

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

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MLK's vision of love as a moral imperative still matters

by Joshua F.J. Inwood,
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More than 50 years after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the United States remains divided by issues of race and racism, economic inequality as well as unequal access to justice. These issues are stopping the country from developing into the kind of society that Martin Luther King, Jr. fought for during his years as a civil rights activist.

As a result King's words and work are still relevant. I study the civil rights movement and the field of peace geographies. Peace geographies thinks about how different groups of people approach and work toward building the kind of peaceful society King worked to create. Americans faced similar crises related to the broader civil rights struggles in the 1960s.

So, what can the past tell us about healing the nation? Specifically, how can we address divisions along race, class and political lines?

Martin Luther King Jr.'s understanding of the role of love in engaging individuals and communities in conflict is crucial today. For King, love was not sentimental. It demanded that individuals tell their oppressors what they were doing was wrong.

King's vision
King spent his public career working toward ending segregation and fighting racial discrimination. For many people the pinnacle of this work occurred in Washington, D.C., when he delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Less well-known and often ignored is his later work on behalf of poor people. In fact, when King was assassinated in Memphis he was in the midst of building toward a national march on Washington, D.C., that would have brought together tens of thousands of economically disenfranchised people to advocate for policies that would reduce poverty. This effort – known as the "Poor People's Campaign" – aimed to dramatically shift national priorities to address the



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health and welfare of working people. Scholars such as Derek Alderman, Paul Kingsbury and Owen Dwyer tell how King's work can be applied in today's context. They argue that calling attention to the civil rights movement, can "change the way students understand themselves in relation to the larger project of civil rights." And in understanding the civil rights movement, students and the broader public can see its contemporary significance.

Idea of love
King focused on the role of love as key to building healthy communities and the ways in which love can and should be at the center of our social interactions.

King's final book, "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?" published in the year before his assassination, provides his most expansive vision of an inclusive, diverse and economically equitable U.S. nation. For King, love is a key part of creating communities that work for everyone and not just the few at the expense of the many.

Love was not a mushy or easily dismissed emotion, but was central to the

kind of community he envisioned. King made distinctions between three forms of love which are key to the human experience: "eros," "philia" and most importantly "agape."

For King, eros is a form of love that is most closely associated with desire, while philia is often the love that is experienced between very good friends or family. These visions are different from agape.

Agape, which was at the center of the movement he was building, was the moral imperative to engage with one's oppressor in a way that showed the oppressor the ways their actions dehumanize and detract from society. He said,

"In speaking of love we are not referring to some sentimental emotion. It would be nonsense to urge men to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense[...] When we speak of loving those who oppose us [...] we speak of a love which is expressed in the Greek word Agape. Agape means nothing sentimental or basically affectionate; it means understanding, redeeming goodwill for all men, an overflowing love which seeks

nothing in return." King further defined agape when he argued at the University of California at Berkeley that the concept of agape "stands at the center of the movement we are to carry on in the Southland." It was a love that demanded that one stand up for oneself and tells those who oppress that what they were doing was wrong.

Why this matters now
In the face of violence directed at minority communities and of deepening political divisions in the country, King's words and philosophy are perhaps more critical for us today than at any point in the recent past.

As King noted, all persons exist in an interrelated community and all are dependent on each other. By connecting love to community, King argued there were opportunities to build a more just and economically sustainable society which respected difference. As he said,

"Agape is a willingness to go to any length to restore community... Therefore if I respond to hate with a reciprocal hate I do nothing but intensify the cleavages of a broken community."

King outlined a vision in which we are compelled to work toward making our communities inclusive. They reflect the broad values of equality and democracy. Through an engagement with one another as its foundation, agape provides opportunities to work toward common goals.

Building a community today
At a time when the nation feels so divided, there is a need to bring back King's vision of agape-fueled community building and begin a difficult conversation about where we are as a nation and where we want to go. It would move us past simply seeing the other side as being wholly motivated by hate.

Engaging in a conversation through agape signals a willingness to restore broken communities and to approach difference with an open mind.

