

“Why MLK Day?”

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Here we are, just two or three weeks after the Winter holidays, ready to celebrate yet another federal holiday, Martin Luther King Day. This is the 21st year our nation has honored Dr. King in this way, and just as I complained to you all last month that the annual Christmas celebrations are difficult for me (and for many others), I don't really know what to do with yet another holiday. How many angles are there to the story of Jesus birth, or in this case, to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.?

The story is always the same. So how can we make it fresh in order to remember the meaning of it all?

Well, of course, as you know, Dr. King was a major—if not *the* major—player in the paradigm-changing events surrounding the Civil Rights movement here in America during the 1960's. In his life he was a husband, a father, a revolutionary civil rights leader, and Nobel Peace Prize winner. In his death, he has become a legend.

Since 1983, on the third Monday in January, our country has celebrated the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. A gifted student, King entered college at age fifteen, was an ordained minister before twenty, and received a doctorate at age 26. He became pastor of a church in Montgomery, Alabama, where in 1955 he was enlisted to help organize a boycott against the Montgomery transportation system, after a woman named Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to yield her seat to a white man. The boycott attracted national attention, and at 27 King was arrested for his non-violent protest of the bus company's policies. Three hundred and eighty-one days later, the Supreme Court determined the city and state bus segregation laws unconstitutional.

King found himself catapulted into the national arena as a champion of equality and social justice. He was a gifted orator. His speeches helped fuel a public outcry which drove the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

It has been said that when James Earl Ray's bullet took Dr. King's life on April 4, 1968, it killed the man, but not the dream. But like the man's work, even a holiday in his honor endured intense opposition before prevailing.

Originally submitted just four days after Dr. King's assassination, legislation to make Dr. King's birthday a holiday was shuffled around congress for fifteen years.

A long series of congressional debates and political opposition brought ever-greater public pressure to recognize King's social contributions. Finally in 1983, Congress overwhelmingly voted to pass the bill.

President Reagan signed the bill, establishing the 3rd Monday in January as a federal holiday. After George Washington, he was just the second American ever to receive such recognition.

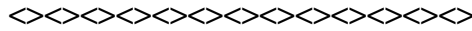
To be honest, I've always wondered how it was that Ronald Reagan was the one to sign this bill. I remember those days, and I even remember how Reagan began his campaign for the nomination for president, way back in 1980, down in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where some fifteen years before, on June 21, 1964, three civil rights workers were murdered by white supremacists. Reagan spoke of “state's rights”, a coded phrase actually referring to institutional racism, and an idea which was supposedly decided in the American Civil War.

Throughout his presidency, Reagan continually resisted further advances in civil rights legislation and policies. And yet he was the one who signed the bill creating the federal holiday.

I'd like to be kind and suggest that the President had a change of heart, firmly believing as I do that people can in fact have a change of heart. The truth is, of course, that Congress has passed the bill creating the holiday overwhelmingly, making it veto-proof, so that Reagan had to sign it.

Well, some of you will say, Yes, and it's all about the Great Turning as a world-wide movement in response to the deteriorated relationship between human beings and the earth itself.

This great change is not only a personal re-positioning. It is a cultural change, one which honors Dr. King's notion of the "mutuality of our existence." And that's the best kind of change.



LET US PRAY:

Great God, who is known in a thousand lands and who is called forth in a thousand languages, we acknowledge your presence within and among us even now, a magnificent agent of change, always challenging us to consider how we think and how we live our lives.

We come making petitions. We sincerely want to be better than we are, even as we recognize our shortcomings and search for ways to mend ourselves, always aiming toward the heart's fondest desires to do good.

Help us to acknowledge all our many resources to make goodness happen, and especially the transformations we can effect in how we act in the world around us.

Help us not to be satisfied with putting the trophies commemorating our accomplishments up on the mantle, only to release our important obligations for continuing growth. Remind us that's it's not enough to pat ourselves on the back. Correct our tendency to kid ourselves into thinking the job is done when we simply announce it.

*Open our eyes that I may see glimpses of truth which wait for me.
Place in our hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set us free.
Open my ears that we may hear voices of truth you send so clear.
And while the waves notes far on my ears, everything false will disappear.
Open my mouth and let me bear, gladly the warm truth everywhere.
Open my heart let me prepare love with they children this to share.
Silently now I wait for thee, ready in love your will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit of Life.*

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives and we shall dwell in the House of Light and Love forever.

Amen.