

2021 Martin Luther King Day Essay Contest

sponsored by Africana Studies and College of FHSS

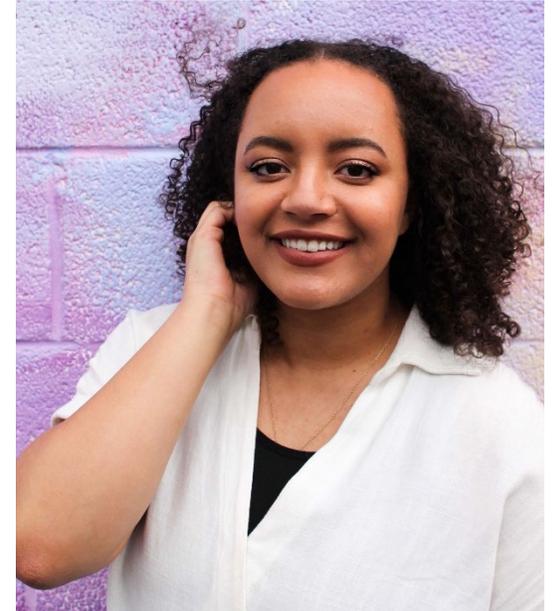
1st place – **Kaila Keolalani Douglass**

(Elementary Ed. & Dual Language
Immersion, Bellflower, CA)



2nd place – **Grace Soelberg**

(Senior, History & Africana Studies,
Sociology, Kaysville, UT)



3rd place

Erin Gibson

(Freshman, Lehi, UT)

Scott Herrod

(Senior, Public Health & International
Development, San Clemente, CA)



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Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints President Russell M. Nelson has recently asked members of the Church to work to “root out” racism and “lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice.” Reflecting on his words, alongside the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s call to action (below), write **an essay of 777 words or less** about what antiracist actions you can take to follow the invitation to “promote respect for all of God’s children.”

[President Nelson Shares Social Post about Racism and Calls for Respect for Human Dignity, June 1, 2020](#), “The Creator of us all calls on each of us to abandon attitudes of prejudice against any group of God’s children. Any of us who has prejudice toward another race needs to repent! During the Savior’s earthly mission, He constantly ministered to those who were excluded, marginalized, judged, overlooked, abused, and discounted. As His followers, can we do anything less? The answer is no!

[Joint Statement with the NAACP, June 8, 2020](#), “Thus, we call on parents, family members, and teachers to be the first line of defense... We likewise call on government, business, and educational leaders at every level to review processes, laws, and organizational attitudes regarding racism and root them out once and for all.”

[“Let God Prevail,” October 2020 General Conference](#), “I grieve that our Black brothers and sisters the world over are enduring the pains of racism and prejudice. Today I call upon our members everywhere to lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice. I plead with you to promote respect for all of God’s children.”

[Martin Luther King Jr., “The Three dimensions of a complete life” \(Delivered at New Covenant Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, on 9 April 1967\)](#), “a man has not begun to live until he can rise above the narrow confines of his own individual concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.... I say to you this morning that the first question that the priest asked was the first question that I asked on that Jericho Road of Atlanta known as Simpson Road. The first question that the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But the good Samaritan came by and he reversed the question. Not ‘What will happen to me if I stop to help this man?’ but ‘What will happen to this man if I do not stop to help him?’ This was why that man was good and great. He was great because he was willing to take a risk for humanity; he was willing to ask, ‘What will happen to this man?’ not ‘What will happen to me?’ This is what God needs today: Men and women who will ask, ‘What will happen to humanity if I don’t help?’”

Submit your essay no later than NOON on Monday January 11th to: africanabyu@gmail.com as a Word attachment. Please include the following information with your submission: your name, year in school, major, minor(s), home town, email address, and phone number.

The first-place winner will receive **\$500** and the opportunity to read their essay at BYU’s *MLK Walk of Life Commemoration* on Wednesday January 20, 2021. The second and third place winners will receive \$300 and \$150, respectively. (Previous first-place winners are not eligible for the same award in consecutive years.) Questions about the essay contest can be directed to the above email or to Dr. Leslie Hadfield leslie_hadfield@byu.edu, the Africana Studies Coordinator.

