

Dear Dr. King
January 14, 2018
Rev. Otto O'Connor

Dear Dr. King,

I want to tell you that you'd be surprised of how the world has turned out.

50 years have passed since you died.

You were in Memphis, supporting Black sanitation workers.

I want to tell you that you'd be surprised.

I want to tell you you'd be surprised that, in 2018, have a president who make openly racist statements about immigrants from Haiti and African Countries. A president who makes racist statements about not wanting to welcome Black immigrants.

I want to tell you that many politicians stayed as these words were spoken.

I want to tell you that you'd be surprised that 1 in 3 Black men can expect to go to prison in their lifetime.

I want to tell you that you'd be surprised that Black folks are still targeted. Their churches are targeted and their bodies are targeted, and they are treated different than white people by the police.

I want to tell you that activist, those who have led the movement for Black lives, also known as Black Lives Matter, that they are told to adjust their ton and that they are told that they are too radical, too political, too anti-white on a daily basis.

I want to tell you that those things would surprise you about a world, a country, our country, 50 years after your death.

But let's face it, you wouldn't be surprised, would you?

You knew that this struggle for racial equity, for racial justice, would take longer than that.

Dr. King, I wonder if you knew it when you wrote, just before your death in your book about economic justice *Where Do We Go From Here?* that "The majority of white Americans consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for [Black people]. They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to steady growth toward a middle-class Utopia embodying racial harmony. But unfortunately this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity."

The world, this world, it seems sometimes, is not so different from the times you lived in.

Yes, of course, civil rights, laws that appear on the book are not *explicitly* racist. Those of every color, as long as they hold United States citizenship, are still technically allowed to vote.

But there is so much more to justice than laws that say who can and can't marry whom, who can and can't vote.

My Dear Dr. King. Sometimes I feel like I'm living in a country where so many celebrate the work you did, and then turn around and work against it. And where so many people change the way it's remembered.

I have to say, I think your legacy has been a little... How should I say it? Whitewashed?

And I do mean it in both senses of the term.

We often talk about your non-violent approach to injustice. Your civil disobedience. You are displayed as a peaceful man, and idealistic man. Your "I have a dream speech," is heard all over the country, if not the planet. Even now, though it has been years since I heard this recording I can still hear your voice echo in my ear "**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."

A beautiful word and dream, no doubt. A dream that we're still striving for today, but that, often, many dismiss because they don't perceive themselves to be judging people for anything but the content of their character. A dream that many think we have achieved as a society. A beautiful dream that doesn't take into account the years of economic inequality and institutional racism that has led to where we are today.

And you knew that. You knew that at the time. You knew it in the letter you wrote, and you know it in your work in your life towards economic justice. You were an intersectional thinker, but we forget that.

Even in our own hymnal, the only reading at the back written by you does not address this inequality directly, but rather your "peaceful" means of protest.

And we close our eyes and pay homage to the Respectable Black Man we think you were. We pat ourselves on the back for the fact that we don't see color and then we go back to "not thinking about it" for the rest of the year.

Or, at least, that's how it was for many of us who are surrounded by mostly liberal white folks.

But things have changed, Dr. King. And I want to know what you would say.

But there is something happening, Dr. King. Something has happened to many of us white folks. While the people of color have said it was there all along, suddenly many white folks are starting see the true nature of racism and white supremacy in this country, and that it is alive and well.

So what would you say to these people who are waking up to injustice? To these people who are finally waking up to the fact that racism isn't over because the laws desegregated us.

To these people who are seeing how racism and white supremacy are in their own lives and institutions?

And what would you say to those people of color who are leading these movements today?

I know you wouldn't turn a blind eye or be criticizing people for their tone or chastising people for blocking a freeway.

I know you'd see the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement. I think you'd relate to the way they are too are called anti-police, too extreme.

And I wonder, Dr. King, if we'll look back on this movement in the same rose-y way we look back on you.

Dr. King, I know you understand that before we can live in a Utopian world where there is true racial equality, the color of someone's skin does matter, does impact their lives on a daily basis, and does make them more likely to be target by the police, or sent to jail, or even to be passed over for a job.

And I know you would see how we have to emphasize that Black Lives Matter, though it should be plainly obvious, it's not. Perhaps, you, Dr. King, would agree that, yes, all lives matter. But I think you'd agree that that was not the point. That the injustice perpetrated against Black people in this country is too much to ignore and so we must proclaim the truth, that they do matter. And guess what? A proclamation like this and a demonstration on a highway are peaceful forms of protest and change.

(Ever notice that the people who we hold up in their death are the very ones we fear during their lives?)

Dr. King, tell me what would you do?

Here's the other thing, Dr. King. I know you weren't perfect. You were simply a human among many, an activist among many. If you were alive today, we might follow your brilliant lead - but we'd also still have the voice of these other black activists to follow.

Like Patrisse Kahn-Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, the three black women who founded the Black Lives Matter movement.

Is it any surprise that co-founder Patrisse Kahn-Cullors upcoming memoir is called "When They Call You a Terrorist." I bet you could relate.

Or what about Tarana Burke, the original founder of the #metoo campaign, something we will be addressing in worship next week?

I hope you would say to them what you said later on in your "Letter from a Birmingham Jail:"

The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extremists of justice?

And so I believe it is what you would say to us here today. To me. Because I know I need to hear it.

For the lesson I take from your life is that it is us religious folks who have both the power and the convictions to make a statements because they are backed by our faith. Your commitment to your faith and to your actions, your grounding your God, is what allowed you to be able to bring your prophetic ministry to all the people on earth. In that way, how can I follow your example? Would you tell us to follow those Black activists today in the prophetic work that they are doing?

And so I'll end like this. Dr. King. My fellow clergyman. I wanted to tell you you'd be surprised. But I'm sure you wouldn't be.

Reading your words, celebrating your legacy, help me not to lose hope. Let us be extremists for love and justice.

With love from a young white minister in Malden, Massachusetts,
Reverend Otto O'Connor