

THINKING OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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By Art Cribbs

The name of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is recognized around the world in almost every culture. His name evokes thoughts of peace, love, and justice. For some, it is a name that congers protest and street demonstrations. He is remembered as a young man who stirred up trouble and caused a nation to re-think its conduct toward its dark-skinned citizens.

Today, Dr. King is remembered with romantic images. His voice and message have been silenced and transformed into a pleasing, welcoming refrain. His essence has been reduced to an acceptable presentation of dreams and ideals. But, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. remains the embodied resurrection of a broken and dispirited people. High above the din of human events, Dr. King proclaimed a clear, plain vision for compassion and empathy. We continue to be charged with the task of fulfilling his hopes for a world made safe for all people.

Reflecting on his brief 39 years on Earth gives pause to what it means to live a life of service. Faced with the constant threat of death because of his undaunted commitment to the poor, vulnerable, voiceless, and ignored peoples of American society, Dr. King made the ultimate sacrifice. One cannot help but wonder how his voice would sound during this very special period of abused presidential powers, an anemic Congress, and assaults on immigrants, gays, and Muslims. What would he say to the American public and the international community about the multiple theatres of war? Would his message be heard with open reception?

Since his murder on April 4, 1968, the exact length of time of his life, human relationships have shifted in directions between progress and regress. We have learned to love objects with an affection that embraces idolatry. Sermons about the benefits of greed and prioritizing our lives to place profits and property above people echo throughout every segment of American life and boomerang around the world. War as sport has become so commonplace we no longer cringe at the scoreboard tally of lost life and destroyed relics.

We listen to his speeches from a distance that provides comfort and separation. While prophetic and relevant, we still remove his wisdom and insight from our daily exposure to human suffering. Thus, we go on as if Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is an ancient sage out-of-touch with our existence. We invoke his name and rehearse his messages while we conveniently ignore why he spoke and acted. 39 years later, the world continues to teeter on a violently drunken path toward madness and destruction.

One can only imagine Dr. King pleading for our awareness and change of heart. He must cry tears that flood the universe because of our inability to practice human kindness and preserve God's Creation.

He dedicated himself to the faithful walk in Christ's mission. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Dr. King drips sweat like blood in anticipation of the cruel outcome that follows a soul-less binge of broken promises, lies and wasteful, chaos-causing, addictive habits.

We weep today on this memorial. We weep not for Dr. King. We weep for all of us who know there is a better way but fail to embrace it. We weep for global leaders who are careless and reckless with public resources and human life. We weep because we know we can do better but choose not to accept responsibility or act more civilly. We weep today because Jesus also weeps over the world that is blind to the Way of Peace.

If Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is to have any significance and for his life not to have been lost in vain, we are required to pick up the torch of goodness, righteousness, and truth. We must place our lives in the gap where a godless void engulfs the human soul.

If Dr. King is to be remembered with honor, then we today must provide the living testament of his vision, hold it dear to our hearts, and engage it with our every breath.

"I ain't gon let nobody turn me round....turn me round...turn me round. Ain't gon let nobody turn me round...." This is what we sing as we march onward into community where all people are respected, loved, honored, and validated; where peace is practiced and the cries of our children and elders are heard and heeded.

Dr. King would then turn to us and say, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last."