

Euri Kim

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### The Man With a Dream

To introduce you to the one-hundred-and-sixty-word excerpt of a speech that, without fail, reduces me to tears every single time I read it, I must first introduce you to Martin Luther King Jr. A Georgian Black minister in the oppressive Reconstruction era, he, along with millions of other Black Americans, suffered unimaginable injustices every single day. With the Ku Klux Klan on the rise, danger became the norm—Black schools were vandalized and destroyed. Mobs of violent whites attacked, tortured, and lynched Black citizens in their communities at night.

It wasn't just dissenting citizens—governmental legislation persecuted Black Americans as well. Under the law, they were forbidden from living in white neighborhoods, marrying or living with white people, and some cities even outright posted signs turning away Black Americans—numerous constituents of the "separate but equal" principle outlined in the 1896 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Dr. King Jr. took these senseless acts of tyranny—and faced them head-on, shoulders back. He refused to accept the arrested state of progress in America, going on to lead the civil rights movement in the United States until his death in 1968. His ideas were critical to the eventual end of the legal segregation of African Americans in the South and other parts of the United States—to the end of legalized racial injustice in America. He was a man who clung to his honor, who refused to give in to the malice of resentment. He was a man who had the courage

to introduce novel rhetoric to civil struggle—peaceful, non-violent protest. He was a man who remained committed to his purpose, no matter how hopeless it seemed.

The following excerpt comes from Dr. King Jr.'s speech at Illinois Wesleyan University in 1966. Thirty-eight days before this speech, Sammy Younge, an outspoken advocate for civil rights, was murdered in cold blood for trying to use the whites-only bathroom. He was twenty-one.

It goes, "...Do to us what you will, and we will still love you. We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force...And so throw us in jail, and as difficult as that is, we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children and as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators and violence into our communities at the midnight hours and drag us out on some wayside road and beat us and leave us half-dead and we will still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And one day we will win our freedom but we will not only win freedom for ourselves. We will so appeal to your heart and your conscience, that we will win you in the process. And our victory will be a double victory."

Do to us what you will, and we will still love you. I find myself returning to that, over and over again. Perhaps that is why his words resonate with me so deeply—it speaks of a love so heavy, so persisting. The unceasing resilience of this man, of these Black men and women, to have not a single soul in the world on their side—and continue to remain hope for change.

You see, we spend so much of our lives focused on this idea that we alone cannot hope to fight the world's malice. And yet, amidst the rise of the Jim Crow era and the birth of the Civil Rights Movement: forty-two-year-old Rosa Parks, a Black seamstress from Alabama, refusing to yield to her white oppressors—setting off a chain of events that would change the course of

history. In the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Little Rock Nine, fighting through mobs of dissenters just to attend high school. Thirteen Freedom Riders on a Greyhound bus bound for the South, hoping for something better, even in the face of pervasive brutality.

Countless invisible stories shoving back against the black hole of prejudice, oppression, persecution. One act of conviction turned the tide: a man with the unrelenting courage to stand up for what was right. A father who dreamt of a nation where his children would not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. That, to me, is the epitome of honor, of courage, of an unyielding commitment to his beliefs. A dreamer, unwilling to give up on a divided world.

Dr. King Jr.—and those he inspired—taught me that it is not naïve to fight for something better. These people made me realize that every force starts from the bottom—they showed me that light finds a way to prevail, glimmering where the shadows weigh the heaviest.

The capacity to suffer—maybe that is not so dissimilar to the capacity to love. Maybe the capacity to love is to refuse to let hatred pervade the heart. To choose to hold onto your compassion, even for those who have caused you unimaginable pain. To endure. If they could do it, could find it in themselves to harbor humanity for their tormentors—then so can I. We all can.

In *Strength to Love*, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” I strive to emulate his ideals within every part of me—by loving freely and without judgment, by giving the benefit of the doubt, and by forgiving without retaliation. This is how his impact persists: through me—through you. Through every single act of kindness without expectation, through the boundless compassion of humanity, through the rejection of violent resolution. Martin Luther

King Jr. died years ago, but his legacy lives today through the love, even in the face of hate, of Americans across the country.

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