

RENEWING AMERICA TOGETHER:

Celebrating Martin Luther King Day through Citizen Action Conversations and Service

The challenges facing our communities — not to mention our nation and world — are so daunting and complex that they tend to lead us to one of two responses. The first response is to turn away from these problems and focus on creating a good life for ourselves and our small personal circle. Perhaps we'll vote in elections and then keep an eye on officials to see if they fulfill the promises they made. But mostly, when we're in this frame of mind, we just try to carve out a good life for ourselves and our own. And as long as this approach causes no harm, most of us would agree that this is a perfectly valid way to live.

The second response is to decide that there are so many problems on so many levels of our society that the only chance we have of making progress is if we, as individuals and families and groups, all chip in. This response is based on the idea that ordinary people, not just the government, have an important day-to-day role to play in addressing problems and in making life better in our communities. In other words, there are lots of ways for all of us to make a difference and our communities would be better if we all did a little more.

There are, of course, very real obstacles to doing so. With greater pressure to make ends meet and get by, and with barely enough time to take care of ourselves and to be with our families and friends, the idea of taking time out of our already busy lives to serve in our communities seems unrealistic.

To complicate matters even more, we live in a country where citizens are often treated as spectators on the sidelines of public life, and as clients or customers of government services, not as valuable partners in problem solving. As a result, we may not always realize how much we have to offer, and how critical each of us is to building the solutions that are needed.

On the other hand, America is also a country that has a strong and vibrant tradition of community involvement, of neighbors helping neighbors, of citizens rolling up their sleeves and doing what needs to be done to make life better for our families, neighborhoods, communities and nation. For some, this is a reflection of faith, for others it is a reflection of political beliefs or family traditions. Whatever the source or motivation, America has a long history of community service, and at the start of the 21st Century, when there are more challenges than ever, we need the opportunity to think about ways we can all make a difference.

The fact is that government cannot handle all of our community's problems or needs, and we all have unique talents, knowledge and energy to bring to the table to help make a difference. In other words, we all have something to offer, but it is critical that the work we do in and for our communities be effective, meaningful and satisfying. It should have the impacts we want it to have, and it should be a way of bringing us closer to our friends and families, rather than taking us away from them.

The discussion format that follows is designed to help you make the most of your Martin Luther King Day Citizen Action Conversations. The Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday is a great opportunity not only to engage in community service, but to demonstrate what it can mean when everyone has a voice on the critical issues that face us. This discussion is for people who are already working on community projects and issues and want to rethink the way in which they are doing so. And, it is also for people or groups who might not be involved now but want to make a contribution to the life of their community, and are looking for the best way to get involved.

Some might say that thinking and talking about how to be of service is a waste of time, that the needs are so many and so great that there should be no hesitation in getting down to work. But it is precisely because there are so many needs and so many ways of addressing them that we believe a few moments of thoughtful consideration and conversation up front and along the way can be worthwhile and lead to stronger results over time.

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Preliminaries (about 20 minutes)

Goals for our Conversation

- To deepen our volunteer experiences in our community.
- To re-energize ourselves by looking to the legacy of Dr. King.
- To connect to the larger work on social and political challenges.
- To connect with others to make a difference in our community.
- Other goals?

Who Are We?

At this stage, we will introduce ourselves and tell the group how long we have lived in this community, and when we have felt most connected to it.

Ground Rules

Before we go further with our discussion, it's important that we have a way to talk about our community and our commitment to service. We will use these guidelines or ground rules to keep ourselves on track.

- Be respectful.
- Share "air time."
- You can disagree, but don't make it personal. No name-calling or put-downs.
- Help your group facilitator keep the conversation on track and moving.

Vision and Reflections (about 30 minutes)

Let's think about some of the things that Dr. King said about service and about the kind of communities and democracy we want to have. This discussion can help set the context for our conversation about how to make a difference in our community.

Think about the following questions as you read over the quotes from Dr. King:

"We have made of this world a neighborhood and yet have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood."

"An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

"Everybody can be great... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

"Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

"For we know now, that it isn't enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't have enough money to buy a hamburger?"

"Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice."

Which of the quotes speaks to you most directly, and why?

In light of the serious challenges facing our communities and country today, which quotes(s) provides insights into how we can best face those challenges?

