Singer, actor, activist Belafonte recalls King's "I Have a Dream" speech

By Harry Belafonte, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.12.18

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Editor's Note: On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. He delivered his stirring words at the conclusion of the March on Washington. Around 250,000 people took part in the march. They had come to the nation's capital to demand full and equal rights for African-Americans.

The singer, actor and social activist Harry Belafonte was there that day. Belafonte was a close friend of King's. He had first became famous as the "King of Calypso" music. Later, he starred in many movies and became a leading civil rights activist around the world. Below, Belafonte shares his memories of King's great speech.
It Felt Like A Rebirth Of Hope

The atmosphere that day in Washington was a mixture of hope and excitement. I think that everyone who attended the march felt empowered. There was a tremendous sense that we were pursuing a cause that was just, and a certainty that what we wanted was winnable. We were there as Americans, and not just as black Americans. All of America was represented that day. It felt like a rebirth of hope.
There were several rousing speeches before Dr. King took the platform, as well as music and singing. But of course the "I Have a Dream" speech was the event of the day. It has since been recognized as one of the great speeches of American history.  

**It Represented The Best Of America**

I was not surprised by the speech's meaning, because we had worked with him on determining what his message would be. What I was not prepared for was how moving, how beautiful his words were.

King's "I Have a Dream" speech helped us all realize our own possibilities. It made ordinary people realize they had power too. In that way, it represented the best of America.

I was already an activist when I first met Dr. King. I was utterly devoted to the civil rights struggle, to the fight for black people's rights.

**Black People Were Denied Equal Rights**

Like many black American men of my generation, I had fought for America against the Nazis in the second world war. Yet we returned to an America where black people were denied their rights as citizens.

Blacks had fought and died for freedom and equality, and yet they were still denied those things at home. That experience marked the beginnings of the civil rights struggle in America, I believe. For many, it was just too much to bear.

**People Were Filled With A Sense Of Hope**

One of my strongest memories of that wonderful day back in 1963 was something I will probably never experience again. All around me I saw a huge tide of people filled with such a sense of hope. That was America at its greatest. And I have no doubt we can get back there again by moving forward.

The truth is that our society still is more unjust than it is good. We should not and cannot accept that. Black people are still suffering, but today the struggle is not just about race, it is also about women's rights and fighting poverty. It is about human rights.

**New Hunger For Justice Is Taking Shape**

There is a cruelness about America today that horrifies me. But Americans are opening their eyes and there is change in the air. A new hunger for justice is taking shape, because people have once again had enough.
I speak at colleges all over America, and it is clear to me that something is happening. Young people are hungry for change. They believe a better world is possible, but that feeling has not yet been fully acted upon. But it will be, because our times demand it, they call upon us to act.

The same was true for Dr. King, who was after all just an ordinary man, with the same hopes and fears as anyone else. He made history, but history also made him.
Quiz

1. Read the first section, "It Felt Like A Rebirth Of Hope," and the final section, "New Hunger For Justice Is Taking Shape."

What is one connection between these two sections?

(A) Both sections explain the contrast between King's speech and other speeches that have been given in America.

(B) Both sections describe how King's speech solved many problems people were experiencing with civil rights.

(C) The first section explains what caused people to listen to King's speech, and the final section explains how it has affected America over time.

(D) The first section describes the feelings of people on the day of King's speech, and the final section describes the feelings of people today.

2. Read the section "Black People Were Denied Equal Rights."

What does this section explain that other sections do NOT?

(A) how injustices in America led to the struggle for civil rights

(B) the reasons why black people were denied equal rights in America

(C) how injustice affects many black people in America today

(D) the connection between Dr. King and the struggle for civil rights
3 Read the paragraph from the section "People Were Filled With A Sense Of Hope."

The truth is that our society still is more unjust than it is good. We should not and cannot accept that. Black people are still suffering, but today the struggle is not just about race, it is also about women's rights and fighting poverty. It is about human rights.

According to this paragraph, HOW do people today see the struggle for civil rights differently than people during King's time?

(A) People today no longer need to fight for civil rights based on race, because women's rights and poverty are more significant problems.

(B) People today no longer need to fight for civil rights based on race, because most racial problems have been solved.

(C) People today need to fight for rights for all people who face injustice, including people of different races, women and people in poverty.

(D) People today want to fight for rights for all people who face injustice, but there are too many different civil rights problems to solve.

4 Read the section "It Represented The Best Of America."

Which selection BEST shows the author's point of view that Dr. King's speech made a difference in the lives of those who listened to it?

(A) I was not surprised by the speech's meaning, because we had worked with him on determining what his message would be.

(B) What I was not prepared for was how moving, how beautiful his words were.

(C) It made ordinary people realize they had power too.

(D) I was utterly devoted to the civil rights struggle, to the fight for black people's rights.