



MLK: UNDERSTANDING THE MAN

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How does learning about Martin Luther King, Jr. as a multi-dimensional person enrich our historical understanding of him and his leadership during the Civil Rights Movement?

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson students will expand their historical understanding of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as both a leader of the Civil Rights Movement, and as a congregational minister, husband, father, and friend, and an individual with humor, doubts, and fears. To deepen their understanding of this lesson's essential question, students will engage with multiple historical sources and practice the skill of historical corroboration by analyzing historical photographs, documentary film, and first-person interviews.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Students will increase and enrich their historical understanding of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by:

- Analyzing historical source material including photographs and documents
- Critically viewing documentary film and first-person interviews to inform their understanding of history
- Synthesizing new learning through developing questions for further historical inquiry
- Demonstrating their understanding of the lesson topic through a final writing exercise

MATERIALS

- Equipment for watching video segments
- Copies of handouts

LENGTH

Two 50-minute class periods, with homework.

ACTIVITIES

- 2 Do-Now: Opening Questions
- 2 A Close View: Analyzing Images
- 3 Analyzing Film as Text
- 4 Close View of Interview Threads
- 5 Read and Corroborate
- 5 Closing Discussion Questions
- 6 Homework or Extended Learning

HANDOUTS

- 7 Close View of the Film
- 8 Understanding the Man: Interview Thread One
- 10 Understanding the Man: Interview Thread Two
- 12 Understanding the Man: Interview Thread Three

ACTIVITIES

1. Do-Now: Opening Questions

Teacher Note: Have students discuss or respond in writing to these questions:

- What was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s role in the Civil Rights Movement?
- Write down five words or phrases you would use to describe what you know about Dr. King.
- What do you imagine Dr. King was like when he was not in front of a microphone or a camera?

2. A Close View: Analyzing Images

Teacher Note: A Close View mirrors a Close Read exercise in which students use visual analysis skills to “read” visual sources as if they were employing literary analysis skills. Use the discussion questions in this section as a starting point.

Project or print and distribute the photographs under the “Images” title on the MLK - Understanding the Man page.

- 1 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with Coretta Scott King, 1965. (Courtesy Library of Congress)
- 2 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., March 2, 1965. (Courtesy Library of Congress)
- 3 Martin Luther King Jr. in the Cabinet Room at the White House, Washington D.C., January 18, 1964. (Courtesy LBJ Presidential Library)
- 4 President Lyndon Johnson meeting with Martin Luther King Jr., White House, Washington D.C., March 18, 1966. (Courtesy LBJ Presidential Library)

DISCUSS

- What do you see happening in each photograph?
- What story does each individual photo tell?
- What larger story do the photos tell when viewed together?
- What questions would you ask the photographers about these photos?
- How can we know that these images are accurate? Do the images fit with what you previously knew or assumed about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?
- Do you trust what you see in the images? Why or why not?

Have students write down any new questions they have about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in general, what he was like, and whether and how the pictures change their ideas about him.

3. Analyzing Film as Text

Watching a Clip from the Film *King in the Wilderness*: Contextualization

Teacher Note: Distribute Handout 1: *MLK - Understanding the Man Note Catcher* to help students watch the film clips actively and with critical eyes. Review the Note Catcher questions before showing the clips to give students a sense of what to watch for. These clips contain leaders from the Civil Rights Movement remembering different aspects of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. beyond his role as leader.

WATCH

- Clip 1: "MLK - Understanding the Man" (run time: 9:48)
- Clip 2: "He Joked Because There Was No Other Way to Be" (run time: 8:13)

NOTE CATCHER QUESTIONS

What did you see?

What did you hear the interviewees say about the following aspects of MLK:

- His doubts and fears:
- His personality:
- As a preacher:
- As a leader:
- As a friend:
- As a student:
- As a son:
- Other aspects:

What did you learn?

