

"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](#)...' " – Martin Luther King Jr., March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1963.

Most children are taught from a young age to admire and respect the great American civil rights leaders, but for many the reasons for this near-immortalization are not so clear. In my hometown, an affluent, mostly Caucasian, suburb of Hartford, Connecticut, most inhabitants do not have too many interactions with people of other ethnicities. In this atmosphere, the messages of the great American activists can be especially lost or taken for granted. Despite all forces that may have held me back from understanding Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s declaration of rights and equality, I still felt his influence from my first kindergarten lesson on him. Sitting in the classroom, listening to my teacher's voice quiver as she described his assassination, I sensed a force, though I did not know what it was, coming from this man's story as if I were listening to one of his moving speeches. As the son of immigrant parents from India who work intimately with the diverse yet politically, economically, and racially polarized towns and cities of the greater Hartford area, I understand how a human like Dr. King can bring people together for the causes of the greater good. Dr. King was my personal role model before I knew about Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the man who inspired King by bringing the British Empire to its knees without so much as killing a person and mobilizing the South Asian people of my grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations to form a collective nation.

King's principles of determination through hardship, greater cooperation between all peoples, and the use of nonviolent means to achieve various ideals are principles for

which I have always had the utmost reverence. My application of these principles to practice, however, did not begin to have grounding in reality until I was in middle school. During this time, a short period of only two or three years, I had my perceptions of reality shattered over and over again. Though I suppose now that this was just an effect of the regular trends of adolescent emotion, I struggled during this time with issues of identity. In a town that is largely white and homogenous, I found it very difficult to come to terms with my own heritage and place myself in the context of the town I had lived in for my entire life but never fully understood. I also felt the first and most prominent examples of racism in my life when a bully, probably acting not out of racism but anger camouflaged as hatred, labeled me with hurtful racial epithets like “curry” and “Apu”. As a lot of this also happened in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, I was further singled out by some of my bigoted classmates as “one of them” (though now the absurdity of associating a Hindu and an Indian with Arab, Islamic terrorism makes me chuckle). Thus, the rapidly changing world combined with the strange new development of a racial identity that did not fit with the rest of picture-perfect Avon put me in a position that often left me feeling disenfranchised and that I, really, did not belong.

At this crucial moment, Dr. King’s philosophies came into the picture again. During middle school, as I became very interested in my ancestral culture and learned more about Gandhiji, I discovered that Dr. King’s methods of non-violent, steadfast protest were a direct descendant from those of the Satyagraha philosophy. It became apparent to me that, through the same principles, I could conquer the oppression of my own insecurities and the naïve yet bigoted atmosphere around me. I have always

maintained a pride in my culture, along with understanding that its most prominent historical figure founded the nation with nonviolence the same way that Dr. King led a peaceful movement for equality of all peoples.

I learned a lot about how to deal with situations from Dr. King. His own sense of determination and hard work for a hopeful gain influenced me greatly in my desire to continue working hard in school, as well as the nonprofit work I do in the Hartford area to help the underserved, immigrants, and refugees, as well as raise voter awareness in the state among all population groups. His principles of cooperation helped me to reconcile my many friendships with people of other races with the way I felt as an Indian-American and accept everybody for who they really are past ethnic definitions. His successes with the use of non-violence, in the face of growing physical violence amongst teens in both the malevolent and joking varieties, aided me through a period of physical and emotional bullying, as well as a lot of bigotry and joke-related violence from my friends. His insight opened doors into new worlds for humankind, and the application of this insight to my life has made all the difference between leading a mundane, self-serving existence and working to make the world a better place.

Upon the eve of my adult life, I know not the direction that the Earth will take, whether equal justice will be granted to all peoples or if oppression will reign supreme over the masses. What I do know is that Dr. King's message cannot and will not die, for it has left too strong of an impression on all Americans and people of the world, whether we realize it or not, that can never be ignored.