

Martin Luther King Jr: Seeing the Redeeming Qualities in Others

With Eddie Zacapa

There are many stories about Martin Luther King Jr. that remind us of his dream. There is one story in particular that stands out to me and inspires me today.

It is a story that goes back to when Martin Luther King Jr. was in a meeting with some team members. Bobby Kennedy had just become the U.S. attorney general. Many leaders of the civil rights movement were distraught.

Henry Bonafante, one leader at the time, described Bobby Kennedy this way, "famously not interested in the civil rights movement."

He goes on to say, "We knew we were in deep trouble. We were crestfallen, in despair, talking to Martin [Luther King Jr.], moaning and groaning about the turn of events, when Dr. King slammed his hand down and ordered us to stop the [complaining]. 'Enough of this,' he said. 'Is there nobody here who's got something good to say about Bobby Kennedy? We said, 'Martin, that's what we're telling ya! There is no one. There is nothing good to say about him. The guy's an Irish Catholic conservative [expletive], he's bad news.'"¹

Moving Beyond the Negative Images

There have probably been times in your life where you felt the same way about someone. You might have thought they were bad news and you only had bad things to say about them. As long as we stay in this type of thinking we will not be able to influence change or bring peace.

Martin Luther King Jr. understood the importance of seeing others as human beings worthy of contribution. He understood that creating negative images of others only blocks forward movement toward the goal of peace.

What Martin Luther King Jr. said to his team after they made their comments shocked them. He said, "Well, then, let's call this meeting to a close. We will re-adjoin when somebody has found one thing redeeming to say about Bobby Kennedy, because that, my friends, is the door through which our movement will pass."²

Opening The Door To Change

King believed that the only way to influence Kennedy was to discover one redeeming quality that they could say about him. That one thing could lead them to opening a door to accomplish the change they desired.

What was discovered through all of this was that Bobby Kennedy was close to his bishop. The team worked with the bishop and were so successful that by the end Bonafante himself said, "there was no greater friend to the civil rights movement [than Bobby Kennedy]. There was no one we owed more of our progress to than that man."³

¹This story was told to Bono by Henry Bonafante. Michka Assayas, *Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas* [New York: Riverhead, 2005], Pg. 86).

² Ibid., emphasis added.

³ Ibid., emphasis added.

By looking at the redeeming qualities in others we too can see their potential and beauty. We can see their humanity and not an enemy image. This act of seeing the positive qualities in others can be the road towards making peace and collaboration. This is one of the lessons that I have learned from Martin Luther King Jr. I hope that it inspires you to see beyond the negative and to see the potential in others.

(I encourage to you take some time to listen to the famous "I Have A Dream" speech to celebrate the accomplishments of Martin Luther King Jr.)