- What surprised you about what you learned?
- In what ways was he different than you imagined him to be?
- What are aspects of MLK that you can relate to?

Why is it important?

- Why does understanding a leader like Dr. King as a whole and complex person matter to us today?
- What political, social, or cultural factors influence how we remember important historical leaders?

Ask students to briefly share their answers and thoughts with one another.

HABIT OF A HISTORIAN

After having seen the photos and watched the film clips, have students write down further questions about Dr. King that they would like to explore.



4. Close View of Interview Threads

The filmmakers conducted 19 interviews to make *King in the Wilderness*. Those complete interviews are available at www.kunhardtfilmfoundation.org/interview-archive

For each lesson, interview segments that were not used in the film, but which contain deeper information about aspects of each lesson topic, are edited together to create “interview threads.” There are three interview threads in this lesson that teachers and students can choose from, or use together, to deepen their understanding.

Teacher Note: Print and distribute the transcript of the appropriate threads (Handouts one-three) so students can follow along and take notes as they watch the segment collections.

BEFORE WATCHING THE THREAD(S), DISCUSS

- What is the value of first-person accounts, like those featured in the interview threads, that is different from other kinds of historical sources?
- What questions arise from using memories as a historical source?

WATCH THE INTERVIEW THREADS

As they watch, students will:

- Follow along on the transcript.
- Underline details that catch their attention.
- Jot down questions and insights that come to mind after viewing the threads.

- 1 Thread One: MLK - Understanding the Man: Humor (run time: 11:42)
Featuring Tom Houck, Cleveland Sellers, Diane Nash, and Andrew Young
- 2 Thread Two: MLK - Understanding the Man: As a Leader (run time: 6:49)
Featuring Marian Wright Edelman, Mary Lou Finley, Cleveland Sellers, and Richard Fernandez
- 3 Thread Three: MLK - Understanding the Man: As a Minister (run time: 4:23)
Featuring Richard Fernandez and Harry Belafonte

ASK THE CLASS

What did you learn from these interviews that you might not learn anywhere else?



5. Read and Corroborate

Teacher Note: After viewing and reading the interview threads, have students choose one or more historical details that stood out to them to practice the process of corroboration. Students will research and identify a credible historical source that will verify or complicate the detail they selected from the interview.

HERE ARE SUGGESTED ARCHIVES TO USE TO FIND CORROBORATING EVIDENCE:

- 1 The King Center. (www.thekingcenter.org/archive)
- 2 Stanford University: The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. (kinginstitute.stanford.edu)
- 3 Library of Congress. (www.loc.gov)

ASK STUDENTS

What other sources can you use to help you better understand memories and recollections as historical resources?

6. Closing Discussion Questions

- How does viewing all the historical sources in this lesson contribute to your understanding of Dr. King as a whole person?
- What can we extrapolate from this lesson that teaches us about how historical figures are remembered and represented?



7. Homework or Extended Learning: Writing a Persuasive Essay

In *King in the Wilderness* we see several ways in which Dr. King's moral grounding as a Baptist minister guided every decision he made as a leader of the Civil Rights Movement. Marian Wright Edelman offers the following insight:

"The real misconception—[FBI Director] J. Edgar Hoover tried to destroy, you know, his character, whatever. But he was a man of deep faith and deep courage. Who loved his country so much he was willing to die for it. But to die for it nonviolently and at the hands of violence. . . . We need to hear him. And not to deify him. Not to— to — make him into something he wasn't, but his message was the message as Abraham Joshua Heschel said, he was a prophet for our time."

As an assessment or extended learning assignment, have students write a persuasive essay expanding on their ideas about why it is important, as Marian Wright Edelman says, "not to deify him. Not to make him into something he wasn't." Their essays may address what we remember about historical leaders, who influences our historical memory, and why. Students can refer to any of the historical source material included in the lesson or resources they discover through independent research.

