

CIC/CB DEI – 2022 Celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Monday, January 17, 2022

Hello everybody. Happy Martin Luther King Jr. Day to you. First of all, I'd like to thank the Chatham Interfaith Council and the newly established Chatham Borough Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Committee for inviting me to share some thoughts on the man whose life and mission we are here to celebrate.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is today one of America's most revered public moral figures, and rightly so. His struggle for racial equality and civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s profoundly altered the course of our nation's history. From his involvement in the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 until his untimely death in 1968, Dr. King's message of social change through peaceful means bolstered the Civil Rights Movement's numbers and imbued it with its moral strength. His deeply-held conviction that human beings everywhere, regardless of color or creed, are morally equal members of the human family has formed the core of American political morality for decades now.

The Dr. King currently enshrined in popular sensibilities is the man who led a national movement of civil rights protests, grassroots organizing, and nonviolent civil disobedience. He is the activist preacher whose inspirational leadership and soaring oratory have transformed him over time, justifiably I might add, into a venerated prophet of social progress and moral redemption.

But there is another side to Dr. King that remains under-appreciated. And that is the theoretical and practical significance of his social and political thought. This neglect is truly a shame. For not only does King's vitally important message of racial equality, innate human dignity, and peaceful social change matter in the shaping of our national ethos and political creed; so too do the many additional lessons he can still teach us through his considerable corpus of sermons, speeches, essays, and books.

Dr. King was a penetrating political thinker. His ruminations included well-considered treatment of a host of philosophical and political issues, including not just the more familiar topics of racial equality, voting rights, civil disobedience, and nonviolence, but also such matters as labor and welfare rights, economic inequality, poverty, just war theory, virtue ethics, political theology, violence, imperialism, nationalism, citizenship, reparations, and social justice.

While Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech and "Letter from Birmingham Jail" essay are widely canvassed, few have read or even heard of such longer works such as *Strength to Love*, *Why We Can't Wait*, *The Trumpet of Conscience*, and *Where Do We Go from Here*.

Embedded in these literary gems are not just careful examinations of the aforementioned public policy matters, but critical analyses of basic philosophical concepts that undergird much of his political and social thought. Indeed, we see critical engagement by King with such important and recurrent concepts in his writings and speeches as *human dignity*, *moral perfectionism*, *nonviolent civil disobedience*, *civic republicanism* (in particular, its articulation of a "non-domination" conception of freedom), and the like.

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In one such unsung work, which also happens to be one of his final sermons, a meditation evocatively entitled “Unfulfilled Dreams”, King considers the proposition that justice, perhaps *the* animating concept of his lifework both in the Civil Rights Movement and in the intellectual domain, is not something that can be achieved once and for all; rather, it is a matter of continued striving, never to be fully attained or established. Here King considers Solomon’s story about his father David, who never succeeded in the construction of his planned temple. In a remarkable display of self-candor, King proceeds to judge his own life a “continual story of shattered dreams,” marked by the inescapable truth that “we are [all] constantly trying to finish that which is unfinishable.”

“Unfulfilled Dreams” strikes me as a philosophical valediction of sorts, and an important one at that. While King oversaw gains regarding social justice and racial equality in his years, he came to understand that what the “first phase” of the Civil Rights Movement principally showed was that “the absence of brutality and unregenerate evil is not the presence of justice.” Instead, the pursuit of justice meant taking on shifting targets, with varying degrees of connectedness to the difficult problem of racial discrimination. These targets include poverty, economic inequality, labor rights, and class division, to name a few. Moreover, King now saw that the battle for social justice requires understanding the nexus of racism, materialism, militarism, violence, and so on. In the final analysis, King concluded that the quest for justice entails a constant re-examination of society’s surface-level norms and deeper principles.

This is heady stuff. For King, the fight for justice at every level of society is never complete. It is a perpetual struggle, one that is waged both internally and in the public square. As such, King’s later message serves as a poignant but instructive counterpoint to his earlier, more familiar “I Have a Dream” speech. The vision we share of realizing a final state of true justice in society may never in fact be reached. Not for want of trying. But because of evolving social contingencies and our own moral frailties. Nevertheless, we must keep striving. We must keep fighting. And we must commit to passing the torch of this noble struggle to successive generations so that they, too, may engage in this most human of quests.

I hope I have persuaded you of Dr. King’s enduring relevance, and of his rich body of written work that is deserving of attention. King’s political and philosophical thought still speaks to us today, and is fertile ground for policymakers, academics, and activists alike. His work presupposes a human condition marked by inescapable change, and the attendant need for re-examination and revision of our settled policies and deeply-held convictions. Many of King’s ideas upset convention and pose radical challenges to received opinion and points of view. In a time of growing authoritarianism, continuing racial chauvinism, and a brand of nihilism that threatens the future of democracy and the ideal of equality, I view that as a good thing.

Thank you everyone.