Ahimsa Center- K-12 Teacher Institute

**Title of Lesson:** Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Childhood Stories of Truth and Nonviolence

This lesson can be used as an extension of the lesson on Mohandas Gandhi (See: Mohandas Gandhi: Childhood Stories of Truth and Nonviolence by Michael Pinkava).

**Lesson By:** Michael Pinkava

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<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
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<td>Grade 5/ Social Studies</td>
<td>15-25 students</td>
<td>4 Sessions/ 30-40 minutes</td>
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**Guiding Questions:**
- Who was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?
- What childhood experiences influenced Dr. King’s sense of truth and nonviolence?
- How did Dr. King utilize his childhood experiences in the civil rights movement in the United States?

**Lesson Abstract:**
This lesson, which can be used as an extension of the lesson Mohandas Gandhi: Childhood Stories of Truth and Nonviolence by Michael Pinkava, encourages students to understand Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a child and as a person who learned the power of nonviolence through his childhood experiences. Students will have the opportunity to explore how they too are developing a sense of truth and nonviolence, and how they can be a leader in their own lives and in their community.

**Lesson Content:**
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a great orator with a compelling approach to speaking his ideas. It is in his great speeches that much of what people today know about Dr. King is remembered. Many people know that he had a dream. Many people know that not only did he have a dream, but that the dream was of “little black boys and black girls [being] able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls as sisters and brothers (Carson, p. 226).” People may also be aware that in the midst of the civil rights movement in the United States of America, there was a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama; and that during that boycott, Dr. King spoke the words: “…when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, ‘There lived a race of people, a black people, “fleecy locks and black complexion,” a people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization (Carson, p. 61).’” Dr. King spoke powerful words that had a powerful influence in a changing country and in a changing world. Similar to Mohandas Gandhi, Dr. King’s words and his actions were not something that came naturally, nor did they come from some kind of lucky set of circumstances. Just as it was instilled in Gandhi, the pursuit of learning from living was in the veins of Dr. King.

Of course, the learning from living it is in all people, but certain events in life provide the opportunity to pursue this learning. In particular, moments in Gandhi’s childhood learning proved significant in his ability to learn as an adult as well as his ability to make choices with a consciousness of truth and what nonviolent actions could be taken. Dr. King, like Gandhi and in
many ways inspired by Gandhi, also had childhood experiences that would later influence his ability to make important decisions and to use important words. Dr. King also learned these things at an early age, an age that students can relate to. Students should be able to connect with Dr. King more than just in his dreams but also in his life experiences and his life choices. Now possibly more than ever, providing the opportunity for students to realize their experiences which foster a sense of the power of truth and nonviolence and how they continue to learn from these experiences under these guiding ideas is of the utmost relevance. Why should students seek truth? Why should students act nonviolently? Why should students believe that they could be agents of change in their own lives and the lives of others? The answers to these questions can be found in the childhood life of Dr. King and how truth and nonviolence led this person to not only discover himself but also to become a person who discovered a need to cultivate humanity through truth and nonviolence. For this reason, a pursuit of how Dr. King came to understand truth and nonviolent action as a child is worth exploring.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was not born a civil rights activist, but he was born into a family of preachers and change agents. When Dr. King was born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia, for all intents and purposes, he was not only given his name but also his occupation. Dr. King’s father, grandfather, great-grandfather, brother, and uncle were all preachers. As Dr. King states in his autobiography: “…I didn’t have much choice (Carson, p. 1).” But, Dr. King was not only expected to become a preacher. Born into a fairly comfortable economic situation, both Dr. King’s mother and father completed college and had experiences in their lives that allowed them to appreciate injustice as well as the possibilities that change could bring. Put simply, Dr. King’s family had high expectations for him to become a great and highly educated preacher but not necessarily a great and highly educated preacher and agent of change. So, how did Dr. King get to be in a position where his words were so important and he became the face of change in America?

The answer to this question starts at a young age in which Dr. King was confronted with two incidents that altered his way of viewing the world, two incidents that allowed him to recognize the power of truth and nonviolence later in life on a mature level. This more sophisticated level would allow him to have the courage to say influential words and call on people to make significant actions. As seen with Gandhi, influential moments in childhood appear commonplace only until considered in the context of the person who later realized and acted out much more significant choices. Thus is also the case with Dr. King.

Truth, as explored through Gandhi, is of the utmost importance for a person to discover within oneself in order to act nonviolently. Truth is derived from awareness. Dr. King was introduced to and elucidated to truth in the form on his grandmother’s death. Dr. King relates this story in his autobiography:

“She was very dear to each of us, but especially to me. I sometimes think I was her favorite grandchild. I was particularly hurt by her death mainly because of the extreme love I had for her. She assisted greatly in raising all of us. It was after this incident that for the first time I talked at any length on the doctrine of immortality. My parents attempted to explain it to me, and I was assured that somehow my grandmother still lived. I guess this is why today I am such a strong believer in personal immortality (Carson, p. 7).”
While the truth in this short story might not be so immediate, there is truth in this that all students can relate to. Dr. King confronts the idea of death, mortality. People die: this is a truth. Dr. King makes sense of his grandmother’s death through discovering for himself that somehow his grandmother lived on in him, that she influenced him. In this way, Dr. King realizes that the mind is capable of realizing the value of experience, and that in having experiences, a person is capable of seeing and understanding the truth. Death gives people perspective, and while it may seem challenging to teach to small children, there is something in death that is not necessarily tied to an institutional religion that can elucidate truth. It is beyond institutionalized religion to say to a child that when a person dies, just because they are dead, doesn’t mean that we can learn from their experiences, the experiences we shared with them, and the experience of losing them.

