



Scenes from the March on Washington, August 1963.



Written by Wynsor Taylor and Caryn Frain

Words in bold type are defined in the Glossary on page 8.

## *If I Can Help Somebody*

*"If I can help somebody, as I pass along,  
If I can cheer somebody, with a word or song,  
If I can show somebody, how they're traveling wrong,  
Then my living shall not be in vain."*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. lived his life to help others. He worked to eliminate injustice and **ensure** that all people were treated equally.

Even though slavery was **abolished** in 1865 and everyone had the right to vote, many people all over the country **discriminated** against others based on their race. In fact, between 1876 and 1965 many southern states passed laws that kept different races apart. This meant there were separate schools for white children and black children, separate water fountains, different places to sit on buses and even separate cemeteries for different races!

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born into segregation. When he was a young child, he played with both black and white children, but when he was old enough to attend elementary school, he could no longer play with his white friends. He tried to visit his white friends but their parents told him to go away and not come back. This was the first time he realized that some white people thought they were better than he was. He knew this was not right and would dedicate his life to changes this attitude.

## A TIMELINE OF EVENTS IN AMERICAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY

**1607** - First permanent English settlement in America at Jamestown, VA.

**1619** - First African slaves arrive in Jamestown, VA.

**1767** - Phillis Wheatley, a slave in Boston, becomes the first African American woman to have her poetry published.

**1776** - Declaration of Independence states "all men are created equal" but slavery still exists in the United States.

**1783** - Revolutionary War ends. United States wins independence from England. Around 500,000 slaves live in the United States  
**1831**- Nat Turner leads a slave revolt.

**1832** - A slave named Tice Davids escapes to the north to freedom. His owner tries to find him but says, "He must have gone on an underground railroad." The name sticks.

**1857** - United States Supreme Court hears the case of Dred Scott v. John F. A. Sandford, ruling that slaves and their descendants were not protected by the Constitution and could not be United States citizens.

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# A Nonviolent Protest

*"Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love."*

Martin Luther King, Jr. decided to become a minister, just like his father. While he was in **seminary**, he studied the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. Like Gandhi, Dr. King believed that violence was wrong. He said, "Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both **impractical** and **immoral**. It is **impractical** because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. It is **immoral** because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to **annihilate** rather than to convert. Violence is **immoral** because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible...it creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers."

When someone hurts you, many people think you should hurt them back. Dr. King believed that combating violence with violence only led to more violence. In order to get people's attention and to change their minds, he believed in, and preached, **passive resistance**. Dr. King encouraged utilizing techniques like boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and peaceful protests.

*"You ought to believe something in life, believe that thing so fervently that you will stand up with it till the end of your days. I can't make myself believe that God wants me to hate. I'm tired of violence. And I'm not going to let my oppressor dictate to me what method I must use."*

Despite their efforts, the nonviolent protestors were often met with violence. These peaceful protestors were beaten by mobs, sprayed with fire hoses, or arrested, and sometimes homes and businesses were bombed. People were even murdered. Still, Dr. King asked members of the movement to **persevere**. He believed in forgiveness. He said, "Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can

do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illumines it. ...Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."

In recognition of his efforts, Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on December 10, 1964. The Nobel Peace Prize is given to people who promote peace. When he accepted the prize he said, "I am reminded that only yesterday in Birmingham, Alabama, our children, crying out for brotherhood, were answered with fire hoses, snarling dogs and even death. I am mindful that only yesterday in Mississippi, young people seeking to secure the right to vote were brutalized and



*Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks during a rally.*

murdered. Therefore I must ask why this prize is awarded to a movement which is beleaguered and committed to unrelenting struggle; to a movement which has not won the very peace and brotherhood which is the essence of the Nobel Prize. After contemplation I conclude that this award, which I receive on behalf of the movement, is a profound recognition that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and racial questions of our time—the need

for a man to overcome oppression without resorting to violence."

Sadly, not everyone believed in peace. Dr. King was **assassinated** in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968 at the age of 39. While his life was cut short, he left a legacy that impacted the United States forever.

*"If you are cut down in a movement that is designed to save the soul of a nation, then no other death could be more redemptive."*

*"Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude."*

**1861** - A number of states **secede** from the United States and form the Confederate States of America. The Civil War begins with slavery as the primary issue.

