



Center for Civic Education

Martin Luther King Jr. and the Power of Words

Teacher Resource 2 Quotations by Martin Luther King Jr.

Listed below are a series of quotations by Martin Luther King Jr. You can find these and others at a variety of sources on the web, including at [BrainyQuote](#), [Goodreads](#), [The Quotations Page](#), and [About.com](#).

Quotations by Martin Luther King Jr.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

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.

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

A man who won't die for something is not fit to live.

Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men.

Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle. And so we must straighten our backs and work for our freedom. A man can't ride you unless your back is bent.

A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual doom.

I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.

An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.

A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus.

In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.

He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.

Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.

Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.

Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.

History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.

A man can't ride your back unless it's bent.

A nation or civilization that continues to produce soft-minded men purchases its own spiritual death on the installment plan.

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.

All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence.

The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.

A lie cannot live.

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.

Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think.

We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.

Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.

I look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.

Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.

If we are to go forward, we must go back and rediscover those precious values--that all reality hinges on moral foundations and that all reality has spiritual control.

Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies—or else? The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or else we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.

Almost always, the creative dedicated minority has made the world better.

Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'

The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people.

The hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict.

Whatever your life's work is, do it well. A man should do his job so well that the living, the dead, and the unborn could do it no better.

There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.

Never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was legal.

The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But... the good Samaritan reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

The time is always right to do what is right.

Everything that we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see.

Discrimination is a hellhound that gnaws at Negroes in every waking moment of their lives to remind them that the lie of their inferiority is accepted as truth in the society dominating them.

Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.

All progress is precarious, and the solution of one problem brings us face to face with another problem.

An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law.

A right delayed is a right denied.

At the center of non-violence stands the principle of love.

We must build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear.

Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into friend.

One who breaks an unjust law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now.

I am not interested in power for power's sake, but I'm interested in power that is moral, that is right and that is good.

Law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.

That old law about 'an eye for an eye' leaves everybody blind. The time is always right to do the right thing.

Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him.

A riot is the language of the unheard.

Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood.

Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon which cuts without wounding and ennoble the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals.

The hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace and brotherhood.

If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live.

Never succumb to the temptation of bitterness.

The limitation of riots, moral questions aside, is that they cannot win and their participants know it. Hence, rioting is not revolutionary but reactionary because it invites defeat. It involves an emotional catharsis, but it must be followed by a sense of futility.

If physical death is the price that I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive.

The quality, not the longevity, of one's life is what is important.

It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important.

I submit to you that if a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live.

The art of acceptance is the art of making someone who has just done you a small favor wish that he might have done you a greater one.

Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary.

Seeing is not always believing.

One of the greatest casualties of the war in Vietnam is the Great Society... shot down on the battlefield of Vietnam.

When you are right you cannot be too radical; when you are wrong, you cannot be too conservative.

The moral arc of the universe bends at the elbow of justice.

The means by which we live have outdistanced the ends for which we live. Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men.

Pity may represent little more than the impersonal concern which prompts the mailing of a check, but true sympathy is the personal concern which demands the giving of one's soul.

We are not makers of history. We are made by history.

The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be... The nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I submit that an individual who breaks the law that conscience tells him is unjust and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law.

We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive.

It is not enough to say we must not wage war. It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it.

Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted.

The Negro needs the white man to free him from his fears. The white man needs the Negro to free him from his guilt.

War is a poor chisel to carve out tomorrow.

Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal.

Property is intended to serve life, and no matter how much we surround it with rights and respect, it has no personal being. It is part of the earth man walks on. It is not man.

We have guided missiles and misguided men.

The sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.

Wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows.

Means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek.

I want to be the white man's brother, not his brother-in-law.

We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war but the positive affirmation of peace.

There is nothing more tragic than to find an individual bogged down in the length of life, devoid of breadth.

It is incontestable and deplorable that Negroes have committed crimes; but they are derivative crimes. They are born of the greater crimes of the white society.

The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows.

We must use time creatively.