Kaila Keolalani Douglass

We're Still Dreaming

My first-grade teacher struggled with her words. She was trying to find the words to help a bunch of six-year-olds understand the meaning of the word hate. We were listening to a recording of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, and we just weren't getting it. Seeing our faces, my teacher tried to explain: "If you looked different, you were treated differently." She paused, then turned to Julia, an African American student in my class and my best friend. "Julia, back then, you wouldn't have belonged in this classroom. Back then, if I was your teacher, I would've said: You can't be here. Get out." We watched as Julia's eyes widened, confused, taking my teacher's words as a command. Her twisted, pretty braids swung as she walked out of the classroom. Alone. It wasn't until the door slammed shut, swallowing Julia, that my teacher realized her mistake, the misunderstanding. I understood very little about what was happening, but I did understand that it wasn't fair that Julia had to leave, and if she was going, I wanted to leave too.

I have reflected on that experience again and again. In a world with so much hatred and inequity, all of us have had to grapple with the ugly and uncomfortable realities of racism in this country. As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I believe that we have a special responsibility to be front-line workers in the fight against inequality. I am reminded of the words of the great Dr. King himself, who, while sitting in the dark confines of Birmingham jail, wept "in deep disappointment... over the laxity of the church."¹ How I hope that we, as Latter-day Saints, can be Christians that help prevent, instead of cause, tears of disappointment. I pray we can follow the counsel of our beloved prophet, President Nelson, who has called upon us to "to lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice."²

But what does that look like? What can we do to "root out" racism from ourselves and our societies?

First off, in following the example of Jesus Christ, we need what I call gritty meekness. We need both grit to keep trying when things get hard and meekness to keep owning our mistakes. If, for example, you felt prompted in May of 2020, to repent of racist thoughts or actions, or to speak out on social media, or to support a local Black-owned business, I would ask, as our beloved prophet Alma once did, "Can ye feel so now?"³ Gritty anti-racists don't follow trends; they follow truth, and their commitment to said truth encourages them to keep trying even when things become emotionally, spiritually, or mentally hard. Grit, however, can only get you so far without meekness. Our Black brothers and sisters need us to be able to accept correction without admitting defeat. We need to do better at owning our actions, saying sorry, and seeking corrections to our mistakes.

¹ King, Dr. Martin Luther, "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" ([1963](#))

² "President Nelson calls upon Latter-day Saints 'to lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice'" ([2020](#))

³ Alma 5:26

Second, we need to get proximate to each other.⁴ I'm not talking about physical distance; rather I refer to hearing and validating our brothers and sisters' stories and sufferings, getting to know people personally and deeply, and creating deep and open relationships where brave questions can be asked and hard corrections can be made. Again, I think of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who was "fully acquainted with grief"⁵, and who "descended below them all"⁶ to get proximate to every one of us. His love knows no limits. In contemplating this, think: what can I do to build deep and loving relationships with those who are different than me? What causes or groups in my community or congregation can I get to know and support?

Finally, we can start local. Gathered here today are people from all different majors, careers, and walks of life. There is ample opportunity for all of us to lift where we stand. What can you do as artists, as lawyers, as teachers, to fight racism? What can we do as Relief Society Presidents, ministering companions, or as Sunday School teachers? The answer will be different for everyone, but if our commitment to follow President Nelson's counsel is unwavering and sincere, God will show us what we can do to make a difference at the home front.

I conclude with the stirring words of Dr. King, who, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963, proclaimed his dream that "now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."⁷

Dr. King, if you're listening, we're still dreaming.

⁴ "A Blueprint for How to Change the World" ([2018](#))

⁵ Isaiah 53:3

⁶ Doctrine and Covenants 122:8

⁷ King, Dr. Martin Luther, "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" ([1963](#))

Grace Soelberg

When I think of the Church and its members, I am reminded of a rose bush. At first glance, I'm enraptured at the sight of the flowers. The vibrant shades of red, pink, yellow, and purples and their sublime almost fruity scent. As I approach and reach out for the petals, I'm delighted as I find they are velvety smooth to the touch and it seems as if I've finally encountered a secure, holy, and loving place to rest my soul. All that's left is to reach out and grab ahold of a stem and partake in the Gospel of Christ.

However, every beautiful rose bush is covered in thorns. In the Church, these thorns represent its legacy of racist theology and policy. They represent the deep seeded prejudice, unconscious biases, ignorance, and at times outright malicious actions of its members both past and present.

White members of the Church are able to exist as leaves within the rose bush, unharmed by the existence of the thorns. They can choose to acknowledge them, some simply ignore them, and others even deny their very existence. But as a Black member of the Church I do not have the privilege of choice in this regard. I'm forced to experience the rose bush in its entirety, to grab ahold of the stems, to exist in an exhausting binary of both beauty and constant pain and affliction.

