

A WEEK IN *Learning*

SPECIAL EDITION

LESSONS FROM THE PAST: REFLECTIONS ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. FOR OUR WATERSHED MOMENTS

An Interview with Dr. Neal A. Lester

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (MLK Day) is a federal holiday. The celebration on January 15th commemorates the actual birthday of Dr. King. On this holiday, we celebrate Dr. King as a social activist and civil rights leader who played a critical role in the American civil rights movement through the mid-1950s and early 1960s. Dr. King's work was impactful. On August 2, 2011, he was honored as the fourth non-President (and the only African American) memorialized in a statue, on or near the Washington Mall.

ESTABLISHING THE HOLIDAY

Much like the causes championed by its namesake, establishing this holiday was hard-fought. Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, and within four days of his murder, Michigan Rep. John Conyers introduced a US Congressional bill to commemorate King's life and work on behalf of humanity with a federal holiday. For nearly ten years, this bill did not get a single vote on the House floor; and in 1979, it was five votes short of passing in the House vote. In 1983, Congress passed and President Reagan signed the bill into legislation. However, it was not until 1986 that the first national MLK holiday celebration took place. Even with federal support, the adoption of the MLK holiday among states moved at a snail's pace.

In January 1989, the MLK holiday became legal in 44 US states. Some records cite New Hampshire as the final state to officially honor MLK Day as a paid state holiday in 1999. Other sources report that states like Virginia, Utah, and South Carolina did not make this commitment until 2000. In case you were wondering, Arizona observed this federal holiday for the first time in 1993; gaining the dubious honor of being one of the "Final Five" states to observe the MLK Day. Even without a signed bill from Congress, King's legacy carried on through his supporters. On January 15, 1969, the year after his assassination, the first MLK celebration took place in Atlanta, Georgia. Through the years of stopped and stalled efforts in Congress, King's spouse, Coretta Scott-King, led many efforts to make this holiday a reality. In 1981, music icon, Stevie Wonder, wrote his famous "Happy Birthday" song in support of federal recognition of MLK Day. It is said the final petition handed over to Congress in 1983 had over 6 million signatures on it! This turnout made the holiday bill near impossible to ignore.



Dr. Neal A. Lester



Georgia Harris

LASTING LESSONS

There are many lessons we can learn from the life and legacy of Dr. King and from our journey as a nation to establishing this holiday. In the wake of our current social and political climate, MLK Day is an opportunity to reach into the past to find inspiration in the present and for the future. To help guide us on this journey, our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Steering Committee reached out to a dear friend of our organization, Dr. Neal A. Lester, for his reflections on MLK Day and the life and legacy of African American Studies and is a diversity champion. Among his many local, regional and national accolades in the area of diversity and inclusion, and the City of Tempe awarded his Project Humanities team a 2021 MLK Diversity Award in the Education category. We hope you find these highlights from our conversation with him as insightful as we did.

On a “misquoted” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

Dr. King left us with an abundance of thoughts, ideas, and concepts, many of which continue to shape the landscape of our thoughts on equity and justice. Having studied Dr. King so intently, we started by asking Dr. Lester to share his thoughts on any quotes or phrases from Dr. King that are often quoted out of context. He responded with a firm, “Yes. The oft-quoted, “I Have a Dream” speech and the section that refers to people being “judged by the content of their character, and not the color of their skin”.

In Dr. Lester’s view, this Dr. King statement tends to be used as a justification for alleged race-neutral “colorblindness,” a concept reliant upon the presumption that race-based differences do not matter, therefore, denying the reality of people’s lived experience[s]. In the case of Dr. King, this was an aspirational statement, but not an effort to erase difference. This becomes evident as we explore Dr. King’s the complete body of work, which was far more “radical”. (see Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1967 speech on “The Other America”) Dr. King speaks of an American reality overrun with racism, police brutality, and poverty.

Dr. Lester also noted that Dr. King did not believe in “gradualism,” the notion that lasting change is gradual and not the result of sudden change or revolution. Dr. Lester concluded by quoting Civil Rights scholar Dr. Charles McKinney who contends that our society embraces a “sugar-coated” version of Dr. King, “not the King that says, “We need justice, and we need it now!”

