

# 2021 and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday

*by Sharon L. Eiseman*

## **When was the Martin Luther King, Jr. (“MLK”) Holiday established and why?**

First, before turning to a discussion of Dr. King’s legacy and what it means, let’s review how a holiday in his memory was established. Are you surprised to learn that serious controversy arose in 1983 when Congress moved to create a national holiday to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and commemorate his legacy? It did, from southern legislators as well as from President Ronald Reagan, who opposed any national observance for Dr. King, a man variously described as “an outside agitator” (by Senator Strom Thurmond in 1968 following King’s assassination) and as someone who “welcomed collaboration with Communists” (by North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms). To express his resistance that year, Helms led a sixteen-day filibuster of the MLK Holiday bill, but ultimately voted for it in exchange for Congress’ approval of his tobacco bill. Despite this opposition, the bipartisan vote in favor of the bill handily won the day, possibly because many Republicans may have believed they needed to show the public their support for civil rights.

And did you know, or do you recall that Dr. King died before he even reached the age of forty, having been assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968 when he was in the midst of preparing to lead a protest march in support of the city’s striking sanitation workers? Yet, in his short lifetime, Dr. Martin Luther King accomplished the unimaginable, especially for a black man from the South and one advocating for peaceful integration. Thus, this year, as in every previous year the holiday has been observed, people all over our country—and beyond—will pay homage to this great man, preacher, and acknowledged leader of the civil rights movement in America who has defined for generations what our country must acknowledge and address in order to eliminate racism in our society.

## **Dr. King’s early and relevant education**

Even before he stepped onto the national ‘stage’ and ignited a widespread movement for peace, justice, and racial equality through his electrifying voice and powerful words, invoking hope for the dreamers in his audiences, Dr. King had achieved many impressive goals. At an early age, and in short order, Dr. King proved the belief that he was bright, articulate and driven by earning a B.A. in sociology from Atlanta’s Morehouse College when he was only nineteen, a B.A. in divinity just three years later, and then, in 1955, a doctorate in systematic theology from Boston University. Those studies and his degrees both reflected his interest in canonical teachings and grounded him in the power of oratory of a spiritual nature that would engage his listeners and move them to action.

## **How Rosa Parks’ courage helped inspire Dr. King’s early activism and advocacy for the oppressed and dispossessed**

Also in 1955, Dr. King was chosen by local civil rights activists to lead a one-day boycott of the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama. Their protest was spurred by area residents upset when Rosa Parks, a black woman, was arrested and fined on the bus she was taking home from work for violating the city’s segregation laws. Parks had refused the order of the bus driver to give up her seat to a white man who had been standing on the crowded bus. Under local law governing public accommodations, that man was entitled to preferential seating because of his race. That single day turned into a year, which is how long it took Montgomery to desegregate the buses.

By persisting in its defense of racial segregation within its public transportation system, the city not only faced legal and financial challenges, but it also, perhaps unwittingly, simply stoked the flames of a significant and growing national civil rights movement. That movement, which engendered many other battles for racial equality, was borne of one black woman’s use of her voice to demand equal access to public services. Ms. Parks later explained that she claimed her seat that fateful day not because she was physically tired, but because she was “tired of giving in.” For more about Rosa Parks, who was lauded for her courage, wrote two compelling memoirs, and lived into her nineties, see <https://www.biography.com/people/rosa-parks>.

**Etched forever in our collective memories: Dr. King’s compelling words**

Events in the sixties related to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. are forever etched in our memories and in America's history. On August 28, 1963, King delivered perhaps his most stirring and memorable speech, one that has come to be known as the "I Have a Dream" speech. To the 250,000 participants in that day's organized march to D.C., King pronounced: "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.'" In that same speech, he made the dream personal when he stated: "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character." The theme of non-judgmental equality and respect for human rights and opportunity for all without regard to color resonated with many individuals besides the marchers, which is what King intended: that his message of hope would take hold across the nation and trigger needed changes in the law.

