

Martin Luther King, Jr., Courage, and What We Want to Hear

Today is Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. For most of us, that means we don't have to work and very little else. We get a holiday thanks to the icon of Civil Rights, who seems far away and long gone to most of us. The reasons why we should celebrate this man are mostly forgotten to many of us.

It shows.

It shows especially in our elections when we choose "leaders" to govern our state and our country. We support political parties and elect candidates who tell us what we want to hear. If they don't, we don't support them. If they speak out against what we want to hear, we're done with them. Instead, we opt elect the "leaders" who go along with the crowd.

The words for people who tell you what you want to hear have always had negative connotation—huckster, con-artist, grifter. But we don't mind that anymore. The worst of these "leaders" figure out where they can provoke and exploit resentments. They tell us who to hate and why we should hate them. These "leaders" love to tell us that people who oppose them are our enemies. They inspire fear rather than hope. Yet, everybody gets on board. Even the "leaders" who aren't stoking this frothing resentment with deceit and fear are unwilling to speak out when it is right for them to do so. They remain unwilling to tell us what we don't want to hear, lest they lose our support in the next election.

This is the opposite of courage—it is cowardice.

It takes exactly zero courage to tell people whatever they want to hear.

Conversely, it takes considerable courage to tell people what they don't want to hear.

We celebrate today because Martin Luther King, Jr. courageously told people things they very much did not want to hear. He made them uncomfortable. Extremely uncomfortable. He challenged conventional thinking. He did not promote hatred or animosity, but sought to change the hearts and minds of everyone, including those who hated him, so that they might understand the need for human equality and justice. He fought for this in a peaceful, defiant, dignified way. This took enormous courage.

He maintained that courage in the face of threats to his safety, even after enduring brutal physical attacks and unjust arrests, to the very end of his life when was gunned down for his defiant courage in Memphis in 1968.

America did not become the "Home of the Brave" without a long history of people with great courage standing up to and acting against conventional thinking. King was not the first or the only brave person worthy of honor. We should emulate them.

We celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. because of his tremendous courage to tell people what they did not want to hear.

We all have the ability to speak up and speak out. To decry wrongs when we see them. To disagree. To tell people things they don't want to hear. So in celebration of the life and spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., let's ask ourselves if we can muster the courage to challenge our own thinking and to take a stand against prevailing fears, hatreds, divisiveness and moral cowardice.

Or will opt for more fear, resentment and divisiveness by sticking with the easy, courage-less path of staying silent, going along with the crowd and sticking with the "leaders" who just tell us more of whatever we want to hear?

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