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# OPINION

## Real Path to Greatness is Through Service

### A lesson to teach about Dr. King

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

*"If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness. And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."*



These well-known words are from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermon "The Drum Major Instinct," delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church on Feb. 4, 1968. Dr. King was explaining that we all start out with the ingrained instinct to be "drum majors": everyone wants to be important, to be first, to lead the parade. Watch a group of children try to form a line and right away you'll see this instinct in action. But Dr. King said too many people never outgrow this instinct—and by constantly struggling to be the most powerful or famous or wealthiest or best-educated, we forget one of the Gospels' and life's largest truths: the real path to great-

ness is through service.

This is one of the key lessons we should teach our children about Dr. King. Many of them have just studied Dr. King in school in the days leading up to his birthday, and many have learned to see him as a history book hero—a larger-than-life, mythical figure. But it's crucial for them to understand Dr. King wasn't a superhuman with magical powers. Just as the extraordinary new movie *Selma* is reminding a new generation of filmgoers, our children need to be reminded that Dr. King was a real person—just like all of the other ministers, parents, teachers, neighbors, and other familiar adults in their lives today.

I first heard Dr. King speak in person at a Spelman College chapel service during my senior year in college. Dr. King was just 31 but he had already gained a national reputation during the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott five years earlier. He became a mentor and friend. Although I do remember him as a great leader and a hero, I also remember him as someone able to admit how often he was afraid and unsure about his next step. But faith prevailed over fear, uncertainty, fatigue, and sometimes depression. It was his human vulnerability and ability to rise above it that I most remember. "If I Can Help Somebody Along the Way" was his favorite song. He was an ordinary man who made history because he was willing to stand up and serve and make a difference in extraordinary ways as did the legions of other civil rights warriors in the 1950s and 1960s. We need to teach our children every day that they can and must make a difference too.

"Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve."

Towards the end of "The Drum Major Instinct," Dr. King told the congregation he sometimes thought about his own death and funeral. He said when that day came he didn't want people to talk about his Nobel Peace Prize or his degrees or hundreds of awards: "I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that's all I want to say."

Dr. King was assassinated two months to the day after giving this sermon. But a recording of "The Drum Major Instinct" was played at his funeral, and many people think of these moving words in Dr. King's voice as his own eulogy. He knew how he wanted to be remembered.

Americans across the country now celebrate Dr. King's birthday as "a day on, not

a day off" and use this day to come together for community service and action. But we shouldn't wait for the holiday to come back around to remember and honor him this way. We can honor Dr. King's legacy best by serving every day and standing together to build a movement to realize Dr. King's dream and America's dream and by following his lead in being a drum major for justice.

As our country faces morally and economically indefensible child poverty rates, wealth and income inequality, and grandstanding politicians who put party and politics ahead of principle and sound policy, I hope they will hear and follow our great 20th century prophet.

In his last speech in Memphis the night before he was assassinated he gave us our marching orders: "...I'm always happy to see a relevant ministry. It's all right to talk about long white robes over yonder, in all of its symbolism, but ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's all right to talk about streets flowing with milk and honey, but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here and His children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do."

His mandate was not just to God's preachers but also to all of God's people. That's all of us.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

## Historic Drama Reflective of Modern Reality

### Selma movie wins hearts and minds

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Who among us could have predicted that a cinematic retelling of the heroic efforts of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders in 1965 to organize and lead marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in an effort to gain equal voting rights for African Americans in that city would end up teaching us as much about the present as it does the past?

*Selma*, with its nod to history, is a film that also manages to channel and highlight our nation's modern-day struggles to form a more perfect union.

Ava DuVernay's Oscar-nominated biopic comes across the big screen at a pivotal moment in our history. It comes on the 50th anniversary of the three Selma to Montgomery marches and the signing of the federal Voting Rights Act into law. It comes during this week's 30th anniversary celebration of Martin Luther King Day as a national holiday. It comes on the heels of demonstrations and



social unrest over the lack of accountability in the deaths of black people from Sanford, Fla., to Staten Island, N.Y. and beyond — with protestors of varied hues and backgrounds calling for an end to centuries-long discrimination, racial inequality, and police misconduct.

These demands, the urgency for change, and the use of productive, non-violent civil disobedience would have been all too familiar to Dr. King, who, along with other notable and nameless heroes, sacrificed his own life in the pursuit of many of these goals.

With John Legend, the co-creator of the film's soundtrack "Glory" at his side, rapper Common recently accepted *Selma*'s sole Golden Globe award for Best Original Song — drawing a direct line from the past to the present:

"The first day I stepped on the set of *Selma*, I began to feel like this was bigger than a movie. As I got to know the people of the civil rights movement, I realized I am the hopeful black woman who was denied her right to vote. I am the caring white supporter, killed on the front lines of freedom. I am the unarmed kid, who maybe needed a hand, but instead was given a bullet. I am the two fallen police officers murdered in the line of duty. *Selma* has awakened my humanity... We look to the future, and we want to create a better

world. Now is our time to change the world. 'Selma' is now."

For those who have seen this powerful film, is it possible to watch a young black man be shot and killed by police officers acting with impunity then and not think of the names that crowd our front pages and protests now? Is it possible to watch a black woman fail to meet an unreasonable standard to be permitted to vote and not worry about the Supreme Court's 2013 decision that effectively dismantled the 1965 Voting Rights Act? Yes, in so many ways, *Selma* is now.

It is thus unfortunate that this historic, culturally-relevant, well-made feature about an iconic moment in and figures of American history has not been fully recognized during this awards season. While I celebrate the film's win for Best Original Song at the Golden Globes, I have also expressed my disappointment that DuVernay did not win Best Director. The film is worthy — and so is she. The subsequent failure of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to nominate DuVernay and the film's lead actors for Oscars has not only been almost universally viewed as a snub, but it has set the stage for the least diverse Oscars since 1998, with not

one actor of color receiving an acting nomination.

Still, *Selma* has achieved much more than could ever be reflected in any statuette as everyday citizens, politicians, entrepreneurs, business and community leaders, and notable personalities have stepped in to give the film the recognition it deserves — and to give thousands of students a meaningful history lesson beyond their classrooms.

Through various coalitions, free screenings of *Selma* are being offered to middle school and high school students across the country in select cities including Selma, Washington, D.C., New York and New Orleans, which was led, in part, by the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. I have also joined a coalition of African American business and civic leaders in New Jersey who are underwriting free admission to *Selma* for students.

Although Hollywood's most coveted honor will elude the director and actors, *Selma* — and everyone involved — have already won for one of the most impactful and inspirational movies of a generation to a nation still in search of peace, healing, and equality.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.