



## A LETTER TO DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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Dear Dr. King,

Nearly 52 years after your assassination, the country still pauses today to reflect on your personal contributions to the fight for basic human rights and their universal implications in our current world. I confess that meaningful reflection led me to learn and relearn about the hundreds of acts you made to improve race relations in our country and the stark contrast to the contributions I've made in my own life.

Most people remember you for the incredible orator you were. Your words are forever memorialized; and, rightfully so as the applicability to so many fights for justice still ring true today. Until recently, I overlooked the undisputable bravery that was required of you each time you took to a podium as well as in all the more private efforts you made. You had to purposely lean into discord and dangerous situations. You chose to step into chaos and discomfort each day. Though your words are what we remember, your bravery is what truly set you apart - and above - in my mind.

Turning the tables to reflect on my own life, I am acutely aware of present day injustices that anger me. I am the daughter of a gay man who when he eventually lived his truth experienced a cruel distancing of some friends and family who previously were so close. I am a woman living in the era of the #MeToo movement with girlfriends who all have stories of assault or harassment to share. And I am a business professional who (like so many others), has been witness to and impacted by many "isms" throughout my career. On the surface, our causes may differ, but I am

confident you would have waved the flag for these wrongs as well. As you taught us after the violence in Birmingham, tensions are not about white vs. black, straight vs. gay, men vs. women. Tensions are about justice and injustice.

This recent Christmas brought many different people and viewpoints to my dinner table. I found that when confronted by a biased comment my reaction was to roll my eyes or walk away under the notion that dialogue was futile. Many times in my life I've worked to "keep the peace" in similar situations, but now I wonder if the ugly truth is that peacekeeping was actually cowardice and timidity.

Dr. King, you persevered in your fight for a better world despite your home being bombed, numerous arrests and even solitary confinement, physical harm including a near-death stabbing, burnt crosses in your front yard, traveling millions of miles across the country to support different communities, exhaustion, and more. Who am I to expect no discomfort in my desire for change?

Please know that you inspired me to examine my own choices and I regret that I did not like what I found. Today, I make a commitment to you and those I care about to begin stepping into the awkward, the uncomfortable, the friction – from the Christmas table to the conference table. We learn that at a very upscale dinner that honored you for your Nobel Peace Prize, you remarked, "I am tempted to stay here in a more serene life, but I must return to the valley...of anger and prejudice." Maybe we all need to spend more time in that valley?

Most of us will never find ourselves on a national platform fighting for justice like yourself, but I am energized by the notion of being a better, more vocal advocate closer to home. I make a posthumous promise to you to say more – not for the sake of antagonism but because I truly believe that better is possible. I make a promise to talk to my older family members and not simply write them off for generational differences. I make a promise to talk to and work with firm leadership instead of assuming cultural change won't come. I make a promise not to let bigotry voiced in my presence stand because as you said, to remain silent in the face of oppression and cruelty is the ultimate tragedy.

Dr. King, you once said, "I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity...say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness...I just want to leave a committed life behind." Sir, you certainly achieved that legacy. Thank you for inspiring me to find my voice and pick up my own baton.

With renewed gratitude,

Liz Abren