### **In the face of many threats to him, his family, and all of his supporters, Dr. King receives the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964**

The era of the sixties was also witness to the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Dr. King in 1964. In the presentation to King, Nobel Committee Chairman Gunnar Jahn described the Reverend as an "undaunted champion of peace" who had distinguished himself by showing that "a struggle can be waged without violence." Mr. Jahn also praised Dr. King for never abandoning his faith despite his having been subjected to numerous imprisonments and bomb threats, as well as repeated death threats against him and his family. Although detractors continued to attack Dr. King's teachings, much progress had been made toward the goals of equality, justice and peace that King was preaching. As notable examples, in the mid-sixties, Little Rock High School and the University of Mississippi were integrated, Congress enacted the 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

### **Dr. King's assassination: a dark day for all, and its aftermath**

Sadly, as we all know, that decade didn't end well. Dr. King's good fortune, and possibly the momentum toward a more civil and just society, took a tragic turn on April 4, 1968 when Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, and it seemed the world had come to a stop. By that time, many who questioned his motives and his means to achieving peace and equality had begun to appreciate the import of his messages and his work on the ground toward implementation of his mission—even though some believed Dr. King was espousing more aggressive actions to bring about the change he wanted. While his death left a terrible void, his legacy as a 'champion of peace' has continued to move us forward toward a more just society, even if slowly and with 'bumps' in the road in recent years. Still, we all need to remain vigilant to make sure we don't lapse in our efforts or allow prejudice, anger and distorted perspectives to further divide us as a nation into separate and unequal factions. This is where Vernon Jordan enters the scene and shares a somewhat different, and thus refreshing, view of how to best honor the work done and progress achieved by Dr. King.

### **Who is Vernon Jordan and what does he have to say about MLK, Jr.?**

Vernon Jordan, who is African American, graduated from Howard University Law School in 1960, and joined the firm of a prominent civil rights attorney in Atlanta as a law clerk earning \$35 a week, eventually became a well-known civil rights advocate in his own right. As a new lawyer, Jordan was part of an NAACP team representing a young black man who, in a mere 48 hours, had been arrested, arraigned, indicted, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by electrocution. That was a time when 'colored' people had to find outlying black-only motels when transacting business in the courts—or anywhere. And, because they were banned from restaurants, they had to buy food at a grocery store and eat in their car.

Mr. Jordan's firm, which included Constance Motley\*, sued the University of Georgia in Federal Court, alleging that its restrictive admission policies constituted racial discrimination. Despite challenges and a stay that was reversed, the case concluded successfully for the plaintiffs in 1961 with a court order directing that the two named African American plaintiffs be admitted to the University. *See Holmes v. Danner*, 191 F. Supp. 394 (M. D. Ga. 1961). In 1970, having left his firm, Jordan became the executive director of the United Negro College Fund and, in 1971, he assumed the presidency of the National Urban League, a position he held until 1981 when he resigned to become legal counsel in the Washington, D.C. law office of a Texas firm.

Aside from serving as a presidential advisor and a consultant to other high level government officials, and in demand for appointment to the boards of multiple corporations, Jordan has recently held the position of senior managing director for an investment banking firm. He has also authored two books, most recently, in 2008, *Make It Plain: Standing Up and*

*Speaking Out*, a collection of his public speeches with commentary. The title certainly makes plain what Jordan has fought for all of his life and career. This indefatigable humanitarian has continuously used his legal and oratory skills and his talent for advocacy to help move the dial forward on the task of eliminating racial injustice.

### **Vernon Jordan's characteristic 'call to action' as a means to change**

It is on the stage before attentive audiences such as college graduates that Jordan is most effective. In June of 2015, speaking to Stanford's graduating class at a multi-faith celebration for the students and their families, he minced no words, instead urging the audience to be 'disturbers of the unjust peace.' Using a question from the prophet Isaiah, "Who will go, and whom shall we send?" as a basis for his message that day, Jordan said he prays the answer is "Here am I. Send me." He continued on: "Send me to help clear the rubble of racism still strewn across this country. Send me to be one of the bulldozers on behalf of equality and in the cleanup crews against injustice. Send me to 'disrupt' injustice. Send me to 'hack' bias and bigotry. Send me to 'lean in.'" These words read today remind us of how much more work needs to be done to address inequities within communities of color in education opportunities; health care; jobs that meet and exceed minimum wages for workers; affordable, quality housing and day care for children of working parents; and access to legal representation and to justice through the court systems.

And now, 'fast tracking' to 2018: Vernon Jordan, at 83 years of age, was invited by Dr. Otis Moss III, the young and engaging Senior Pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ in the Washington Heights Community on Chicago's South Side, to give the guest sermon at the church's September 30, 2018 Sunday morning service focused on 'Honoring Our Elders.' How did I learn about this meaningful event? Attorney Juan Thomas, a member of the Illinois State Bar Association's Standing Committee on Racial and Ethnic Minorities and the Law ("REM Committee"), had invited his REM Committee colleagues—which includes me—to this special church service, and I decided to attend with my husband Noel.