While I can always choose to leave the rose bush, I will never truly be free of the pain, forever scared by its thorns, but I will also miss the grandeur and beauty of the flowers. I will long to once again breathe in its scent, and to feel the softness of the petals. So again, and again, I return, grasping ahold of the thorns. Enduring the pain, believing that it's better to suffer in the presence of the Gospel than to experience life without it.

But it doesn't have to be this way. President Nelson has asked us all to "root out" and abandon "attitudes and actions of [racial] prejudice." As members, we can make the Church a safe place for Black saints to worship in peace. To experience the joy of the restored Gospel without simultaneously experiencing racial trauma.

In order to do this, we must constantly work to de-thorn the rose bush. To actively make decisions that promote love, understanding, empathy, and inclusion. To teach our children about racial inequality. To fight against policies in institutions and in the government that oppress and discriminate against the Black community. Specific actions within the Church include correcting narratives of dark skin being a sign of divine disfavor or sin. Listening to Black members of the Church and validating their experiences and their pain. To refute any who espouse what Elder Holland has deemed "racist folklore" in regards to the Priesthood and Temple Ban. Abandoning racist attitudes around interracial marriage and relationships. Advocating for artwork that accurately depicts the Savior, Bible, and Book of Mormon figures, as well as religious art that includes and highlights Black saints. Also, to allow for our Sacrament meetings and services to better reflect local cultures in regards to music and dress, rather than forcing members across the world to abide by Europeans/Western standards of worship.

Lastly, and most importantly, we must acknowledge and accept a simple yet fundamental truth. Just like a rose bush, we, as well as the Church, are inherently born with thorns. We must accept that we live, and have been socialized in a racist society. That we and the Church currently harbor racist attitudes, and have participated in racist actions in the past. No one of us is innocent and neither is the Church, but the beauty of our theology tells us that we don't have to remain in this state. We have full access to the Atonement of Christ which allows us to choose to repent for our individual mistakes, and push for an institutional repentance process on behalf of the sins of past generations. This would allow us, and the Church to shed our thorns, leaving only the majesty and beauty of the flowers.

Whether or not you choose to accept it, we are all full of thorns, but we have every opportunity to rid ourselves, and the Church, of them. Will you choose to ignore the thorns, and sit by while your fellow Black saints suffer? Or will you choose to "root out" racism. To access the power of the Atonement, and work to rid your own tabernacle of its thorns, and to create a Zion-like community in which future generations of saints can experience the Gospel and worship without pain.

Erin Gibson

“Okay but are you even really black” “you look normal I didn't even know you were black” “You know you only got into BYU because you're black” “I don't see race” “ Erin stop making everything about race” “Racism isn't even a thing anymore”

I am 19 years old and I have had each one of these statements said to my face. So listen to me when I say that racism is alive and well. And anyone who says otherwise, exists in an ignorant fantasy. My opinions, my actions and my livelihood is under constant scrutiny from people who say that they love one another, as their savior loves them. And it's not just me, brothers and sisters all around the country and the world face this, enough so that President Nelson has implored us “to lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice.” He pleads with each of us “to promote respect for all of God’s children”. In a post by the president of the church we are reminded that “During our savior's earthly mission he consistently ministered to those who were excluded, judged, overlooked, abused and discounted. And as his followers can we do any less, the answer is no!”

I have a unique view on this topic: anti racism. I am multiracial. My dad is black while my mom is white. To put this into perspective it means the color of my skin is either too light or too dark to be accepted anywhere. I have seen multiple cases of racism and anti racism. I have witnessed racial gaslighting and still feel the emotional strain of being a BiPOC. Through all of my life's experience I found that a good way to root out racism, is to erase ignorance found in our communities and ourselves through education. In a joint statement from the NAACP and President Nelson it was said that “Prejudice, hate and discrimination are learned. Thus, we call on parents, family members, and teachers to be the first line of defense. Teaching children to love all, and find the good in others, is more crucial than ever,”. It won't be easy but we must educate not only ourselves but our posterity. Change happens when we are willing to let god prevail in our lives.

