



2019 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Art, Essay, & Multimedia Contest

It's 5:45 on a Sunday morning. That's a.m. as in a.m.-azingly early. The air is cold, the bed is warm. I have a choice to make—sleep in or get up and do something for others. Each Sunday, I choose to get up, to show up, to step up. I am dedicated to serving people who are homeless in Columbus. We are all neighbors in one community. My journey is not finished until everyone has equal access to the basic necessities on life.

This task is not done. I know that when I look into the tired eyes of a homeless person and shake their hand to greet them. As they walk away, I can't help but wonder if this might be the only positive, human interaction that person will have today. So, as I greet the next person in line, I put a little extra stretch in my smile and a little extra warmth in my voice—I hope that it might be enough to keep their spirit warm for the long week ahead. And as the morning unfolds, I find myself scooping out a hot meal on a bitterly cold day, hopeful it is enough to fill that person's stomach with food for the present, and that person with hope for a week. Perhaps each Sunday as I help a homeless person replace their tattered hat or gloves, I help them find something else as well. I help them find kindness in a world that is too often unkind. I extend a hand to someone whose hand has too often been pushed away.

The journey is not complete.¹ I know that each person I encounter every Sunday has a hard journey ahead. A possibly frigid, hunger-filled, and hopeless journey may await them on the other side of the church door. In a few hours, I will return to my warm house, but I wonder what awaits each of these people as they walk out of the doors into the cold grip of winter. I know that their journey is not complete and so my journey is not complete. How can I feel satisfied with my warmth until I have done everything I can do to help someone without warmth?

But the warmth I can give isn't strictly from clothing and blankets, but rather a social warmth, a warmth that allows a person to look at themselves as more than forgotten. A warmth from the heart, for the heart, because the people I serve are not just people, they're my neighbors. They're storytellers and singers and cooks and laborers and people with ineffable qualities whose great potential has yet to be seen by a world blinded by assumptions.

We can do and must do more. I make a promise to myself each Sunday. I search for the things I can do to help ease the suffering of others and erase the injustices around them. We are all one community; we are all one family; we are all neighbors. I can dedicate my early Sunday mornings; I can serve the potatoes with a smile and genuine conversation. I can place food into the Little Pantries scattered around town. I can hand out blessing bags to the people with cardboard signs on the side of the road. And as I walk my journey, I will look for ways to help others because I can and will do more. That is how justice is served, by allowing everyone equal access to the necessities of life. No one should walk their journey alone.

At times, the bottomless problems of the world can seem overwhelming. At times, it's easy for people to question what possible difference the service of a single person can make in a world so troubled. But those who question the impact are those who have yet to see what I have seen. They have yet to see the grateful faces whose hopeful hands welcome the nourishment and warmth as they look into the horizon of an uncertain tomorrow.

As I walk in that church on Sunday morning, I think of each individual act of service as a building block for a better tomorrow. I do this because a person who is fed today can have the strength and hope to continue tomorrow. I do this because a person who is clothed today is able to attend an interview and be hired for a job tomorrow. Maybe my kindness will bring a person who feels forgotten and left behind by society some dignity so that tomorrow that person may have hope.

My effort may not change the world, but it may change one person's world. When I hear people mention a homeless person, it feels as if the stress is put on the homeless rather than the person. They are individuals, not a collective. They are somebody. And that is what matters.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his speech "A Time to Break Silence" at Riverside Church, "True compassion is more than flinging a coin at a beggar."² I believe that true compassion comes from the personal connection made with another person. And if my personal connection to a homeless person restores their faith in humanity, it restores my faith as well. For their stories that they so generously share with me help me grow as a person like I hope my service helps them weather the storms of life. Until everyone has a safe place to call home, until everyone has the food they need, until everyone has the dignity they deserve, my journey is not finished. Justice is not served.

So I will continue to slip out of a comfortable bed and slip out of my comfortable existence and into the uncomfortable reality that many people brave each day. It's easy to choose not to notice that which makes people feel uneasy. However, I choose to see, I choose to care, and I choose to act. And I am left to wonder if I don't stop to help, what will happen to the faces who have become so familiar to me?

1. King, III, Martin Luther, speech as part of celebration of the 50-year anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech at Lincoln Memorial Washington, D.C. Delivered on August 24, 2013

2. King, Jr. Martin Luther, speech "A Time to Break Silence" at Riverside Church, New York City. Delivered on April 4, 1967.

Spencer Stevenson
10th Grade Essay Winner
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The Journey is Not Complete

