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Historian Daina Ramey Berry offers perspective on the legacy and enduring relevance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Be good to people. As a concept, it's simple. As a practice? Lifechanging.

The immeasurable power of doing good, of service, of compassion and acceptance are throughlines of the thousands of speeches, sermons and letters of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And, says historian Daina Ramey Berry, they're as essential now as they were when King shared them.

"In his day, King saw the way we treated one another and he wanted to see us rise above the hatred and bigotry. We still have opportunities to do so today," said Berry, a scholar of African American and U.S. history and the Michael Douglas Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts at UC Santa Barbara. "His message is still relevant, which is why we keep turning back to him. His overall themes make so much sense — love one another, be respectful to one another, live in harmony with one another, support one another. Live as human beings respecting other human beings — it's that simple."

This Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Monday, Jan. 16, Berry will be the keynote speaker for a community celebration of King's work and legacy. Culminating a weekend of activities including volunteer opportunities and a unity march, the event(link is

external) begins at 11 a.m. at the Arlington Theater in Santa Barbara.

A minister and civil rights activist, King once said, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’” The answer should be easy, posits Berry.

“What are you doing for others? What does it mean to serve others? It’s service in a spiritual sense — giving to other people, putting people’s needs first, prioritizing thinking about other people,” she said. “King modeled servant leadership and humility as qualities we should all embrace, and I think we would be a much more harmonious society as a result.”

International social protests sparked by the death of George Floyd, then sparked again by the deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and too many others, the emergence of Black Lives Matter and other current social movements are all rooted in King’s legacy, Berry said. The racial tensions that still exist despite these efforts, she noted, are fallout that we need to address.

“Part of King’s dream has been realized, but we still have work to do,” she added. “We need to show more compassion, grace and support for others. Lift somebody else up. Learn about other people and their experiences. Understand and respect their history. Acknowledge that ‘I’ve never been there, but I hear you, I see you,’ and if appropriate, ‘I’m sorry.’”

King was the target and victim of violence, but he was a staunch advocate of peaceful protest, believing he sent a more impactful message, Berry said, “with peace and grace, he focused on freedom and equality.”

“Those are wonderful goals for us to continue to strive for and I think that’s where we are today — still working toward fulfilling King’s dreams,” she said. “I look forward to seeing his vision come to fruition, and I hope that on Martin Luther King Jr. Day everyone takes a moment to read or listen to one of his speeches.

“If we loved our neighbors, and treated them all with the same amount of respect — if we were all doing that — imagine how much better this planet would be.”

Tags
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

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