

King's visionary work is his greatest memorial

Most of us think of Martin Luther King only as a Southern civil rights pioneer and an American hero. According to Vanderbilt University professor Lewis Baldwin, “this approach undermines King’s importance as a world leader and fails to capture the extent to which he addressed the global realities of racism, poverty and war.” The new Martin Luther King memorial in Washington, D.C., provides an opportunity to reflect on the global impact of his work.

Dr. King’s most influential and powerful quotes are engraved on the Inscription Wall at the MLK Memorial. Studying the quotes, it is clear that he linked the struggle for civil rights and racial equality to international human rights through messages such as, “I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.” Dr. King lifted the issues of racial and economic injustice to the global level, to include the poor of Africa, Asia, Australia and Latin America.

King’s message of peace, equality and democracy brought him world prominence as a champion of human rights and social justice. As one of the world’s most celebrated nonviolent activists, King’s global influence is immortalized in statues and street names around the world. Over 100 countries from Canada to Japan celebrate his birthday. Britain honored Martin Luther King as a 20th century martyr with a statue in Westminster Abbey in London, the only American to be given a prominent memorial in such an “ancient niche.”

As we prepare for Greenville’s celebration of Martin Luther King’s birthday during MLK Dream Weekend, Jan. 13-16, our view of Dr. King must be expanded to include how he is the global symbol of the struggle

for nonviolent social change. His voyage to West Africa in 1957 to attend Ghana's independence ceremony, the first Saharan colonial African country to gain independence, marked the beginning of a growing global alliance of oppressed peoples with King as the inspiration.

King actively supported the struggle of South Africans against apartheid. Dr. King and Chief Luthuli, president of the African National Congress and the leader of black Africans in their nonviolent campaign for civil rights in South Africa, made an "Appeal for Action against Apartheid" on Human Rights Day in December 1962. Years later, as Nelson Mandela celebrated his election as the first black president of South Africa, he quoted King, the "Great Freedom Fighter," saying, "Free at last."

In 1964, the chairman of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee called King, the youngest person awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, an "undaunted champion of peace" as he was the first person in the Western world to have shown that a struggle can be waged without violence. "Dr. King was the first to make the message of brotherly love a reality in the course of his struggle, and he has brought this message to people of all nations and races."

King inspired the civil rights struggle of Aboriginal Australia. "Freedom Rides" were organized in 1965 throughout New South Wales, a state of Australia, to expose the discrimination experienced by Aboriginal people.

Recently, Martin Luther King's global reach was reflected in the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. Three women from Africa and the Arab world shared the prize for their nonviolent role in promoting peace, democracy and gender equality. One recipient, Tawakkol Karman of Yemen, a pro-democracy campaigner, called the prize "the victory of our peaceful revolution." Martin Luther King most inspired Ms. Karman with his quest for peaceful change. She said, "We try for change using his same methods."

King argued that “we cannot ignore the larger ‘World House’ in which we are also dwellers” in his last book, “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?” He tells a parable of a divided and long-separated family who inherited a mansion, which they cannot sell. They must instead live together peacefully in the house, putting aside their differences.

Using this parable to point to a new problem of mankind, King says, “We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together — black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu — a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace. The large house in which we live demands that we transform this worldwide neighborhood into a worldwide brotherhood.”

Today, Dr. King’s message is more important than ever before. In “Where Do We Go From Here,” King noted that oppressed people cannot remain so forever as “eventually the cup of endurance runs over,” prophesying events in Egypt and the Middle East. King’s visionary work is his greatest memorial.

Join us as we celebrate Martin Luther King’s leadership which still resonates all over the world at the MLK Dream Weekend Diversity Banquet on Friday, Jan. 12, 2012. Tickets are on sale now at several locations in Greenville and online at mlkdreamweekend.com.

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