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What advice would Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. give to students in our school today?

It has been just 55 years since Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and delivered one of the most significant and well-known speeches in history. He stood in front of a crowd of 250,000 people who were hopeful for change and could see that Dr. King was the man who would make it happen. A civil rights leader and Baptist minister, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. fought the injustices of discrimination and segregation and paved a more bright future for African-Americans up until his assassination in 1968. The world has changed a great deal since then, but his message to the youth of America hasn't. If he were alive today, he would remind us to not hate because we are different, to never respond to violence with violence, and to never stay quiet when we see injustices occurring.

It is a common perception among Americans that discrimination ended after the 1960's. Unfortunately, this is not true. Discrimination, although more veiled, still exists today. Our political culture has divided us and our leaders have convinced us that our differences make us too different. Today our schools aren't segregated, but our own institutions still suffer from the effects of systemic racism. Then it was lynching, today it's police brutality. It's the same thing just a different name. It isn't a coincidence that black people are more likely to be killed than white people by the police. Dr. King said it best, "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now." All of us come from different backgrounds, ethnicities, religions, financial standings, but we all must be tolerant of our differences and work together to achieve a common goal: equity and equality. We can't let our differences divide us or we will only fail ourselves.

Dr. King once said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter," and it is just as relevant now as it was then. Injustices happen all of the time and we must dare to be the one who stands up and says, "this is not right" - even if we stand alone. It takes courage to stand against the current, but it is those who do that change history. If Rosa Parks hadn't refused to get up from her seat that day, would the world be the same? If Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had stopped fighting for equality after his house was bombed in 1956, would the world be the same? We can't know for sure, but we do know that their contributions were instrumental in forming a more accepting society. When injustices are not challenged, they will run rampant. They must be challenged for the common good because "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Non-violent protest is what made Dr. King's message resonate with so many Americans. He showed us that an "eye for an eye" only makes us all blind. Nonviolence is more powerful than violence, it seems contradictory, but it's true. You cannot stoop as low as violence because the people you face are not your enemy. They are the people you most show the most love to, they are the people who you strive to change because they are the people who need it the most. Responding with violence in any aspect of one's life is never the right choice, it only further escalates the situation. As Dr. King said, "Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that." You can't drive hate out of people's hearts with hatred, only with love.

In closing, Dr. King's message is applicable to any time. He preached a universal message of nonviolence, love, and personal courage in the face of immorality. His words were powerful, but they alone could not change society. It is the people who were inspired by those words and stood up and fought for what was right that changed history. We are all possible of fostering change, we just have to have the courage to believe we can.