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Martin Luther King Jr. had a much more radical message than a dream of racial brotherhood

by Paul Harvey,
University of Colorado Colorado Springs

Martin Luther King Jr. has come to be revered as a hero who led a nonviolent struggle to reform and redeem the United States. His birthday is celebrated as a national holiday. Tributes are paid to him on his death anniversary each April, and his legacy is honored in multiple ways.

But from my perspective as a historian of religion and civil rights, the true radicalism of his thought remains underappreciated. The “civil saint” portrayed nowadays was, by the end of his life, a social and economic radical, who argued forcefully for the necessity of economic justice in the pursuit of racial equality.

Three particular works from 1957 to 1967 illustrate how King’s political thought evolved from a hopeful reformer to a radical critic.

King’s support for White moderates

For much of the 1950s, King believed that White southern ministers could provide moral leadership. He thought the White racists of the South could be countered by the ministers who took a stand for equality. At the time, his concern with economic justice was a secondary theme in his addresses and political advocacy.

Speaking at Vanderbilt University in 1957, he professed his belief that “there is in the white South more open-minded moderates than appears on the surface.” He urged them to lead the region through its necessary transition to equal treatment for Black citizens. He reassured all that the aim of the movement was not to “defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding.”

King had hope for this vision. He had worked with White liberals such as Myles Horton, the leader of a center in Tennessee



ADDRESSING CROWD--Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addresses marchers during his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. AP Photo

for training labor and civil rights organizers. King had developed friendships and crucial alliances with white supporters in other parts of the country as well. His vision was for the fulfillment of basic American ideals of liberty and equality.

Letter from Birmingham Jail

By the early 1960s, at the peak of the civil rights movement, King’s views had evolved significantly. In early 1963, King came to Birmingham to lead a campaign for civil rights in a city known for its history of racial violence.

During the Birmingham campaign, in April 1963, he issued a masterful public letter explaining the motivations behind his crusade. It stands in striking contrast with his hopeful 1957 sermon.

His “Letter From a Birmingham Jail” responded to a newspaper advertisement from eight local clergymen urging King to

allow the city government to enact gradual changes.

In a stark change from his earlier views, King devastatingly targeted white moderates willing to settle for “order” over justice. In an oppressive environment, the avoidance of conflict might appear to be “order,” but in fact supported the denial of basic citizenship rights, he noted.

“We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive,” King wrote. He argued how oppressors never voluntarily gave up freedom to the oppressed – it always had to be demanded by “extremists for justice.”

He wrote how he was “gravely disappointed with the white moderate ... who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom.” They were, he said, a greater enemy to racial justice than were members of the White supremacists as the Ku Klux Klan and other White racist radicals.

Call for economic justice

By 1967, King’s philosophy emphasized economic justice as essential

to equality. And he made clear connections between American violence abroad in Vietnam and American social inequality at home.

Exactly one year before his assassination in Memphis, King stood at one of the best-known pulpits in the nation, at Riverside Church in New York. There, he explained how he had come to connect the struggle for civil rights with the fight for economic justice and the early protests against the Vietnam War.

He proclaimed:

“Now it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America’s soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read ‘Vietnam.’ It can never be saved so long as it destroys the hopes of men the world over.”

He angered crucial allies. King and President Lyndon Johnson, for example, had been allies in achieving significant legislative victories in 1964 and 1965. Johnson’s “Great Society” launched a series of initiatives to address issues of poverty at home. But beginning in 1965, after the Johnson administration increased the number of U.S. troops deployed in Vietnam, King’s vision grew radical.

King continued with a searching analysis of what linked poverty and violence both at home and abroad. While he had spoken out before about the effects of colonialism, he now made the connection unmistakably clear. He said:

“I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor in America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and death and corruption in Vietnam.”

King concluded with the famous words on “the fierce urgency of now,” by which he emphasized the immediacy of the connection between economic injustice and racial inequality.

The radical King

King’s “I Have a Dream,” speech at the March on Washington in August 1963 serves as the touchstone for the annual King holiday. But King’s dream ultimately evolved into a call for a fundamental redistribution of economic power and resources. It’s why he was in Memphis, supporting a strike by garbage workers, when he was assassinated in April 1968.

He remained, to the end, the prophet of nonviolent resistance. But these three key moments in King’s life show his evolution over a decade.

