

A SPECIAL MESSAGE FROM RALPH B. STRICKLAND, JR.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

On Monday, January 16th, our nation will celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We do it every year on an appropriate Monday in January.

I thought that since at my age I had lived through the part of his life that was his public appeal for and support of equal rights for all, I might just comment on why we have a holiday in recognition of him.

Dr. King spearheaded and was the public symbol of the movement to bring an end to organized, government-sanctioned racial segregation, an endeavor that was then still very dangerous, and for which the cost in fear, terror, and even lives was quite high. Sacrifices were made by many. And Dr. King did it by non-violent, Christian tactics. Dr. King preached an unconditional love of your neighbor, even if your neighbor did not love or even like you. Dr. King was a peacemaker even though many accused him of being a mere agitator.

Dr. King loved to quote Mark 9:35 on greatness. "And He sat down and called the twelve; and He said to them, 'If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.'"

Dr. King taught that a person would be a great person when he served others, and he wanted it to be said of him after his death that he did his best to love and serve humanity. He must have known what he meant to us, though few probably sufficiently expressed their gratitude to him.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929. On the evening of April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of his motel room in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was to lead a protest march in sympathy with the striking garbage workers of that city, he was assassinated.

Yes, he was only 39 years old. By early December 1955 he had accepted the leadership of the first great Negro nonviolent demonstration of contemporary times in the United States, a bus boycott that lasted 382 days and ended successfully. Consider that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was on the national stage for only about thirteen years.

My memories of that era are vivid. I was ten years old in 1955, and twenty-three years old at his death. I at first disagreed with him and his aim, but I was only ten, living in a very segregated southern city (Durham) and what did I know? I realized, though, in time (especially in high school and college) that he was right. By then I did not think his non-violent tactics would work, which, of course, they did, and probably his movement would not have worked any other way than peacefully. Even then, as I have said, the cost was very high. The cost to him was the ultimate price that so often must be paid by men and women to preserve freedom, peace and real love.

I watched his death unfold on TV as I had when President Jack Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. Two months after Dr. King's assassination, Presidential candidate Bobby Kennedy was assassinated in a hotel kitchen, and we went back to the TV. Cities like Detroit burst into literal and figurative flames that summer. Four anti-war student protestors were killed by National Guardsmen at Kent State University. And at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, the police were cracking college students' heads with nightsticks to keep order because Mayor Richard Daley told them to (or so it was said). Let me tell you, the 1960s would break your heart or your head.

My wife and I married in June 1968, making it, at least for us, a wonderful time. But there was much turmoil and change, and there was Vietnam, too, where I resided from early August 1970 until late July 1971. I missed being in-country for a full year by three whole days. My daughter had been born in April 1970, so even I was not immune from the incredible chaos of that era. But I think Dr. King rose above it all, but not enough people took to heart at the time what he taught.

I thought you should know (and remember) all of this, especially you "youngsters," so that when you take Dr. King's holiday on the 16th you don't just "take it in stride" as another three-day weekend. Think about it, what he means to this country and to you. You might want to rededicate yourself to loving your neighbor. Right now would be a good time to do it.

Finally, Dr. King's words again: "Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's Theory of Relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermo-dynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."