Common Core State Standards

ANCHOR STANDARDS

Reading Literature and/or Information: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- RL/RI.X.7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- RL/RI.X.8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
- RL/RI.X.9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration

- SL.X.1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- SL.X.2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
- SL.X.3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- W.X.7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- W.X.8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

CLOSE VIEW OF THE FILM

MLK: UNDERSTANDING THE MAN NOTE CATCHER

Instructions:

As you are watching these film clips from *King in the Wilderness*, consider the following questions and record your answers.

What did you see and hear?

What did you hear the interviewees say about the following aspects of Dr. King:

- His doubts and fears:
- His personality:
- As a preacher:
- As a leader:
- As a friend:
- As a student:
- As a son:
- As a preacher:
- Other aspects:

What did you learn?

- What surprised you about what you learned?
- In what ways is he different than you imagined him to be?
- What are aspects of Dr. King's personality that you can relate to?

Why is it important?

- Why does understanding a leader like Dr. King as a whole person matter to us today?
- What political, social, or cultural factors influence how we remember important historical leaders?

After watching this clip: what further questions do you have about Dr. King?

UNDERSTANDING THE MAN

INTERVIEW THREAD ONE: HUMOR

TOM HOUCK

“. . . And he was — how would you describe it, a jovial person in terms of cracking jokes. So many instances I can think of, but I think one — what happened was a lot, a lot of auto dealers from the North would send cars to the South for civil rights workers to use. And there was this one Chevrolet, which actually Doctor King gave to me to drive around in, which had a — had a hole in the floorboard in the back.

“So, he had called to the house and wanted to know if I was there, I said, ‘Yeah.’ He said, you know, ‘Come pick Ralph [Abernathy] and I up at the airport.’ And I said, ‘Yeah, I’ll come pick you up.’ And so, he said, ‘I don’t want you to bring my car, I want you to bring that car I gave you, that Chevrolet with the floorboard, and we’re going to put Ralph through the hole in the back.’ And so, we get, we get to the, get to the airport, and then Ralph’s standing there, you know, making his little moves, and Doctor King says, ‘Now, Ralph you got to stay in the back, I’m sitting up front with Tom.’ And so, as Ralph gets in, he goes right down through the floorboard. And Martin starts, I mean, starts laughing and I was worried about Ralph. Ralph actually bre — he tore his pants. And so, Ralph says, ‘Now, why did you do that to me, why did you do that to me?’ And then he said, ‘Well, I was just trying to have some fun with you, Chops.’ And so — you know, but it was — and kind of — he’d do that constantly. I mean, he would also show the kids, they had a small pool table, not a big pool table in the house, he’d show the kids his latest pool moves when he came home. He even mentioned he sort of saw himself as a little hustler.”

CLEVELAND SELLERS

“I remember when Doctor King was — we decided on the Mississippi Meredith march, the Black Power march, that we couldn’t take the march through Philadelphia [Mississippi], but it was the anniversary of the murder of the civil rights workers there. So, we decided to get maybe 10 cars and we were going to take the leadership over and we were actually going to march in Philadelphia, and we did that. And when we were marching, everybody was told that we’re going to march up to the courthouse, and we had already decided because the steps of the courthouse was lined with police officers, and so we decided at that point that we didn’t want to put Doctor King at the front and say that prayer. So, Abernathy led the march. And we got up to the steps and Doctor Abernathy turned around to the crowd and he was beginning to open up and he said something like, and I’m paraphrasing, I’m not giving the whole thing, but he said something like, you know, ‘I want to — I want to be able to be here today and memorialize the three victims and I want to ask for redemption for those who — and forgiveness for those who murdered these three young men in Philadelphia, Mississippi.’ And somebody in the crowd behind him said, ‘Yeah, and we standing right behind you.’ And at that point Doctor Aber — Reverend Abernathy’s eyes opened and he finished this prayer with the eyes open and then walked down to the group and said, you know, ‘We need to leave here as fast as we can.’

