

A Lesson on Equality

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31

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Sen. Smith writes about the life work of Dr. Martin Luther King and how it influenced his own thoughts on the meaning of equality.

BRUNSWICK, WI - What does equality mean to you? It's a question on most Americans' minds as we come together to honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in communities across America, including Eau Claire. For this year's MLK Day Celebration, we're asked to reflect on his life's work and the meaning of equality.

Dr. King championed the issue of equality as an activist during the Civil Rights Movement. He advocated for the "full realization of the American dream ... A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few."

When considering what Dr. King said, we understand there's so much more to achieving equality than removing the shackles of slavery. Working toward Dr. King's vision of the American Dream requires us to understand historical barriers that prevent equitable advancement opportunities in our country.

Dr. King identified the realities of inequality throughout many aspects in American life, including obvious economic inequalities. The "necessities" of our everyday life—healthcare, a good-paying

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job, basic human rights—can be lost or unattainable for some because of policies adopted by political leaders. While some policies deliberately widen the gap of inequality, some policies may be an oversight with unintended consequences. Either way, policies that harm Americans, and adversely affect groups one over the other, must be addressed.

That was the intent, of course, when slavery was finally abolished. And yet, we know equality wasn't achieved because of this one act. Another hundred years of oppression toward African Americans followed because some leaders and those in positions of privilege weren't willing to be equal with their fellow Americans.

Equality happens only when opportunities are present for all, not just those privileged at the top. We can still have diversity in what we do and how we live. Equality means that no family should suffer in poverty. It should mean that nobody should be homeless or struggle with inadequate housing.

As Dr. King raised his own credibility on the national scene, he was able to also raise the consciousness of a nation. He earned the trust of Americans through his diplomacy and insistence of a non-violent movement. Despite being arrested thirty times, he never bowed to violent measures and found other ways to prevail.

While his first goal may have been to stop Jim Crow laws, he expanded his own advocacy after his success following the March on Washington in 1963 to include equal housing, fair wages and voting rights for all U.S. citizens regardless of one's skin color.



So, what is your image of equality? Most of us have lived with the privilege of not knowing oppression or the lack of opportunity to better ourselves. Personally, I know I live with this privilege because I haven't experienced discrimination firsthand.

It takes critical thinking to recognize policies don't always present the best outcomes for everybody. It takes even more for each of us to openly admit that we could do better to lift up our fellow citizens. Equality must be a reality in our daily life in order to live the life we thought

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this country was designed to deliver. A free and equal education system, food security, affordable housing, guaranteed livable wages and access to voting for all eligible citizens—these are just some of the necessities that make us truly equitable.

Dr. King proclaimed in his “I Have a Dream” speech, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ... Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.”

We know this speech well; we’ve heard these words many times and understand the powerful meaning behind them. Achieving equality—the American Dream for all citizens—has been slow to come, but I believe we can head in the right direction. Only together can we fully get there, closer to true equality.