

A Peculiar Letter

A routine trip to my home mailbox became an unbelievably revivifying experience. I pulled out a peculiar envelope. It read atop the left corner: "From everlasting to everlasting." The postmark pictured a "land flowing with milk and honey." Breaking the seal, I found a parchment scripted in bold blue ink against a beige background with these words...

Letter from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to 21st Century America

Dear 21st century Americans:

I am so happy to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you since I exited humanity in the emergency room in Memphis in 1968. My thoughts have never left you in the intervening years, and my prayers have not forsaken you.

At this moment, I lean over the beatific balconies of Heaven. As I push away the cotton clouds and peer through the ether, I stand admiring the hurling, swirling blue-white ball, Earth. The morning sun shines brightly upon your nation.

Yes, America has made significant progress scientifically and technologically. But America's scientific prowess must complement its social progress. Technological growth must not outdistance theological, moral, and ethical development. Advances in science must keep pace with advances in *conscience*.

As you strive for biotechnological breakthroughs, modern medical miracles, and technological triumphs, are you striving equally for breakthroughs in becoming the Beloved Community? Are you striving equally for miracles in morality and solutions in social action; social justice; and social welfare for the poorest, marginalized, elderly, and disenfranchised? The true measure of a society, America, is how it treats its most vulnerable—the poor, the brothers and sisters migrating, those imprisoned, or in the words of Jesus, "the least of these."

To Whom Much Is Given

America has been bequeathed blessings to be a blessing. Your nation is a superpower—militarily, economically, and scientifically. I challenge you to become a new kind of superpower—morally, ethically, and spiritually. Your country is called to distribute its wealth so all can enjoy it equitably.

The True Measure of a Nation

Justice and works of mercy should be emanating from your lives. As Gandhi teaches, be the very essence of good you wish to see in the world. The true measure of your life lies not in what your life possesses but in what your life produces, what you do for others, and the legacy you leave behind. (continued)

As Jesus would invite you to discern:

*When I was hungry, did you feed me?
When I was thirsty, did you give me a drink?
When I was naked, did you clothe me?
When I was sick, did you come to see about me?
When I was imprisoned, did you visit me?*

Indeed, as you do it to “the least” of humanity—the person who is poor, sick, oppressed, homeless, imprisoned, seeking refugee, or migrating—you do it to me.

The Greatest Nation Serves the Greatest in Need

I have personally met that person who incarnates Himself in your world as the poor, sick, vulnerable, neglected, imprisoned, or the person migrating or seeking refuge and asylum. It is He about whom I’ve endeavored to write you this letter.

Based upon outward signs, men of his day did not regard Him as remarkable. But, as 1 Samuel tells us, man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart. He neither had a high school diploma nor a college degree. He was born in a burrowed crib in a barn. He came not to be served but to serve. Wherever He went, He had love in his heart and service on His agenda.

Despite His teaching, serving, and healing ministry, public opinion turned against Him. Community leaders became jealous of Him, falsely accusing Him of treason. He was arrested, tried falsely, found guilty, and sentenced to death. The end of His life was utter disgrace, humiliation, and shame.

I would weep as I think of the sad, sordid spectacle of such social injustice, except this man was eventually vindicated. Twenty-one centuries have come and gone (and will come and go), yet He is the greatest and most influential person ever.

Farewell

I must now return to the place where rough places are made plain, the crooked ways are made straight, and the glory of God is revealed. Green pastures and still waters beckon. Buildings are not made by hand, and many mansions await me. I must return to that place where evil ceases from the troubling, where there is no more sadness and no more sorrow.

As I pen my penultimate words, remember that your significance lies not in assimilating to the ways of this world. America in the modern world is not to be the America of the modern world. Instead, your distinction lies in that you are called to be in the world but not of it. Remember, “Greater is the one who is in Me, than the one who is in the world.” Therefore, do not conform to this world, America, but be transformed by renewing your minds.

You hold a dual citizenry—you live both in time and eternity, the physical and the spiritual, the secular and the sacred. America, you are called to be the salt of the earth. Indeed, you are called to be the light of the world. Until we meet again in Eternity—farewell!

/s/ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What would Dr. King write to you about in a 21st century American high school?
- Dr. King wrote: “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’” The Jesuit motto is to be men and women for others. In what ways are you living out the motto to be men and women for and with “others” while answering Dr. King’s persistent and urgent question?
- Dr. King passionately advocated social justice, civil rights, peace, and nonviolence. In what ways is nonviolence as a way of thinking, being, and living as important today as it was during the civil rights movement?
- Read and meditate on the sermon on the mount: bit.ly/USCCBMT5. Dr. King wrote that nonviolence rests on this passage; identify the verse that speaks to the eternal power of nonviolence.
- Dr. King wrote: “True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.” How would you interpret what Dr. King meant by this quote? How are you being called to be a peacemaker who actively fosters peace with the people around you?
- In the book *Strength to Love* (1963), Dr. King wrote: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” In what way are you using love to drive out darkness in your life, your family, your school, and your community?

Dr. John G. Igwebuike is the director of school culture—diversity, equity, and inclusion at Saint Ignatius College Prep in Chicago. He is a thought leader, focus-group facilitator, and DEI consultant to schools, companies, and universities in effective listening skills. He is uniquely and distinctly focused on the intersection of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. As an active listening activist, Dr. Igwebuike founded The Lead Listening Institute, which helps organizations, groups, and individuals tap the positive power of effective listening so that all voices can feel seen, heard, listened to, and understood from another person’s perspective.