“And so, I was not in the car with Abernathy and Doctor King, but on the way back to the car, Doctor King asked Abernathy, Ralph Abernathy, said, you know, ‘We’re, we’re Baptist ministers.’ And he said, ‘Yes, sir.’ And he said, ‘Now, were you, were you, were you scared when you were up there?’ ‘No, sir.’ He said, ‘Well, that was the first time I’ve seen a Baptist preacher pray with his eyes open.’ And everybody kind of fell out, I mean, that was Doctor King’s joke, he was comedic too, he told jokes all the time. The funny part about him telling jokes was, he didn’t have the rhythm for jokes, so they would be all kind of — you know, you say, ‘Okay, alright, I’m going to laugh, but I’m going to laugh at you telling that joke, I’m not going to laugh at the joke, but I’m going to laugh at you telling that joke.’ But everybody fell out laughing, but we had to get back in those cars and get out of Philadelphia and Neshoba County very quickly and we got back over.”

DIANE NASH

"I said to an audience one time that I had double dated with Martin Luther King. And I was really surprised they laughed, and I didn't understand why they were laughing. People generally do laugh when I say that now. And I think it's because they don't associate Martin Luther King with dating. But he was very human and not at all the perfect, super human, saintly, remote kind of impression that a lot of people, a lot of young people especially, have. He was very human and his humanness was one thing I found endearing about him. He had a sense of humor. He — I remember he often enjoyed playing table tennis with the staff, and talking smack, and laughing and it was just really, really clear that he was having a great time, as the staff was. Sometimes they would crack jokes and try to top each other's jokes, you know, a joke here, and then somebody would crack another one, another one.

"So, this particular time, though, Martin was going to the Bahamas Islands to work on one of his books. And Jim Bevel surprised me and — with a trip. We were going along also. We were in the Atlanta airport, and I remember we had just come from someplace. And I was like, 'Bevel, we're going the wrong way. Ground transportation is that way.' And so, he said, 'No. We're going to the Bahamas.' And so, we joined Coretta and Martin. And I have lovely memories of a great restaurant that was cut into the side of the hill and the moon was shining through the palm trees. And for somebody from Chicago, the moon shining through the palm trees is a big deal, and as you can imagine, you know, great conversation. He was a fun person to be with, and Coretta, it was a really nice evening and then the next day a long boat ride. And so, he was to me a likable person.

"I admired a lot of things about Martin Luther King. I remember really admiring him for the amount of work that he could grind out in a day. He was a person that had an open mind to the extent that he could grow and change his mind over a period of time. I respect that a great deal in a human being. He was steadfast. He didn't waiver. He kept his hand on the freedom plow, to borrow a phrase from the gospel song. And he didn't want to die. I really relate to that. I didn't want to die either. But he did what was necessary to change things. I admired that deeply. There was a lot to him. He was serious at times. He was courageous at times, a many-faceted human being."

ANDREW YOUNG

"What I remember about Airlie House was, I mean, his sense of humor, because we were up there on that balcony and we were being served iced tea and lemonade by a group of students from University of Virginia in white coats. And we were looking out over the land and there was a tractor out there mowing the grass. It was a beautiful scenery, and he says, 'You know, I can't blame white folks.' He said, 'This plantation system looks pretty good from up here.' You know, we were rocking back and iced tea, and he had a, I mean, he had a very good sense of humor laughing at things like that.

"And I think that what got him that I didn't realize, was that he was constantly aware of the imminence of death. And he used to say that to us all the time, you know, 'You're going to die, and you can never say what you die f — I mean, how you're going to die, when you're going to die, or where you're going to die. Your only choice is what you give your life for.' And I've heard him say that 40 or 50 times in different situations. And he was warning us, but I think at the same time he was reminding himself that whenever his end came he wanted it to be for the purpose of the least of these, God's children."

