

Good morning, Secretary Work, ladies and gentlemen. I'm honored to be here this morning to celebrate the life of such an important man.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is often and unquestioningly referred to as the greatest *civil rights* leader of the 20th century. Without a doubt, Dr. King's impact on the civil rights movement was vital to its success and instrumental to bringing about lasting change in this country.

HOWEVER, couching Dr. King's actions in those terms undercuts his true genius, diminishes what he actually accomplished, and robs his legacy of its wider applicability.

Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the greatest *leaders* that America has ever seen. The context of his life was important. The people he helped are plentiful and eternally grateful. The changes that he marshaled are profound.

But nothing is so profound as understanding that America owes Dr. King a debt of gratitude not just for the advances in civil rights, but more significantly, for his example of leadership *through and during* change.

Ironically, change is one of life's few constants. Yet change is simultaneously hard for people to recognize, perplexing for cultures to face, and challenging for anyone to control the outcomes.

Former Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Mike Boorda summed it up nicely by saying that change hurts people's heads like a new pair of shoes hurts their feet.

During the time that Dr. King led the American people, not only did he peacefully bring society through some of the most complicated and charged social upheavals of American history, but he also fostered change in the very hearts and minds of the American people. These feats take an immense strength of character and a steady application of leadership.

Dr. King made it simple. Dr. King made the way ahead clear. Dr. King changed America and in doing so, history.

Among the many things that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr is remembered and celebrated for, are his profound words. Let us explore Dr. King's example of leadership through his own remarkable words:

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Martin Luther King Jr. was born 86 years ago today, January 15, 1929. It was eve of the great stock market crash and ensuing devastation of the Great Depression. The world immediately before and during his young life bubbled with social turmoil. The citizens of the world were learning that they couldn't afford to be silent about things that matter. Women had secured the right to vote only nine years prior.

Political and social struggles were in full swing the world over with Lenin's revolution in Russia and Chiang Chaisek's battles in China. The world had undergone the Industrial Revolution and the Gilded Age associated with those great advances had lost its luster. Social reforms for immigrants and low-wage factory workers of the Progressive Era came in.

As King grew up, the tides of change continued to wash over the country and the world. King was "a teenager during the World War II riots, he was in college when Harry Truman integrated the armed forces, and just into his first job when the Supreme Court handed down *Brown v. Board of Education*."¹

¹ "Martin Luther King, Jr., On Leadership" By Donald T. Phillips

King faced the endless barrage of injustice common for African Americans living in the American South at the time.

He hated it.

He understood at an early age that “there is no such thing as one people being better than another.”² During his early life Dr. King thought that the answer to race inequality would be violent revolt, already modeled by so many other movements both in earlier American history and in the contemporary history around the world. Whatever the form, Martin knew that change must come and that he could never be silent.

So, again, in the words of Dr. King:

“If a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live.”

² “Martin Luther King, Jr., On Leadership” By Donald T. Phillips

Dr. King's leadership role was thrust upon him at the outset of the Montgomery bus boycotts. At the time, he was just starting out as preacher in Montgomery.

Initially, the movement was “nonviolent but that was not a deliberate choice...if it came to a fight, blacks would lose.”³ As the momentum built, the activists in Montgomery faced violence in response to what they were doing.

Dr. King began to receive threatening phone calls. Someone fired a shotgun through his door and on two separate occasions threw bombs on his porch. Members of the movement considered self-defense or retaliation, but Dr. King was beginning to learn about the approach of another iconic human rights leader of the early 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi.

³ “Strategy” By Freedman

Once, after Dr. King's house was bombed, members of the black community gathered in a crowd at his house, outraged.

The policemen who were investigating the bomb became concerned that the crowd would become violent, so they asked Dr. King to speak to the people.

As soon as he stepped in front of the group and held up his hand, everyone fell silent. Dr. King calmly explained that no one was hurt and that he wanted everyone to go home and put down their weapons. The crowd dispersed and there was no further violence on either side that night.

Dr. King saw the wisdom in Gandhi's tactic of using nonviolent protest. The principles behind the bus boycott were *worth* dying over.

It was clear to the authorities that the protestors were willing to die for the cause without fighting back and that began to make an impression. Dr. King realized that more could be accomplished with determined pressure from a coalition of people than with radically violent actors.

Again, in Dr. King's words:

“Means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek.”

As Dr. King's influence built, his very person became the lightning rod of the civil rights movement. Nonviolence became Dr. King's fundamental guiding principle. He began to build a strategy around it, deliberately cultivating every opportunity he could. After the success of the Montgomery bus boycott, his destiny and his more public role started to formalize.

Dr. King took time to write a book about Montgomery, reflecting on what worked well and how best to achieve the desired end. He began to understand that in order to effect real and lasting change he must galvanize his people to adopt the moral high ground.

It fell to Dr. King to exemplify the restraint and moral purpose of nonviolent movement, and to convince the black community to embrace and adopt it. He gave speeches all over the American South. He participated in protest after protest. He was jailed multiple times.

One time his wife went so long without hearing from him in 1963, she called then president, John F. Kennedy, who had pledged to help Dr. King. The president called her back and ensured her he would help. Dr. King called her from jail shortly after that and was released within a couple of days.

Nothing dampened his dedication. He was executing what had become a national strategy to overwhelm the status quo with the concentrated and insistently righteous perseverance of a heroic people.

As Dr. King said it this way,

“A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus.”

The final piece of Dr. King’s leadership was to bring the black community together with the white community.

His ultimate success always depended on leading the entire country towards unity, on convincing everyone that they were better together, that “injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.” He continued to demonstrate and speak at every opportunity, but he also exercised any other tactic he had at his disposal.

Savvy to how best to access the hearts and minds and make cultural progress, he even used television shows!

When he met Nichelle Nichols, the actress who played Uhura on the popular science fiction television show, Star Trek, she was just about to leave the show. Dr. King told her what a trekkie he was and that his whole family watched the show. He asked her to reconsider. He explained that what she portrayed on the show – a future where a black woman is a respected and equal member of a diverse team – was a critical role image. It gave black people everywhere hope and filled them with pride. It was a subtle suggestion to mainstream audiences of what the ideal team should and would look like.

Through his tireless efforts, Dr. King molded a personal dream of an equal future, and projected it onto the national culture of America. Using tools of love, mutual respect, and compassion, he built a foundation for greater understanding and true progress.

Americans have much to thank Dr. King for, but the greatest gift he gave was his example of leadership. John Quincy Adams said “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.” Dr. King inspired the entire country to dream more, learn more, and become more. He pushed both black and white citizens to look beyond themselves, beyond their comfort zones or habits or beliefs, to something bigger and better for all of us.

Dr. King managed to do all that without violent uprisings or retaliatory and bitter campaigns. He rose above the petty and he taught his followers to demand the moral high road to progress.

These lessons of inclusiveness, and restraint, are some of the hardest concepts throughout human history, often the ones that humans collectively forget the fastest. For that reason, it is even more important that our society continue to observe and remember Dr. King for the things he did and the principles he stood for.

Our country continues to move towards equality, towards greater dignity and better understanding, but we remember the skills that Dr. King showed us, and we remember to speak out about what matters, we remember that our freedom in our country is worth dying for, that the means are just as important as the end, and that we must mold the future where we want to work for together.

Thank you and Birthday blessings for Doctor King, and all of America's citizens.