The Potential For Greatness

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did great things. It was almost as if he was destined for it, too. The wisdom he held, the passion he displayed, the calm confidence he radiated in the face of open hostility—these are the qualities of an American hero. But when I first saw this quote, I thought instead, “If I cannot do great things, I should not do them at all.” This attitude has plagued me with frustration throughout every project I have embarked on. On a global level, any effect I may have is like a dead leaf held captive by the wind. The world is in an autumnal phase, and facing an inevitable winter.

In retrospect on this past month, I see the quote in a different light. Originally, it felt generic. It is easy to claim that great results don’t matter when one is already successful. Now I realize the wisdom that King imparts with these words, and that the quote has more of a connection to my ordinary life than I could have ever imagined. With my eyes freshly peeled, I see the various ways that the people in my life have tried to convey this. From my English teacher’s insistence that a goal based on external validation is impossible to achieve, to my father’s emphasis of the simpler sides of life, King’s words have lived with me for years.

Still, as I watch my hands suspended above the keys, I can only see all the other confident and great students writing impossible essays with the unique and trail-blazing perspective that I lack. It wasn’t until the quote wound up pasted to my locker one morning that clarity struck. I tore the paper from the metal and thought about the coincidence as I walked to class. Faced with Dr. King’s quote yet again, I realized something important about my own life. Previously, I had viewed results as the aspects that define greatness. Accolades, recognition, and impact were three impossible criteria swarming myself and my generation. Truthfully, it is a person’s qualities of greatness that matter. The act of seeking something better, to be a beacon of hope in darkness, to forge a new path—I believe that this is what King means when he says, “If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way.”

We cannot all be revolutionaries. In the end, it is the everyday greatness that changes the world for the better. To honor Dr. King and his impactful words, we must continue to chip away at the injustices that surround, but never conquer, our inalienable rights. And the first step in that journey is to discover the potential for greatness, and to live every moment in that same, undeniably great way.