While it is very important for everyone to work to be anti racist by educating themselves, I would now like to speak directly to the population of people who have been told that they don't matter. In the words of president Oaks “Of course Black lives matter. That is an eternal truth all reasonable people should support,”. My peers, professors, brothers and sisters of the black community, YOU MATTER and I'm sorry that we have to fight so hard for others to realize this. This eternal truth can only be regarded as truth if we know it for ourselves. We must know that we are children of god, a heavenly father who loves us, we must know our own worth. In Dr. Martin Luther King Jrs speech “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life” he talks about a dimension of life he calls length, in which he describes loving yourself. He says “...*you know what loving yourself also means? It means that you've got to accept yourself. So many people are busy trying to be somebody else. God gave all of us something significant. And we must pray every day, asking God to help us to accept ourselves. That means everything. Too many Negroes are ashamed of themselves, ashamed of being black. A Negro got to rise up and say from the*

bottom of his soul, "I am somebody. I have a rich, noble, and proud heritage. However exploited and however painful my history has been, I'm black, but I'm black and beautiful." We need to stop pretending to be something we are not. Our differences are our advantages and no one is going to see that until we do. Once we see our worth we will be able to accurately teach others, and further destroy the ignorance that prejudice and racism is founded on. In the words of President Nelson "The question for each of us, regardless of race, is the same. Are *you* willing to let God prevail in your life?" Are you willing to change through christ?

Scott Herrod

The Plague of Prejudice Within Medicine

The Savior, Jesus Christ, was born into a world plagued with prejudice, similar to the challenges of prejudice we face in our day. When walking the coasts of Tyre and Sidon the Master Physician was approached by a “woman of Canaan,”—a gentile, marginalized by the Jews. “Lord, help me,” she plead. While His followers implored Him to “send her away,” Jesus took a different approach. “[Jesus] said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.” In this experience, Jesus transcended the social constructs of His day and answered this woman’s plea to heal her daughter. I believe that Jesus saw this woman for who she was—a daughter of God entitled to the same care that so many others had received from His hands. Reverend Martin Luther King also saw the world through the same lens. He once said, “Of all forms of discrimination and inequalities, injustice in health is the most shocking and inhuman.” Yet, half a century since the death of Dr. King racial minority groups still suffer the consequences of prejudice within health. As an aspiring physician and medical researcher, I believe the best way for me to perpetuate the legacy of Martin Luther King and follow President Nelson’s admonition to “promote respect for all of God’s children” is through dedicating my career to addressing the health inequities resulting from structural racism in our healthcare system and abroad.

Structural racism is the reality that racial discrimination is reinforced by societal structures,¹ which leads Black Americans and other racial minority groups to suffer far worse health outcomes compared to White Americans, even after accounting for education, wealth, and other important factors. This includes higher infant mortality rates,² more maternal deaths,³ and most recently, experiencing a disproportionately higher number of cases and deaths from COVID-19.⁴ As a future physician my mission will be to “root out [racism from our healthcare system].” I will not only provide care for underprivileged racial minority groups, but I will also design research studies to understand the barriers preventing these groups from receiving adequate healthcare. With the data collected through these studies, I will then be able to influence health policy which can lead to greater health equity within our country. To most effectively address these issues, it is essential that individuals from these racial groups are at the

forefront of designing and implementing solutions. However, these minority groups are underrepresented among physicians,⁵ leading to outsiders from other racial groups trying to solve problems they do not fully understand. To address this, I will advocate for greater representation from these racial minority groups and help facilitate their leadership when addressing these challenges.

Although these antiracist actions will mitigate prejudice within the United States, President Nelson's invitation was to "promote respect for *all* of God's children—" not just those within our own country. The plight of healthcare systems in countries across Africa also stems from racism in the form of the historical exploitation of African countries by their colonial masters. Worldwide, life expectancy⁶ and mortality rates⁷ are worst in Africa. While serving as a missionary in Ghana, I remember staring into the eyes of a sickly toddler and desperately wishing I could do more to help with her condition. I knew that her disease would shorten her life. Many Western global health initiatives unintentionally sow further seeds of prejudice by paternalistically implementing interventions—often deemed as "White Saviorism." This approach propagates the "master to slave" relationship instead of diminishing it. In my future career I will avoid sowing these seeds by conducting medical research projects in equal partnership with local healthcare providers. I will seek to understand their perspective and ensure they are involved in every aspect of decision-making. This will not only reduce health inequities resulting from colonialism, but also build local healthcare and research capacity thereby promoting independence from Western nations and progressing towards equality.

I will answer Reverend Martin Luther King's call to "rise above the narrow confines of [my] own individual concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity" by helping heal the wounds of prejudice within medicine. However, the principles I have discussed have applications in every life pursuit. Every individual can answer this call by performing an individualized evaluation to identify racism in its various forms within their own workplace, homes, social circles, and personal attitudes and discover ways to "root [them] out." Just like the Master Healer we can transcend the systemic racism of our day and together "promote respect for all of God's children."

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