This remembering matters more than ever today. Many states are either passing or considering measures that would make it harder for many Americans to exercise their fundamental right to vote. It would roll back the huge gains in rates of political participation by racial minorities made possible by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. At the same time, there is a persistent wealth gap between Blacks and Whites.

Only sustained government attention can address these issues – the point King was stressing later in his life.

King’s philosophy stood not just for “opportunity,” but for positive measures toward economic equality and political power. Ignoring this understanding betrays the “dream” that is ritually invoked each year.

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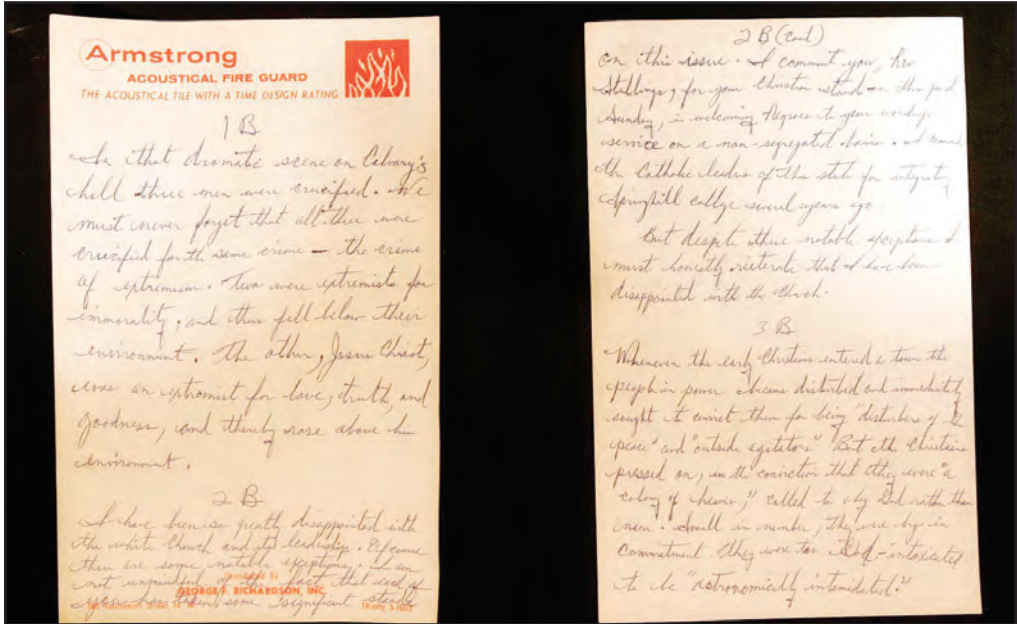
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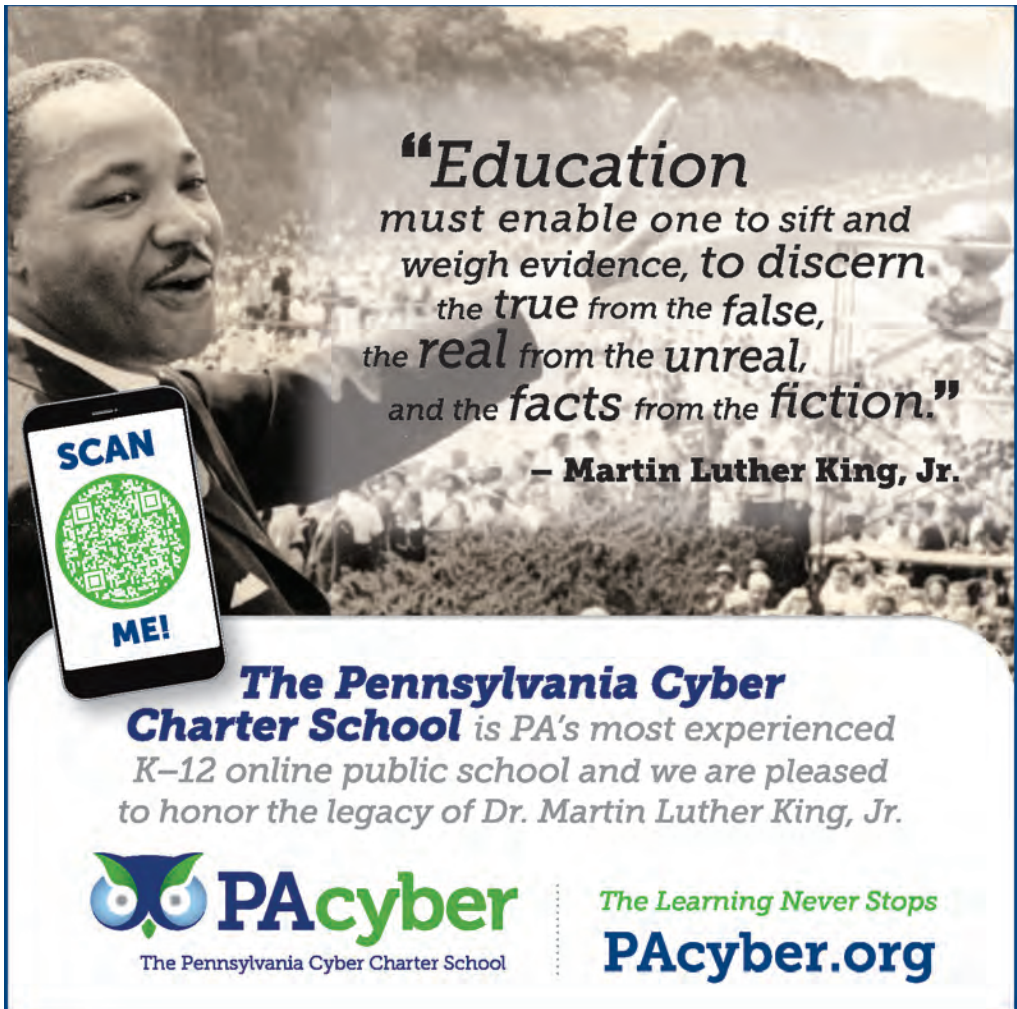
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FAMOUS LETTER--A handwritten copy of ‘Letter From a Birmingham Jail.’ AP Photo/Richard Drew, file