**1863** - President Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation which frees slaves in the Confederate States of America.

**1865** - The Civil War Ends. 13th Amendment added to the Constitution making slavery illegal.

**1868** - 14th Amendment **ratified** and provides all citizens equal protection under the law

**1870** - 15th Amendment **ratified**. It prohibits government from denying a male citizen the right to vote. Joseph Rainey becomes the first African American Representative in the United States Congress. Hiram Revels becomes the first African American United States Senator.

**1896** - United States Supreme Court rules that racial segregation is constitutional as long as it is "separate but equal" in Plessy v. Ferguson.

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# *Children and the Civil Rights Movement*

*"Everybody can be great... because anybody can serve."*

Adults were not the only ones involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Children and teenagers were also central to the quest for racial equality.

Rosa Parks is famous for not giving up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama to a white person in December, 1955. However, she was not the first person to be arrested for doing so. Nine months earlier, in March, 1955, fifteen year old Claudette Colvin was arrested for not giving her seat to a white person when asked to do so. This was an act of civil disobedience. Mrs. Park's arrest for breaking the same segregation law led leaders in the African American community to start a boycott of the buses in Montgomery. Many people, including children, helped pass out 35,000 leaflets in stores, schools and churches to encourage people to boycott. The boycott lasted over thirteen months, but in the end the law was changed!

In September, 1957, nine African American students enrolled at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas under a new integration plan. The governor sent the Arkansas National Guard to keep them out of the school but they didn't give up. President Eisenhower ordered soldiers to walk the students to their classes.



*101st Airborne escorts the Little Rock Nine into Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.*



*The Little Rock Nine are greeted by New York City Mayor Robert Wagner during a trip to New York.*

Four African American students at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University went to the Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina on February 1, 1960. They bought a few supplies and then sat at the lunch counter asking to be served. The workers refused and the young men sat at the counter until the store closed. This started a sit-in movement across the country. Students, both white and black, started sitting at lunch counters across the country peacefully demanding that everyone be served. Just a year later, hundreds of cities changed their segregation laws because of the sit-ins.

Students of all ages participated in the Freedom Rides of 1961. At the time the Freedom Rides began, the Supreme Court had ruled, in 1955, that long distance buses traveling across state lines could not be segregated, but the ruling had been ignored for six years. During these rides, white and black people sat together on the bus. These buses drove through the south to encourage segregation to end. The Freedom Riders were met with resistance and were attacked by mobs of whites and the buses set on fire. Others were arrested, but they didn't give up and eventually the Interstate Commerce Commission was forced to comply with the Supreme Court ruling and passengers of any color were permitted to sit wherever they wanted.



*A young girl participates in the March on Washington, August 1963.*



*Children in an integrated classroom in the 1950s*

One of the most famous events of the Civil Rights Movement involving children was the Children's Crusade in May, 1963. There had been marches and protests in Birmingham, Alabama since April of that year, but it was a march on May 2 that got the country's attention. These marchers, some as young as six years old, were marching in an effort to talk to their mayor about segregation in their city. Almost a thousand of them were arrested and taken to jail. The very next day another group met to march. That next day, Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor had a plan to stop the march. He ordered the police to use attack dogs on the protestors and ordered firefighters to spray the marchers with fire hoses.

When people across the country watched the news that night, they saw the marchers, including children, being bitten by dogs and knocked down by water from the powerful hoses. President Kennedy said, "What has just happened in Birmingham makes me sick."

The marches didn't stop, even though some people thought it was too dangerous for children to march. On May 5, two thousand people marched to pray outside the jail where the children were locked up. When Commissioner Connor ordered them to turn back around, they knelt to pray. He told the police to turn the hoses on them but no one did. The streets were quiet and the protesters rose and finished their march.

# How Can You Help?

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

**1909** - NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) founded to ensure all equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination

**1920** - 19th Amendment ratified securing women the right to vote.

**1929** - Martin Luther King, Jr. is born in Atlanta, Georgia.

**1939** - Marian Anderson performs a concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. after Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused permission for her to sing at Constitution Hall.

**1940** - Hattie McDaniel becomes the first African American to win an Academy Award for her role as Mammy in *Gone With the Wind*.

