

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

On Monday, Martin Luther King III will rise and say a prayer, a private ritual he sees through each year as a way of observing the public holiday celebrating the Jan. 15, 1929, birthday of his late father, slain civil rights leader the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Dallas Morning News writer Lori Price spoke by telephone last week with King, the president and CEO of the King Center in Atlanta. They talked about Monday's national holiday, what his father might say about the state of the nation and his advice to others for honoring his father.

Some excerpts from their one-on-one conversation:

DMN: Each year, the nation observes your father's birthday with the King holiday. For most, a deceased parent's birthday is a private time of reflection. But you must share your remembrance with millions of others. Is that difficult?

King: Actually it really isn't, because it always has been the case, because of who my father was and who my mother is in terms of how we were raised. If he was in our midst and every year we got to this point and we observed a birthday, if you will, and we were not able to have an individual time, it would be. But because this is really about remembering and doing the work that he started and completing the work, it's more of a great honor than anything else.

I've never looked at it from the selfish perspective and felt I was deprived ... I've always felt comfortable sharing him, because it helps to create the unfinished work that he started. Every year, more and more people are involved in community service. More and more people are observing the holiday. More and more school systems. Not every school system is closed down in America, but every year, more and more come on line. ... I think that's wonderful and that's the positive side of it.

MLK III on MLK Holiday

Written by Robert ID718

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Price: So, how do you keep at least a part of the holiday personal?

King: We start off with certainly an ecumenical service. We lay a wreath on the crypt and then we have prayer. That's more individual and personal than anything else. That's how I keep it personal, by the prayer process. But after that, it really is about outwardly giving, because that's what he was about and that's what my mom is about.

I always see personal as sometimes the selfish dimension and I try not to so much focus on that. There are times when one has no choice. For example, during the actual observance of his death. That is where the tragedy is really thought about and it's sometimes painful. Every year, we get to an anniversary every April 4, which is the day that he was killed in 1968. But the birthday is always uplifting and positive and the more people that we see get involved, the more fulfilling that it is.

I must add that one thing about our nation, we have such a great and wonderful nation and while our world and even our nation is experiencing tragedy right now all over, whether it's in California, where we see mudslides and a lot of rain in other parts of our nation, or whether it's in Asia and part of Africa with the Tsunami, where we've seen the greatest tragedy we've ever experienced in recent times, Americans will open up their hearts and minds and wallets and help out and that is what makes this country great ... that's what my father would be encouraging us to do, because he was about creating a better community, nation and world.

Price: As you've already mentioned, the King holiday is still not observed by all. For example, here in North Texas, there are still school districts and cities that don't close. Do you think the day is viewed as a holiday only for black people?

King: I hope that it's not viewed as a holiday for black people. It's much, much broader than that. There may be some who do have that perspective, but we've got a lot of work to do still as it relates to some corporations and others. Quite frankly, I have a dual point of view, because if a school is not closing, if they are engaged in how we remember Martin Luther King Jr., that's not bad either. Because some would take a day off and not necessarily do community service activities. If one took a day off and did community service, then that is what it's really about, but if they do not and they take the day off and just chill, that's not a good thing either.

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I think that more and more Americans are observing the holiday. Every year, not just in the urban areas, but in suburban and smaller communities, every year I end up going to various communities that have only been observing the holiday for a few years. ... I can't say all of America, certainly not at this point, but what does happen is from a federal standpoint all of the federal employees at least know that it's a holiday. And hopefully many of them are involved in community service. That's what the ultimate goal would be, for our entire nation to be involved in community service. I should add a caveat, because the ultimate goal is not just to be involved in community service during the King holiday period, but throughout the year. If we were all doing community service once a week throughout the year, then we would find that many of the problems that we have would be resolved very quickly in our country.

Price: It may be difficult for a young person to identify with the freedoms your father fought for, such as riding at the front of a public bus, when they may not have experienced such basic discrimination. How do we make the legacy of Dr. King alive and vibrant for young people today?

King: I think we can do that through museums. We can do that through various field trips where we bring children and expose them to interactive facilities. One of the things we are considering doing in Atlanta is creating an interactive facility so that you can go through and experience as a child ... to appreciate what happened during a period of time where you may not have lived.

Now, what these young people will experience at some point in their lives if they are black or Latino or they are Asian, they will experience at some point some kind of racism. If they happen to be gay, they will experience some form of discrimination. If they happened to be obese, they will be talked about because we are shallow when it comes to those things as a nation and maybe even as a world. All of these are things that one must understand are a part of what Martin Luther King, Jr.'s mission was about.

So, that's how I think we relate it to them, to a particular incident that is happening in their lives and talk about while you may not have to ride on the back of the bus or you may not have to sit in the back of a theater, because of who you are at some point, there will be unfortunately something called racism that you might have to encounter and that you're going to have to find a way to address. It does not mean that you won't achieve your objective. It just means that these are stumbling blocks that you must overcome.

Price: What would your father want people to be doing on the holiday?

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King: He'd probably be very embarrassed about the fact that there is a holiday named in his honor. But since it does exist and we think it's a wonderful thing, because it allows people to stop and pay tribute to the work by continuing the work, there are so many issues that he would probably want us to figure out how to address.

He talked about the triple evils of poverty and racism and violence. When we look at our country, there are 36 million people living in poverty, 45 million people with no health insurance. Racism, while it takes a different form to some degree today, it's still very real, and violence is at levels that are epidemic. So, he would want us to make a commitment in this country, first, to reduce the poverty level, to address homelessness. And the beauty of it is that as wealthy as this nation is, even though we have a lot of deficits that exist this day, these are issues that we can address. They are not issues that cannot be overcome.

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