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must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the **true** from the **false**, the **real** from the **unreal**, and the **facts** from the **fiction**.”

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Langston Hughes’ hidden influence on MLK

by Jason Miller,
North Carolina State University

For years, Martin Luther King Jr. and poet Langston Hughes maintained a friendship, exchanging letters and favors and even traveling to Nigeria together in 1960.

In 1956, King recited Hughes’ poem “Mother to Son” from the pulpit to honor his wife Coretta, who was celebrating her first Mother’s Day. That same year, Hughes wrote a poem about Dr. King and the bus boycott titled “Brotherly Love.” At the time, Hughes was much more famous than King, who was honored to have become a subject for the poet.

But during the most turbulent years of the civil rights movement, Dr. King never publicly uttered the poet’s name. Nor did the reverend overtly invoke the poet’s words.

You would think that King would be eager to do so; Hughes was one of the Harlem Renaissance’s leading poets, a master with words whose verses inspired millions of readers across the globe.

However, Hughes was also suspected of being a communist sympathizer. In March of 1953, he was even called to testify before Joseph McCarthy during the Red Scare.

Meanwhile, King’s opponents were starting to make similar charges of communism against him and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference, accusing the group of being a communist front. The red-baiting ended up serving as some of the most effective attacks against King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

It forced King to distance his organization

from men with similar reputations – Bayard Rustin, Jack O’Dell and even his closest adviser, Stanley Levison.

It also meant he needed to sever any overt ties to Hughes.

But my research has found traces of Hughes’ poetry in King’s speeches and sermons. While King might not have been able to invoke Hughes’ name, he was nonetheless able to ensure that Hughes’ words would be broadcast to millions of Americans.

