

I Have a Dream: Martin Luther King and Identity

- **Compelling Question**
 - To what extent are you cultivating the identity necessary to enhance freedom in your own life and the lives of others? What aspects of your identity make you suited to confront prejudice and discrimination?
- **Virtue:** Identity
- **Definition** – Identity answers the question, “Who am I?”
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will examine events in the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., analyzing both his identity and his contributions to American identity
- **Objectives**
 - Students will understand how Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged the prejudice, discrimination, and racial injustice of his times in mid-twentieth-century America.
 - Students will analyze their own actions, goals, and ambitions to determine how identity contributes to achievement of worthy goals.
- **Background**
 - The Civil Rights Movement faced some of its greatest challenges in the early 1960s. Freedom Riders, people of all races who were committed to equality, attempted to desegregate interstate buses and faced brutal beatings and bombings. Young African-American college students held “sit-ins” at lunch counters for the simple right to eat a peaceful meal in a public place. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other movement leaders held non-violent demonstrations in cities such as Birmingham, Alabama, where they encountered mass arrests and severe violence including ferocious police dogs and blasting fire hoses. In August, 1963, African Americans and others marched peacefully on Washington, D.C., to argue for basic equality under the law and the opportunity to enjoy their rights and liberties as Americans. The success of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech helped lead to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- **Vocabulary**
 - Freedom Riders
 - Desegregate
 - Lunch counters
 - Civil rights
 - Oratory
 - Emancipation Proclamation
 - Gettysburg Address
 - Declaration of Independence
 - Axiomatic
 - Promissory note
 - Default
 - Creed
 - Crescendo
 - Hamlet
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
 - King referred to the equality principle as a promissory note and said, “It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note as far as her citizens of color are concerned.” A promissory note is similar to an “IOU,” or promise to pay a debt. If someone promised to pay a debt he/she owed you but never did so, how did you address the situation? Or, how do you think the unpaid debt should be addressed? Compare this debt scenario to that described by King.
 - What contributions did Martin Luther King make to the advancement of freedom through his approach to understanding both his own identity and the best ideals of the American identity?
 - In what ways did King’s experiences as a target of discrimination contribute to his ability to fight for the freedom of others?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - History.com Martin Luther King, Jr. <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/martin-luther-king-jr>
 - NobelPrize.org: Martin Luther King, Jr. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html
 - The King Center <http://www.thekingcenter.org/about-dr-king>
 - National Park Service: Martin Luther King, Jr. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/about-dr-king>
 - The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/>
 - Taylor Branch. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988.
 - Clayborne Carson. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Warner Books, 2001.
 - Drew D. Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech that Inspired a Nation*. New York: Ecco, 2003.
 - Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*. New York: Penguin, 2013.

Handout A: I Have a Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and American Identity

Background

The Civil Rights Movement faced some of its greatest challenges in the early 1960s. Freedom Riders, people of all races who were committed to equality, attempted to desegregate interstate buses and faced brutal beatings and bombings. Young African-American college students held “sit-ins” at lunch counters for the simple right to eat a peaceful meal in a public place. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other movement leaders held non-violent demonstrations in cities such as Birmingham, Alabama, where they encountered mass arrests and severe violence including ferocious police dogs and blasting fire hoses. In August, 1963, African Americans and others marched peacefully on Washington, D.C., to argue for basic equality under the law and the opportunity to enjoy their rights and liberties as Americans. The success of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech helped lead to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Narrative

On the morning of August 28, 1963, an exhausted Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., looked outside his window from the comfort of his room at the fancy Willard Hotel adjacent to the National Mall in Washington, D.C. What he saw was deeply discouraging especially after so much planning and hard work that he and thousands of people had done for the day’s event. Hundreds of thousands of black Americans and their supporters were expected to show up the March on Washington for civil rights. He conferred worriedly with his wife, Coretta Scott King, who reassured her husband that the marchers would come. King dressed in a dark suit and tie with a white shirt and affixed a button to his lapel that read “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.” He nervously read his speech but had trouble concentrating before the couple had breakfast and stepped onto the National Mall.