On Dr. King’s “The Other America” speech and modern day:

One of the most provocative speeches of Dr. King’s lifetime was “The Other America.” This speech was a call-to-action, intended to inspire a multiracial crusade for economic and social equality. We asked Dr. Lester to share his thoughts on the modern-day relevance of this speech. Dr. Lester declared, “What ‘The Other America’ shows me is that what he articulated then is exactly what we are experiencing now.” Dr. Lester discussed modern-day images that reflect the reality of two Americas—one of opportunity [and justice] for some, and not for others. “People in this COVID-19 pandemic are not in the same boat even though we are in the same treacherous waters. We are still in a place where people have so much and others have so little.”

Dr. Lester also shared examples of his Project Humanities team's efforts serving populations of Arizonans experiencing homelessness. He articulated how closely interconnected racism, poverty, and our rendition of capitalism truly are in both our American past and present. Regardless of the power imbalance, everyone is affected by racism, classism, homophobia, and the like. He suggests that our commitment to living and promoting the ideals of justice associated with Dr. King's life and legacy should be to press past the denial of these "isms" and learn to dismantle the systems of oppressions.

On Dr. King's concept of forgiveness:

Dr. King famously stated, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive." We invited Dr. Lester to dissect the meaning and application of this statement. Dr. Lester leaned into this topic with a very apropos comment: "Keep in mind that forgiveness does not mean we do not hold people accountable. Sometimes, we either/or those [concepts]." He goes on to say, "You can forgive and hold people accountable, and forgive in such a way that you are not bridled or shackled by anger, or immobilized by bitterness." Dr. Lester then branched into a holistic discussion on appropriate expressions of anger; exploring how systems of oppression not only limit access to resources but often the right to express it freely. Dr. Lester invoked other cultural voices, such as poet Maya Angelou, celebrated for saying in a 2006 interview with comedian Dave Chapelle:

You should be angry. You must not be bitter. Bitterness is like cancer. It eats upon the host. It doesn't do anything to the object of its displeasure. So, use that anger. You write it. You paint it. You dance it. You march it. You vote it. You do everything about it. You talk it. Never stop talking it.

Finding creative ways to express anger – not bitterness—is an important part of any healing process. This does not mean forgetting and moving on without accountability and some semblance of "justice." Our US society does not fully afford each person the privilege of equal expression or justice. Still, we might endeavor to not let it deter us from exploring the struggles of all who want to be heard. As intersectional beings, each of our identities is both layered and complex. Dr. Lester ended this segment by referencing another African American writer, Audre Lorde, by saying, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we don't lead single-issue lives."

On ending poverty and the allocation of resources:

Dr. King advocated against so much more than just racism. In line with Goodwill's mission of ending poverty, Dr. King noted, "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we have the resources to get rid of it" [Dr. King, Nobel Peace Prize address, 1964]. As a final question, we asked Dr. Lester to give some advice on what can each of us do to make sure we are allocating our resources in ways that make sense to us. He began by teasing-out the acknowledgment that many of us have much more than we need. Still, those who are disparaged are those who do not make enough money to live on. He continued this thought, stating that even the way we calculate merit is often subjective-- based on what we value and who we value. Dr. Lester deduced, "If we as a society had the will, and the 'good will,' to address homeless and the unsheltered, we could do that. But we don't want to give up anything, and we are all guilty of that."

Dr. Lester concluded this segment by imploring each of us to look around and see the hurt and suffering that exists not just in our families, not just in our communities, not just in our state, not just in our country. However, he did not stop there. He encouraged us to forgive ourselves for our mistakes and use our individual moral compasses to hold ourselves and others accountable and to heal deep and painful wounds that can allow for growth and personal enrichment.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We are grateful to Dr. Lester for sharing his reflections and life's work with us. His words and thoughts give us much to consider as we search for interventions to the myriad interconnected societal challenges we face. As we approach this MLK Day, we encourage you to step beyond the celebration of the man. MLK Day is the only federal holiday designated as a national day of public service to each community. This MLK Day, find a cause, or even a person who can use your help, and give that help. As Dr. King has said, "The time is always right, to do what is right."

The purpose of Goodwill's Diversity Council is "to build an inclusive workplace that is representative of the humankind that we strive to build as a company and to inspire in future generations." If you would like to learn more about the work Goodwill is doing around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, contact us at DiversityCouncil@goodwillaz.org.