UNDERSTANDING THE MAN

INTERVIEW THREAD TWO: AS A LEADER

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

"Oh, yes. He was always accessible. And I think that most of the times that I saw him, he was depressed, didn't know what the world was going to do next. But he was always accessible, and I think I went to meet him right after that, said I wanted to come see him, he said, "Come see me," and — and he — I loved him because he was one of those adults who didn't feel he had to have all the answers, who could listen, who didn't feel ashamed to say, 'I don't know what the next step's gonna be.' And I guess most of the conver — many of the conversations I had was when he was struggling like we were struggling, for the next steps. He was not somebody who was chosen to lead— who chose to lead, I think he was chosen by [civil rights activist] Jo Ann Robinson and the people — and the women — and the ordinary people of Montgomery. He was new in the block, new kid on the block, didn't have a whole lot of baggage, and they needed a spokesperson, and so Jo Ann Robinson picked this new minister at Dexter, thank God. And the rest is history. But he was always humble, he was always accessible, he was always struggling.

"And that gave you confidence that you didn't know all the answers. And I know we used to laugh a lot about how terrified we both were of police dogs, what it felt when he was in that car going down after one of his arrests at Rich's. And the isolation. I will cross a block to get away from a police dog since I first met them in Greenwood, Mississippi. But he, he was able to laugh, but to talk about fear, but to say you don't let it paralyze you. And that was always reinforcing, I think, for young people struggling to find solutions to life's questions."

MARY LOU FINLEY

"Sometimes we had staff meetings in Doctor King's apartment, and we could barely fit in there. There would be, like, 20 young people all sitting on the floor, kind of crammed together like when you go to a young people's party and you have to, like, walk over everybody to get anywhere. It was kind of like that. But we liked being there in the evenings. It was better than being in a cold church late at night when we need to have meetings. So, one time we were having a meeting there with Doctor King and trying to figure out, you know, what we were going to do next and how we were going to solve some of the problems we were running up against in the organizing efforts. And finally, Doctor King said he was tired and he was going to go to bed, so he left and went into the other room to go to bed in this apartment. And we kept talking. We're meeting, and we got into some kind of wrangle that we can't quite remember exactly what it was about, but we had a lot of disagreements. So, we had a major disagreement that we couldn't really resolve. Somebody said, 'We have to go get Doctor King.' So, somebody went and got him out of bed, and he came out in his pajamas and his robe, and he sat down with us.

"And Doctor King was very good at listening to people, listening to this side and then listening to that side, and then trying to figure out how to make something work that would deal with the issues that all the different people in the group were raising. He was excellent at that. And he really came up with some kind of conclusion that we could all work with and go forward with. And I have to say also that there was a huge amount of respect for Doctor King. And so, you know, if he said, 'This is the way to go,' people would say, 'Okay. That's what we're going to do.' So that was another element in the whole thing. But his capacity to listen carefully and to actually integrate other people's ideas was one of his real strengths that I think people who know him mostly from his speeches wouldn't necessarily guess. But part of the reason all that was so powerful was that he had been listening a lot, and he knew from what he had heard what the issues were in the community."

CLEVELAND SELLERS

"You know, he, when he got his Nobel Peace Prize, an award came with it, it was something like — I think it was \$50,000 or something like that, big money in that day when he got it and he gave some to SCLC and some to other civil rights organizations, but he didn't, he didn't keep any money for himself. And I thought that that was, that was testimonial to an old belief in the African American community that you don't try to benefit in terms of enriching yourself, what you try to do is you try to enrich the community in whatever way you can, and he stuck to that principle."

RICHARD FERNANDEZ

"...he welcomed me, 'Hi, Dick,' he said. You know, I'm a naïve, you know, college student, innocent in more ways than I'd like to admit. And we walked in and we sat down. I had my little yellow pad with my 15 questions. I had my pen out, and he proceeded for 15 minutes to interview me. 'What brought you down to Montgomery? Why were you interested in the aftermath? What did you find out in Montgomery? What are you going to do when you get out of college? What are you interested in?' So, we had this conversation, and I'm thinking, 'Am I going to get to my questions?' But his interest in me just, again, took me back, and always in this very quiet tone.