King had prepared the speech during a very busy week. He had visited his Southern Christian Leadership Conference offices in Atlanta, traveled to Washington for an appearance on the television show, *Meet the Press*, and then jetted to New York for a meeting about his manuscript on the recent Birmingham marches. He had a lengthy draft of the speech when he and Coretta had checked into the hotel the night before but met with several aides in the lobby to finalize the speech. After much deliberation, King got up and excused himself. “My brothers, I understand. I appreciated all your suggestions. Now let me go and counsel with the Lord.” With that, he returned to his suite and continued outlining and writing the speech in longhand until well past midnight. He read the speech over and over as he searched for exactly the right rhythm and words.

King was identified as the leader of the civil rights movement ever since his dramatic leadership in the Montgomery Bus Boycott nearly a decade before. He was recognized as the leader because his profound moral vision of civil rights and equality for African Americans was communicated through his excellent oratorical abilities and demonstrated through his courage on the front lines of the demonstrations of the movement. He was a highly effective speaker because of his study of oratory and rhetoric during college and while earning his doctorate at Boston University. He was also a preacher who delivered resounding sermons and was deeply familiar with the language of the King James Bible. His preaching was a source of strength for expressing the ideals of the civil rights movement and never would it be more important than during the March on Washington.

At about 10:00 a.m., King realized that he did not have to worry that the march would be a failure. African Americans, white Americans, members of clergy, union members, and young people crowded onto the Mall near the Washington Monument. Soon, under the increasingly hot summer sun, almost 250,000 marchers appeared. They had traveled by train, bus, car, and even hundreds of miles on foot from across the country including Los Angeles. Most of the crowd was dressed in their Sunday-best with men in suits and women in dresses. They were singing movement songs, praying together, making new friends, listening to early entertainment, eating their packed lunches, and finally assembling at the steps of the symbolically important Lincoln Memorial while singing “We Shall Overcome.”

A slate of speakers, now mostly forgotten, addressed the crowd to a mixed reaction and polite, sometimes enthusiastic, applause. The speakers were supposed to confine their remarks to five minutes but some went over.

King had prepared to speak for five minutes but his aides convinced him to go longer. “They [are coming] for you,” they told him.

Finally, A. Philip Randolph, a long-time civil rights activist who had threatened a March on Washington for equality in jobs back in 1941, introduced King. The audience focused their attention to listen to King even as excited murmurs ran through the large crowd. Randolph recognized King’s identification as the “moral leader of our nation,” who was seeking to “bring about social change for the advancement of justice and freedom and human dignity.” The assembly eagerly sought to listen to King’s words and yelled, “Hip, hip, hooray!” three times to welcome King while he stepped up to the podium and settled in before numerous microphones. The major television networks interrupted their regular programming to broadcast King’s speech.

Standing in front of the statue of the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, King immediately struck a very Lincolnian note when he stated, “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.” Next, King offered high praise for the Founders. He said that the “architects of our republic” wrote the “magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.” According to King, the Founders created a system based upon the idea that universal rights were embedded in the very nature of all human beings.

For his part, King labeled the equality principle a “promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed to enjoy the ‘Unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.’” King used the term “promissory note” because African Americans were left with an unfulfilled promise of enjoying their rights. “It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’ But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”

King acknowledged the many challenges facing his nation, but held fast to hope. “And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”

The master orator built to an emotional crescendo, finishing his speech with an appeal to universal freedom of all humans by saying, “And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual: “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”

King’s “I Have a Dream” speech demonstrated the moral vision and oratory that identified him so closely with the civil rights movement. The speech reflected King’s own character and the best of America’s ideals regarding equal rights and justice for all. The hundreds of thousands of participants and millions of viewers on television witnessed the greatest moment of the civil rights movement when its greatest leader articulated its vision for equal rights in America for all people.

Handout B: Journal Prompts

Answer the following questions in your journal, as you prepare to voluntarily share some of your responses in a class discussion.

1. To what extent did King's performance align with his purpose? In what ways does your performance align with your purpose?
2. To what extent and in what ways do your unique characteristics enable your pursuit of a life that is on track to achieve your purpose?
3. To what extent and in what ways does your performance align with your identity and purpose? What are you doing this very day to cultivate skills and interests that will connect today's purposes with your long-term opportunity to enhance and protect the life and liberty of others?