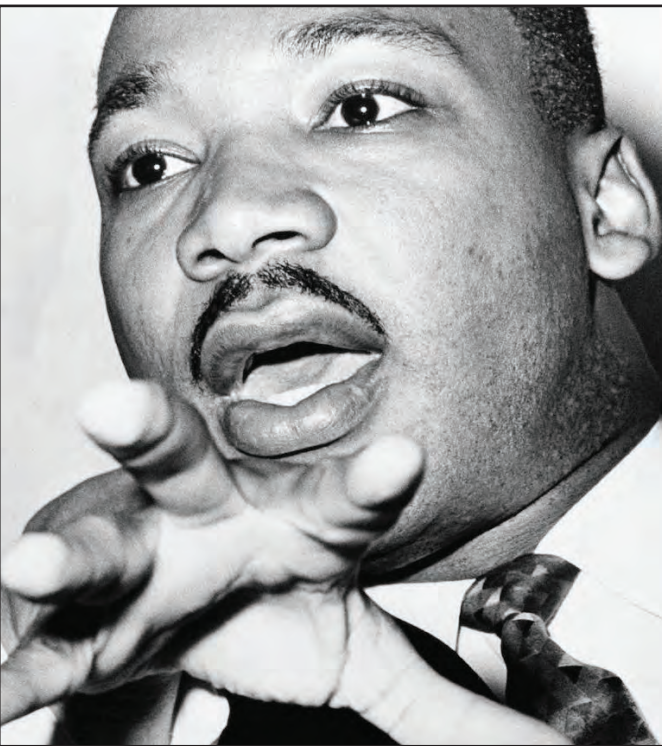
Beating back the red-baiters

In the 1930s, Hughes earned a subversive reputation by writing several radical poems. In them, he criticized capitalism, called for worker’s to rise up in revolution and claimed racism was virtually absent in communist countries such as the U.S.S.R.

By 1940, he had attracted the attention of the FBI. Agents would sneak into his readings, and J. Edgar Hoover derided Hughes’ poem “Goodbye Christ” in circulars he sent out in 1947.

Red-baiting also fractured black political and social organizations. For example, Bayard Rustin was forced to resign from the SCLC after African-American Congressman Adam Clayton Powell threatened to expose Rustin’s homosexuality and his past association with the Communist Party USA.

As the leading figure in the civil rights movement, King had to toe a delicate line. Because he needed to retain popular support – as well as be able to work with the Kennedy and Johnson administrations – there could be no question about where he stood on the issue of com-



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. ‘S DREAM – which alternated between shattered and hopeful – can be traced back to Hughes’ poetry. AP Photo



LANGSTON HUGHES

munism.

So King needed to be shrewd about invoking Hughes’ poetry. Nonetheless, I’ve identified traces of no fewer than seven of Langston Hughes’ poems in King’s speeches and sermons.

In 1959, the play “A Raisin in the Sun” premiered to rave reviews and huge audiences. Its title was inspired by Hughes’ poem “Harlem.”

“What happens to a dream deferred?” Hughes writes. “Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? ... Or does it explode?”

Just three weeks after the premiere of “A Raisin in the Sun,” King delivered one of his most personal sermons, giving it a title – “Shattered Dreams” – that echoed Hughes’ imagery.

“Is there any one of us,” King booms in the sermon, “who has not faced the agony of blasted hopes and shattered dreams?” He’d more directly evoke Hughes in a later speech, in which he would say, “I am personally the victim of deferred dreams.”

Hughes’ words would also become a rallying cry during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

During the grind of the year-long boycott, King spurred activists on by pulling from “Mother to Son.”

“Life for none of us has been a crystal stair,” King proclaimed at the Holt Street Baptist Church, “but we must keep moving.” (“Well, son, I’ll tell you / Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair,” Hughes wrote. “But all the time / I’ve been a-climbin’ on.”)

Did Hughes inspire the dream?

King’s best-known speech is “I Have a Dream,” which he delivered during the 1963

March on Washington.

Nine months before the famous march, King gave the earliest known delivery of the “I Have a Dream” speech in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. (We can also now finally hear this connection after the reel-to-reel tape of King’s First Dream was recently discovered.)

But the roots of “I Have a Dream” go back even further. On Aug. 11, 1956, King delivered a speech titled “The Birth of a New Age.” Many King scholars consider this address – which talked about King’s vision for a new world – the thematic precursor to his “I Have a Dream” speech.

In this speech, I recognized what others had missed: King had subtly ended his speech by re-writing Langston Hughes’ “I Dream a World.”