**1947** - Jackie Robinson becomes the first African American to play Major League Baseball.

**1948** - President Harry Truman signs Executive Order 9981 integrating the military and mandating equal treatment and opportunity to military personnel.

**1954** - United States Supreme Court hears the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS* and rules that segregation by race in public schools is unconstitutional.

**1955** - Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott begins.

Music was an integral part of the Civil Rights Movement, in part because much of the early leadership of the Civil Rights movement was based in the churches of the south. Organizational meetings and rallies were held in church sanctuaries and basements so it was only natural that the music of the churches, including traditional spirituals, hymns, and gospels songs became intertwined with the Civil Rights Movement.

*If I Can Help Somebody*, one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s favorite songs, challenges us to help others. On the next page, you will find text from one of his last sermons, given two months before he died, where he quotes *If I Can Help Somebody* when reflecting on his life. This sermon, titled "Drum Major Instinct" was given February 4, 1968 in Atlanta, Georgia.

## **If I Can Help Somebody**

By Alma Bazel Androzzo, 1945

If I can help somebody, as I pass along,  
If I can cheer somebody, with a word or song,  
If I can show somebody, how they're traveling wrong,  
Then my living shall not be in vain.

### *Chorus:*

My living shall not be in vain,  
Then my living shall not be in vain  
If I can help somebody, as I pass along,  
Then my living shall not be in vain.

If I can do my duty, as a good man ought,  
If I can bring back beauty, to a world up wrought,  
If I can spread love's message, as the Master taught,  
Then my living shall not be in vain.

**How do you help others in your everyday life and how would you like to be remembered?**

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"Every now and then I guess we all think realistically about that day when we will be victimized with what is life's final common denominator—that something that we call death. We all think about it. And every now and then I think about my own death and I think about my own funeral. And I don't think of it in a morbid sense. And every now and then I ask myself, "What is it that I would want said?" And I leave the word to you this morning.

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. And every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others.

I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question.

I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry.

And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked.

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison.

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, 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. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that's all I want to say.

If I can help somebody as I pass along, if I can cheer somebody with a word or song, if I can show somebody he's traveling wrong, then my living will not be in vain. If I can do my duty as a Christian ought, if I can bring salvation to a world once wrought, if I can spread the message as the master taught, then my living will not be in vain."

**1956** - United States Supreme Court declares segregation on buses in Alabama unconstitutional resulting in the integration of public transportation. Montgomery bus boycott ends.

**1957** - Nine African American students integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

**1958** - Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald become the first African Americans to win a Grammy Award.

**1960** - Four students refuse to leave a "whites only" lunch counter at Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina until they are served. This begins a sit-in movement across the southern United States.

**1963** - Dr. King leads more than 250,000 people in a March on Washington and gives his famous "I Have A Dream Speech" from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial

**1964** - Civil Rights Act passed saying that no one can discriminate based on race, gender or religion.

**1965** - Voting Rights Act passed to protect the right of all citizens to vote.

**1967** - Thurgood Marshall becomes the first African American Justice on the United States Supreme Court.

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## GLOSSARY

**1968** - Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Fair Housing Act passed outlawing discrimination in rental or purchase of housing.

**1983** - President Reagan signs a law making Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a federal holiday.

**1990** - L. Douglas Wilder becomes the Governor of Virginia. He is the first African-American to be elected governor.

**2001** - Colin Powell becomes the first African American to serve as the Secretary of State.

**2009** - Barack Obama inaugurated as 44th President of the United States. He is the first African American to hold this office.

**2011** - Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial scheduled to open in Washington D.C.

**abolish** - to get rid of

**annihilate** - to destroy

**assassinate** - to murder a person (often famous) for political reasons

**civil disobedience** - to refuse to obey a law that one believes is wrong

**constitutional** - legal and therefore acceptable under the Constitution

**discriminate** - to not treat the same

**ensure** - guarantee

**immoral** - wrong based on standard beliefs

**impractical** - not reasonable or realistic

**passive resistance** - act of peacefully disagreeing

**persevere** - not give up

**ratify** - to approve and accept

**secede** - separate, become independent

**seminary** - a college where students study to become ministers



*President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Martin Luther King, Jr and others look on.*