"So, I got into my questions and I wish I had kept that term paper; I don't know where it went. But during the course of the conversation I used the expression 'white trash,' probably a couple of times. And three or four minutes after I'd used it the second time, Doctor King said to me, he said, 'You know, Dick, when we use words like 'white trash' it's a way of objectifying those who we are not getting along with at the moment. And the more we do that, it creates more distance between us rather than less. And we'll never get much way along the road if we objectify people.' The fact that he included himself in that sentence, 'when we,' you know, here's this head of the Civil Rights Movement. He didn't have to do that, that he included himself. I asked him about the fact that the buses of Atlanta had been integrated for three years, and African-Americans were still at the back, the whites were still at the front. And he said, 'Well you know, Dick, the people in Atlanta are like people everywhere. Change is not the thing they like to do the most.' And he said, 'If you come back in three more years, about three more years, the buses will be fully integrated. People will be...' And he said it takes time for black and whites together to feel comfortable, but he said it will come because now they have the right to sit anyplace.

"So, I left that interview knowing — not knowing at the time how much it changed my life. But I have never forgotten those lessons of including others and making sure that you identify yourself as part of the problem, because we always are part of the problem. So, that was my interview with Doctor King in Atlanta."

UNDERSTANDING THE MAN

INTERVIEW THREAD THREE: AS A MINISTER

RICHARD FERNANDEZ

“One of the aspects of Doctor King’s life that has not been very well examined and has not been paid attention to a lot, because his public life was so very important to us, is the way in which his own intellectual and spiritual life developed. Many people know that he was raised in the home with a fire and brimstone father, and that for a lot of reasons this did not appeal to him as he got older into high school and college. But, having said that, he wasn’t quite sure what else was out there. And between college and seminary up in Pennsylvania, he kept struggling with, ‘Where am I in the theological universe?’ He was very much attracted to Mahatma Gandhi, and actually took a trip to India during that time. He was also attracted to a professor in New York by the name of Reinhold Niebuhr, who was a great theological thinker. Niebuhr was not a pacifist, Gandhi, of course, was. When he left [Crozer Theological] Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania to go to Boston University School of Theology for a doctorate degree, he was still wrestling with ‘Where am I as Doctor King the preacher going to be?’ And at BU he ran into a group called the Personal School of Theology. And the Personal School actually believe that when you cry, God cries, when you laugh, God laughs, when you’re pleased, God is pleased. And he was really taken with that.”

“I don’t remember during his active ministry following the seminary at BU, him ever uttering a word about — a critical word about someone’s theological position being different than his own. He was such a universalist. That wasn’t in his repertoire, that the God he worshiped loved all people, accepted all people, and that’s what he was committed to doing, even though he wouldn’t get near the hellfire and brimstone again for himself.”

HARRY BELAFONTE

“Everything about Doctor King was somewhat off-center for me. Here was a man possessed with this intellect, with this cranium, that was bubbling over with information and need; he had a need to be understood. Also, he, he — his humility, nothing about him assumed anything. He wasn’t trying to be loved or disliked, he wasn’t trying to be a leader, he was want — he was the first person I’d ever met that had been touched by history, and had been touched by life, to be on the mission that he ultimately chose to take and to bring with him this sense of do-ability. Even now I struggle with trying to describe much that first meeting. Everything about him was on a —unfamiliar, but the way in which he stated his case, the way in which he stated his vision for what he was to do, even the expression of the great doubt as to his capacity to fill what he felt history was demanding of us and of the movement and of black people, whether or not he was the right choice to take on such a responsibility. But as long as the compass was pointed at him, he did not shy away from taking on the challenge and our task was to help him succeed.”