A world I dream where black or white,

Whatever race you be, Will share the bounties of the earth

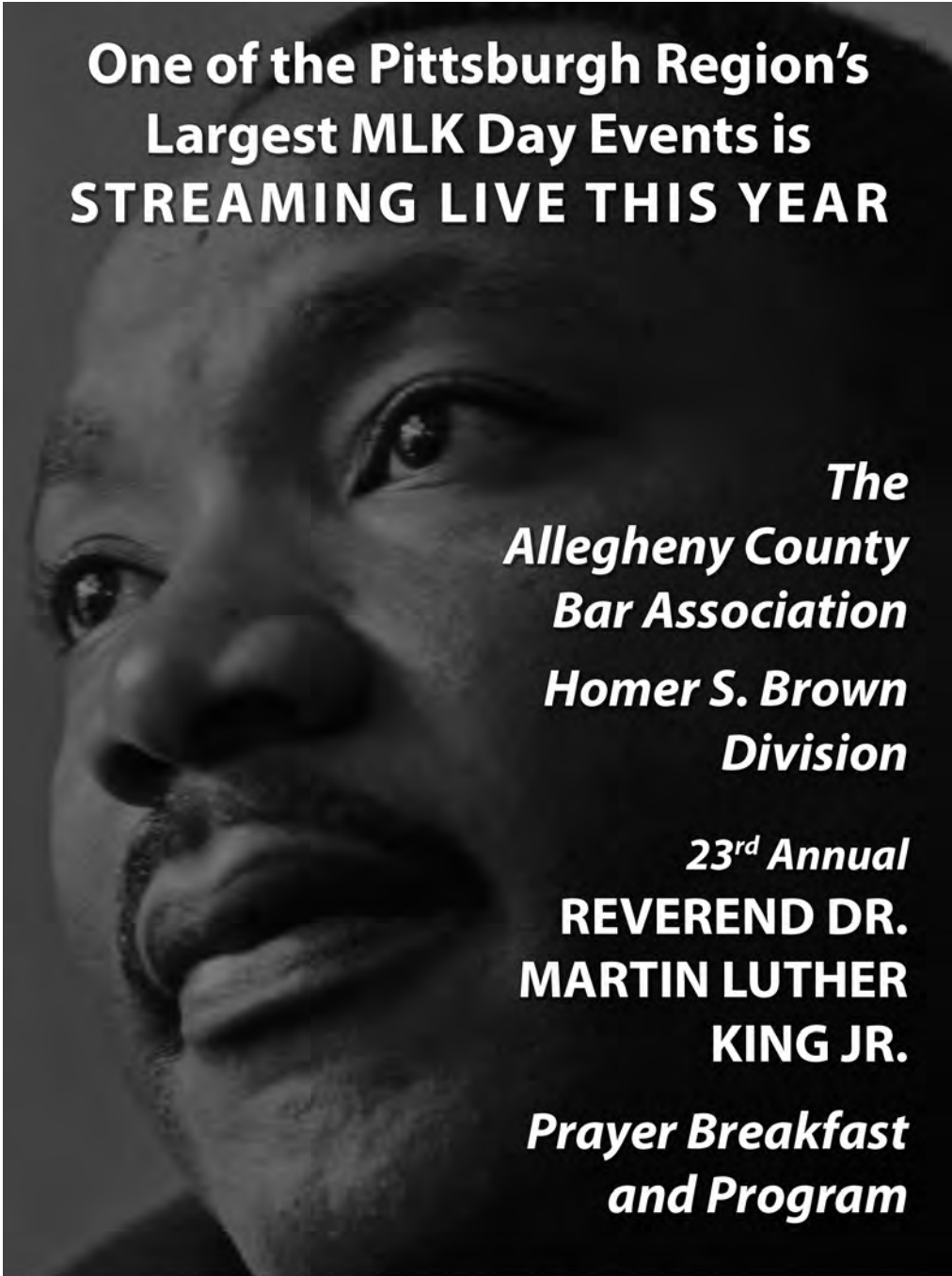
And every man is free.

It is impossible not to notice the parallels in what would become “I Have a Dream”: I have a dream that one day ... little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.

King spoke truth to power, and part of that strategy involved riffing or sampling Hughes’ words. By channeling Hughes’ voice, he was able to elevate the subversive words of a poet that the powerful thought they had silenced.

Jason Miller, Professor of English, North Carolina State University

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