“Dr. King’s Dream: Have WE changed the perception socially, culturally or psychologically?”

It is commonly thought that Dr. King’s statement was one of passive assimilation within America; few were able to see the militancy within the words he spoke on August 28, 1963. Sadly, it has been my experience that few have read the words he wrote from a Birmingham jail or for that matter his Nobel acceptance speech. All three passages utilize verbiage that demand and do not beg for rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution. It seems as if the collective American consciousness is fixated on a perceived need to remember children holding hands. Moreover, in the case of those minds that suffer from the psychological illness of racism, little black boys holding hands with little white girls; a statement which was never uttered by Dr. King. The real intent of his dream eludes those who prefer not to spend time in study and meditation over the messages this man gave his life to deliver.

The passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act can be directly correlated with the actions of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This single article of legislation committed the American people to changes in federal and state laws and most importantly, punitive compensation for treatment which violates advances during the Civil Rights Era, provides the framework for the many ways in which Dr. King’s dream has been augmented and yet still remains a living, breathing, vibrant specter in every facet of American public lives. No amount of legislation can affect private life but Dr. King was never concerned and never made any mention of how private individuals conducted their affairs within their homes. His dream was entirely relative to what was allowed by the government of this nation.

Equal access and available opportunity were the core issues of Dr. King’s dream and they have changed in response to the changes in American society. After decades of Jim Crow
policies in the south and a Midwest, Western and Eastern coasts, which were thoroughly 
grounded in industry, African Americans found themselves free to operate within a paradigm 
that was, essentially, taking its first steps into the technological age. The result is one we are 
laboring to be eased from this very day. Too many African Americans have been trained to 
occupy and continue to seek positions in fields of employment that are outdated and therefore an 
unrealistic goal. Our collective psychological perception must include the knowledge of a lack of 
preparedness for the age we are presently ensconced: the information age.

Socially, we have moved away from the tenets which were our sustenance throughout the 
Civil Rights Era and the Black Power Movement; an extended kinship system that was familial 
and respective of community standards, respective of elders, and self-policing. We have adopted 
a pattern, which contemporarily may seem to flounder, but it is my personal belief that African 
Americans will emerge with a stronger sense of self as an individual. To be specific I believe 
Black women are learning that they are as capable as any other individual of surpassing 
standards of basic needs and attaining status and wealth. I believe Black men are being taught 
through experience as well as education of their necessity in the lives of their family and the 
lives of their children. For too long the image of the silent and long-suffering breadwinner, a 
cultural icon which was brought into chaos by the reduction of American industrialization and 
manufacturing existed as an intangible yoke around the necks of Black men. The image is being 
re-cast and it is one which that remains strong and yet capable of demonstrating love and concern 
for his family. With each day this new image is manifested abundantly in middle-class homes 
that are shared by a nuclear family of African descent. African Americans are breaking 
psychological and social parameters, enforced by centuries of oppression, of what a Black man 
and a Black woman should be. The answer is: whatever they choose.
Our cultural institutions are responding to the needs of society through activism and expansion of services. The image of an itinerant Black preacher, which figured so prominently in Dr. King’s day (he is still known as a preacher even though he earned a doctorate in divinity) is being exchanged for ministers who include the need for therapeutic counseling, study of African heritage, as well as physical exercise in the cultural panorama of Black religious life. Additionally, in the conversation of culture, it is also remarkable that sports and entertainment figures are no longer heralded as deities in the African American community; they are men and women with feet set in sand and molded with the same clay as is every other human being. Currently there has been no exchange of one group of gods for another – but that in itself is a valuable change. I believe that African American children will begin to see themselves as capable of becoming members of medical, legal, economic professions in larger numbers.

In the same way that Dr. King and others marched through the streets of Selma educators march through institutions demanding to have the academic rights of Black children, and in so doing all children, recognized; a new generation of socially conscious young African Americans will show us the way. We are now without fear of being who we are in every aspect of our lives. From dreadlocks to saggy pants, we seem to have lost the need for external approval. This is, perhaps, the most important change. We have gained the ability to be who we are and this is a psychological, social, and cultural revolutionary departure from every generation since the first Africans were brought to the colonies. In this way the dream has been more than changed, it has splintered into 40 million realities.

By LaVonda Rochelle Staples