In addition to understanding the value of experience and truth at an early age, Dr. King also came to appreciate nonviolence during his childhood. While it is true that Dr. King did not always speak of nonviolence in action early in his public life, realizing the possibility of nonviolence is clearly ingrained in his experience with a white playmate. Dr. King relates this story in his autobiography:

“From the age of three I had a white playmate who was about my age. We always felt free to play our childhood games together. … At the age of six we both entered school—separate schools, of course. I remember how our friendship began to break as soon as we entered school; this was not my desire but his. The climax came when he told me one day that his father had demanded that he would play with me no more. I never will forget what a great shock this was to me. I immediately asked my parents about the motive behind such a statement. … [My parents] for the first time [made me] aware of the existence of a race problem. … My parents [however] would always tell me that I should not hate the white man, but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him (Carson, p. 7).”

Without overemphasizing the role of institutionalized religion in this story but rather focusing on the principle of loving the person who might do you harm, it becomes clear that Dr. King has been primed to think nonviolently. The message Dr. King’s parents instilled in him at an early age was not to hate the person who does not know that they are doing you wrong, but to love him so he or she realizes he is doing you wrong. One can only practice such behavior if they have an understanding of nonviolence and that they have experiences that shed light on the truth of this behavior.

As an adult, King utilized these experiences in which he was exposed to the ultimate truths in life and the power of love over hate in nonviolence. He spoke powerful words to a people that were struggling for a long time, a people who had been working so hard to foster truth through nonviolent actions in the United States for decades. Dr. King was able to speak and lead because he learned from his life. Students can learn from their experiences as well. Students can learn what truth is in the face of death or other challenges in their lives. Students can learn the power of choosing to love the people that at times hurt them in order to foster their recognition of how they hurt. Students can learn that they have the potential to use truth and nonviolence to make positive choices in their lives that can indeed cause positive change beyond them and into their community.
New York State Content Standards:

Social Studies (Grade 5)

SS 5.I.4A: Respect the rights of others in discussions and classroom debates regardless of whether or not one agrees with their viewpoint.
SS 5.I.4B: Explain the role that civility plays in promoting effective citizenship in preserving democracy.
SS 5.I.4C: Participate in negotiation and compromise to resolve classroom, school, and community disagreements and problems.

Materials Needed:
- A picture book on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the anecdotes from Dr. King’s childhood contained in the content essay, chart paper or a white board, markers, pens, pencils, construction paper, lined paper, and any other writing utensils and paper goods.

Suggested Teaching Activities:

The lesson is presented sequentially. The books and extension activities are clearly suggestions only. These activities can be integrated towards a culminating activity, none or some of the activities can be used towards an end activity, or no activity could be used other than the discussions. These activities may also be connected to those in the lesson on Mohandas Gandhi. If you care to brainstorm further, feel free to contact me at mpinkava@gmail.com.

- Read aloud a picture book on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and familiarize the students with who he was and what he accomplished. Have a large class discussion on what the students also know and about him and why they think he is important.
  - Example Books:
    - A Picture Book of Martin Luther King Jr. by David A. Adler
    - The Story of Martin Luther King Jr. by Johnny Ray Moore
    - Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by Dorreen Rappaport

- Focus the students on the childhood of Dr. King. The goal of this exploration is to get the students to realize the value of telling the truth. Have a brainstorming session on what “Truth” is. After jotting down some of the students’ ideas, share the story from the content essay in which Dr. King points to a time when he realized what truth was. Have the students share personal stories like when they lied or told the truth. Ask the students questions around moments when they’ve realized what truth is. Revisit the chart of ideas before the story and discussion. Allow the students to add to it.
  - Possible Extensions:
    - Cut out pictures from magazines and newspapers that remind the students of what truth is. Have the students write a few sentences or a story that relates to truth and the pictures. An example might be a person thinking, makes a student relate that to a person thinking about the truth.
    - Write a personal narrative about a time the student told the truth.
- Write a short reflection piece on what the students think truth is.

- Focus the students again on the childhood of Dr. King. The goal of this exploration is to get the students to realize the value of a nonviolent response. Have a brainstorming session on what “Nonviolence” and/or “Violence” is. You can use a Venn diagram or simply make a thought-web. After jotting down some of the students’ ideas, share the story from the content essay in which Dr. King points to a time when he realized what nonviolence was. Ask students questions around times when they chose to act violently or nonviolently when they were in a conflict. Focus on the nonviolent responses and why the students felt they worked. Revisit the chart and add to it as needed.
  - Possible Extensions:
    - Cut out pictures from magazines and newspapers that remind the students of what nonviolence is. Have the students write a few sentences or a story that relates to nonviolence and the pictures.
    - Write a personal narrative about a time the student was nonviolent in a conflict.
    - Write a short reflection piece on what the students think nonviolence is.

- Revisit the main accomplishments of Dr. King. Discuss why the students think that his knowledge of truth and nonviolence helped him accomplish his goals.
  - Possible Culminating activities:
    - Create picture books that explore what nonviolence is.
    - Write short pieces on the power of nonviolence.
    - Discuss a class or schoolwide conflict that might be addressed with nonviolence and address the issue as a class.

Bibliography: