960s. Named Time magazine’s “Man of the Year” at the end of 1963, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1964. The acclaim King received strengthened his stature among civil rights leaders but also prompted Federal Bureau of Investigation director J. Edgar Hoover to step up his effort to damage King’s reputation. Hoover, with the approval of President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy, established phone taps and bugs. The Alabama protests reached a turning point on 7 March when state police attacked a group of demonstrators at the start of a march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery. Carrying out Governor Wallace’s orders, the police used tear gas and clubs to turn back the marchers after they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the outskirts of Selma. Unprepared for the violent confrontation, King alienated some activists when he decided to postpone the continuation of the Selma to Montgomery March until he had received court approval, but the march, which finally secured federal court approval, attracted several thousand civil rights sympathizers, black and white, from all regions of the nation. On 25 March King addressed the arriving marchers from the steps of the capitol in Montgomery. The march and the subsequent killing of a white participant, Viola Liuzzo, as well as the earlier murder of James Reeb dramatized the denial of black voting rights and spurred passage during the following summer of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
Beyond Civil Rights: The Fight against Poverty & Militarism

After the successful voting rights march in Alabama, King was unable to garner similar support for his effort to confront the problems of northern urban blacks. Early in 1966 he, together with local activist Al Raby, launched a major campaign against poverty and other urban problems and moved his family into an apartment in Chicago’s black ghetto. As King shifted the focus of his activities to the North, however, he discovered that the tactics used in the South were not as effective elsewhere. Despite numerous mass protests, the Chicago Campaign resulted in no significant gains and undermined King’s reputation as an effective civil rights leader.

King’s influence was damaged further by the increasingly caustic tone of black militancy of the period after 1965. Black radicals increasingly turned away from the Gandhian precepts of King toward the Black Nationalism of Malcolm X, whose posthumously published autobiography and speeches reached large audiences after his assassination in February 1965. King refused to abandon his firmly rooted beliefs about racial integration and nonviolence.

In his last book, “Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?”, King dismissed the claim of Black Power advocates “to be the most revolutionary wing of the social revolution taking place in the United States,” but he acknowledged that they responded to a psychological need among African Americans he had not previously addressed. “Psychological freedom, a firm sense of self-esteem, is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery,” King wrote. “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”.

Indeed, even as his popularity declined, King spoke out strongly against American involvement in the Vietnam War, making his position public in an address, “Beyond Vietnam,” on 4 April 1967 at New York’s Riverside Church. King’s involvement in the anti-war movement reduced his ability to influence national racial policies and made him a target of further FBI investigations. Nevertheless, he became ever more insistent that his version of Gandhian nonviolence and social gospel Christianity was the most appropriate response to the problems of black Americans.

In December 1967 King announced the formation of the Poor People’s Campaign, designed to prod the federal government to strengthen its anti-poverty efforts. King and other SCLC workers began to recruit poor people and antipoverty activists to come to Washington, D.C., to lobby on behalf of improved antipoverty programs. This effort was in its early stages when King became involved in the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike in Tennessee. On 28 March 1968, as King led thousands of sanitation workers and sympathizers on a march through downtown Memphis, black youngsters began throwing rocks and looting stores. This outbreak of violence led to extensive press criticisms of King’s entire antipoverty strategy.

Last Days & Legacy

King returned to Memphis for the last time in early April. Addressing an audience at Bishop Charles J. Mason Temple on 3 April, King affirmed his optimism despite the “difficult days” that lay ahead. “But it really doesn’t matter with me now,” he declared, “because I’ve been to the mountaintop [and] I’ve seen the Promised Land.” He continued, “I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.” The following evening the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. took place as he stood on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. A white segregationist, James Earl Ray, was later convicted of the crime. The Poor People’s Campaign continued for a few months after his death under the direction of Ralph Abernathy, the new SCLC president, but it did not achieve its objectives.

Until his death King remained steadfast in his commitment to the radical transformation of American society through nonviolent activism. In his posthumously published essay, “A Testament of Hope”, he urged African Americans to refrain from violence but also warned, “White America must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society.” The “black revolution” was more than a civil rights movement, he insisted. “It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism and materialism”.

After her husband’s death, Coretta Scott King established the Atlanta-based Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change (also known as the King Center) to promote Kingian concepts of nonviolent struggle. She also led the successful effort to honor her husband with a federally mandated King national holiday, which was first celebrated in 1986. Additionally, she and the King siblings successfully pursued a civil case in 1999 — King Family versus Jowers and Other Unknown Co-Conspirators — in which the jury suggested that Dr. King’s assassination may have involved additional perpetrators beyond James Earl Ray.

Today, Dr. King is considered to be one of the most important figures of the 20th century, not only for African-Americans but for all those seeking freedom, justice, equality and peace. His unique approach to the philosophy of nonviolent action stands as one of the most successful alternatives to the world’s ongoing struggle against violent conflict, and against structural injustice.
Did You Know?

The detachment of the Stone of Hope from the Mountain of Despair reflects not only victory borne from disappointment, but allows the visitor a clear view of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial which reflects the principles of freedom and liberty which gave birth to the nation.

Dr. King's Spiritual Presence

Dr. Martin Luther King is remembered as a great orator whose impact on the nation came from the eloquence and inspirational quality of his words. His speeches, sermons and public addresses melded themes of democracy deeply embedded in the American conscience, and reinvigorated these messages with clear and insightful reflections on the true meaning of justice and equality.

The Jefferson Memorial as seen from the Stone of Hope.

Within the memorial, quotes from Dr. King’s sermons and speeches, are inscribed at a large scale on the smooth surfaces of the inscription wall. These passages are reinforced through the referential use of water, stone, landscaping and light as metaphorical elements that heighten an awareness of his message.

All of the senses are engaged through the experience of the memorial, and, foremost, through the visual perception of space, using contrast and juxtaposition, scale and height and the bold display of carefully selected words expressing his spirit. The inspirational text and the mood created by the sound of the water, its cooling mists, and the visual complexity of the contrasting rough and smooth surfaces of stone, the gradual changes in grade and the patterns of light and darkness dramatically underscore the visual sense of the man and the qualities of courage, conviction and leadership that characterize his life and work.

Added to these powerful sensory experiences is a sculptural representation of Dr. King himself. This is not conceived of as a pure figurative depiction of his physical being, separate and apart from other elements, but rather gives another dimension and layer of meaning to the experience of the memorial as a whole. Dr. King appears as an integral part of the "Stone of Hope", as if he embodies the stone itself. He is positioned on the side of the stone facing the Jefferson Memorial and is gradually revealed as part of the procession towards the Tidal Basin.

"There are two types of laws: there are just laws and there are unjust laws...What is the difference between the two?...An unjust law is a man-made code that is out of harmony with the moral law...Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Isn't segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness?"

~ Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963
At first, as one enters the main space, the central stone appears somehow cleft from the stones flanking the portal entry, but pushed forward so as to be visually isolated from the rest of the memorial grounds.

As one gets closer to the monolith, its rough hewn edges toward the memorial begins to take on a vaguely familiar contour, recognizable, but not entirely clear.

Finally, as one looks back to the inscription wall and main space from the stone, the image of Dr. King is fully revealed. He is seen looking across the Tidal Basin. This representation stirs the emotions, transcends the physical and symbolic and directly engages the imagination of the viewer.

*World peace through nonviolent means is neither absurd nor unattainable. All other methods have failed. Thus we must begin anew. Nonviolence is a good starting point. Those of us who believe in this method can be voices of reason, sanity, and understanding amid the voices of violence, hate, and emotion. We can very well set a mood of peace out of which a system of peace can be built.*

~ Martin Luther King, Jr.
December 1964

The entire memorial invokes the memory and spiritual presence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. through the visual experience of place, reinforced by the full range of sensory perception, the metaphorical use of water, stone and other landscape elements, the powerful display of passages from his sermons and speeches and the appearance of his physical image in the "Stone of Hope".