Besides being quite touched by the warm welcome we received from the congregants that day in a venue where we were two of just a handful of white people in attendance, we were moved by Pastor Moss' sermon and by Mr. Jordan's compelling insights.

The primary message Jordan conveyed is simple: While it is important to honor MLK, Jr. for his accomplishments and celebrate his storied career as a civil rights activist, we cannot, must not, stop there as we often do, assuming it is enough to pay a yearly tribute to Dr. King as our means of supporting racial, ethnic and gender equality. Instead, we have to keep King's dream alive by working to achieve the goals he pursued. In other words, we should consider ourselves the heirs of his legacy and take on the tasks he left to us—unfinished—until they are finished.

### **What can we do to make a difference 'going forward'?**

For us to stay on track toward achieving justice for all, we must have strong leadership in our local, state and federal governments and in the private sector, as well as great teachers in our schools. It is also through the polls at each election and, of course, through our political discourse and educational systems, that we can encourage each new generation to attain a better understanding as to the positive outcomes when diverse communities live and work together in mutual respect for their differences. *See generally* Diversity & Inclusion, *The University of Chicago*, <http://diversity.uchicago.edu/>. We must also do what we can to assure that equal opportunities for achievement are available to all. Part of this equation is having the will to speak up when we see imbalances and inequities suffered by individuals of color segregated in 'minority communities,' which are prone to a long history of poor health care and lack of access to supportive services and healthful food, making them far more vulnerable to becoming infected with Coronavirus. It is especially important that, as lawyers, we also use our knowledge, our words, and our penchant for persuasion to convince others to join the movement and commit to action toward a more fair and just treatment of those groups in our communities who have no voice, few advocates, and waning hope.

Meanwhile, let us not forget the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday to be observed on Monday, January 17, 2022. We hope you will join in the tributes likely taking place all over Chicago and other Cook County towns and villages, especially in our public schools and in other public arenas, as Chicago is a city that particularly and warmly embraced King and to which he had many close ties. For example, between 1956 and 1966, Dr. King gave three speeches at the University of

Chicago's well-known Rockefeller Chapel, all of which became famous for his inspiring messages and brought him to the attention of the public.

Resources for learning more: A few years ago the University of Chicago offered an interesting challenge to students, faculty, and the general public, to 'voice' their dreams on an MLK Dream Wall. Now, however, one can find coverage of the University's 2021 tribute to MLK, Jr. at: <https://mlk.uchicago.edu/>, as well as an inspiring review of a book that challenges us to consider how to carry on the work that Dr. King was unable to complete. That review can be found at: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/701090>. Much historic detail is available on the website for the National Park Service's Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial located in Washington, D.C. That site is accessible at: <https://www.nps.gov/mlkm>. Teachers will also find many resources for observing the holiday at [www.MLKDay.gov](http://www.MLKDay.gov). For the younger and older, participating in a 'Day of Service' as part of the MLK, Jr. holiday is a way to help preserve Dr. King's legacy and keep the torch of equality burning.

One additional reference is The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change ("King Center") in Atlanta, Georgia, which Mrs. Coretta Scott King established in tribute to her husband, not as a 'dead monument' but as a living testimonial that would engage and empower visitors. The King Center includes a library and an archive, and it has recently undertaken a project for an "innovative digital strategy and conference series." It also offers a chance to enter your dream and choose up to five 'themes' to tag it. If your dream is approved after review, it will be posted on the Center's website. Check it all out at <http://thekingcenter.org>.

\*Constance Motley, widely known as an early civil rights activist, was born in 1921, the ninth of twelve children, to parents who emigrated from the West Indies. At the age of 15, having been inspired by reading about civil rights heroes, Motley decided she wanted to be a lawyer and, ultimately, became the second black woman to graduate from Columbia Law School, where she met Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund where Motley worked while a law student. She later clerked for Supreme Court Justice Marshall, became chief counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and wrote the draft complaint for *Brown v. Board of Education*. As a practicing attorney, Motley argued before the Supreme Court, winning nine out of her ten cases. As lead counsel, Motley was also successful in defending protestors arrested in the early sixties for taking part in the Freedom Rides, and for helping James Meredith gain admission to the University of Mississippi in 1962. Ultimately turning to the political arena, Motley became the first black woman to serve in the New York State Senate. In another first for an African American woman, Motley became a federal judge when President Lyndon Johnson appointed her to the Manhattan Federal District Court in 1966.

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