

## **Breaking the Silence**

### **APRIL 4 MLK READING PROJECT**

# **2021 Organizer's Guide**

Welcome to the Breaking the Silence April 4 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Reading Project. We invite you to participate in this timely national effort to connect Dr. King's message to peace and justice work today.

This Guide provides helpful tools to organize local in-person or online events to engage your community with the ideas in this speech. Thanks so much for your participation!

### **Why Breaking the Silence?**

April 4 is the date Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968 while he was in Memphis, Tennessee to support sanitation workers. Exactly one year before, on April 4, 1967, Dr. King gave one of his most consequential speeches titled, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence". This speech was the first time he publicly called for an end to the U.S. war in Vietnam and for unity and action to end the triple threats of militarism, racism, and extreme materialism.

By April 1967 over 1 million Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians and 16,000 U.S. military personnel had died in the Vietnam war. The countryside and cities in the south and the north had been devastated by combat, bombing, and use of toxic defoliants like Agent Orange. In the U.S. the anti-war movement had mobilized hundreds of thousands of people in local and national demonstrations plus tens of thousands who had challenged the draft. As Dr. King explained, many of those drafted and dying were young, African American men while the demand for justice at home was accelerating, bringing new levels of repression. The connections between the wars abroad and the wars at home were becoming increasingly clear. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was one of the first organizations to denounce the war and emphasize the hypocrisy of the U.S. government claiming to defend democracy abroad while denying democracy at home. Rev. Dr. King's address at Riverside Church built upon the work of activists and projected a powerful call to unite these struggles conceptually and strategically.

### **The Speech**

"Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" was delivered to an overflow crowd at the Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967 at the invitation of Clergy and Laity Concerned (CALC). Dr. King's challenge to engage in a radical revolution of values encountered ferocious opposition. Mainstream media castigated him for speaking out about foreign policy, consigning his expertise only to racial justice. Civil rights leaders criticized him

for diluting the single focus on racism. Rev. Dr. King replied that he was continuing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) commitment to "save the soul of America," by calling for an end to the devastation in Vietnam and the stagnation and decay of the war on poverty in the U.S. As a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize Award, he felt he had the responsibility to speak out for peace. For some, his "Breaking Silence" speech was the primary reason he was killed exactly one year later to the day. By confronting the deeply rooted racism, militarism, and materialism of the United States, Dr. King described the United States as the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.

*"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. ... We are confronted by the fierce urgency of Now." – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at Riverside Church*

### **Nationwide Webinar on April 4 at 7 pm Eastern time**

Many organizations have come together to promote national and local readings of Dr. King's "Breaking Silence" speech in communities across the country to study the lessons of this speech and to convene local coalitions working for justice. The list includes: SNCC Legacy Project, National Council of Elders, Vietnam Peace Commemoration Committee, The Highlander Research and Education Center, National Black Justice Coalition, Zinn Education Project, Voices of a People's History, Fellowship of Reconciliation, National Civil Rights Museum, and Cleveland Peace Action.

Please plan to join us online to watch our national webinar where well-known advocates will be joined by grassroots organizers who will read the speech. It promises to be an inspiring program. A moderated panel discussion will follow the readings offering perspectives about the relevance of Dr. King's speech to peace and justice work today.

Here is a list of the speakers who will read sections of Rev. Dr. King's speech on our national webinar.

- **Adepero Oduye**, (12 Years a Slave, When They See Us, Pariah, The Big Short)
- **Aislinn Pulley**, co-founder, Black Lives Matter Chicago
- **Alice Walker**, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer (Color Purple, Meridian)
- **Andrew Bacevich**, historian, retired Army Colonel, West Point graduate, Vietnam veteran, Gold Star father and American Book Award winner (Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country)
- **Arlo Guthrie**, Grammy-winning singer/songwriter (Alice's Restaurant, City of New Orleans)
- **Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson**, Executive Director, Highlander Research and Education Center

- **Bill McKibben**, climate action leader (350.org)
- **Bill T. Jones**, two-time Tony Award winning choreographer, director, Kennedy Center Honoree and National Medal of the Arts recipient
- **Dr. Corrine Sanchez**, Executive Director of Tewa Women United, New Mexico
- **Edward James Olmos**, Academy Award nominated actor/director (*The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, *Stand and Deliver*)
- **Georgia Hirsty**, Greenpeace activist who hung for 40 hours from St. John's Bridge in Portland, Oregon - to block a Shell Oil ship headed for Arctic oil drilling.
- **Guy Davis**, Grammy-nominated blues singer and carrying on the legacy of his parents Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis.
- **Dr. Ibram X. Kendi**, National Book Award winning and #1 New York Times bestselling author, Founding Director of the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research
- **Jane Fonda**, longtime activist and two-time Academy Award winning actress (*Coming Home*, *Klute*, *They Shoot Horses Don't They?*)
- **Jody Williams**, winner of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for her work banning and clearing land mines internationally,
- **Kathy Wan Povi Sanchez**, Indigenous black ware potter, activist and Elder from the Tewa Pueblo of San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico
- **Ambassador Nguyen Phuong Nga**, former Vietnamese Ambassador to the United Nations and Deputy Foreign Minister and President, Vietnam Union of Friendship Organization
- **Rosanne Cash**, four-time Grammy winning singer/songwriter
- **Saru Jayaraman**, Director of the Food Labor Research Center at University of California, Berkeley and President/Co-Founder of One Fair Wage (OFW)
- **Tantoo Cardinal**, actress (*Dances with Wolves*, *Legends of the Fall*, *Where the Rivers Flow North*)
- **Ton Nu Thi Ninh**, diplomat, former Vietnamese Ambassador to the European Union and two-time recipient, French Legion of Honor
- **Victoria Kirby York**, Deputy Executive Director, National Black Justice Coalition
- **Viet Thanh Nguyen**, Pulitzer Prize winner (*The Sympathizer*, *The Committed*), Aerol Arnold Chair of English, USC
- **Zoharah Simmons**, SNCC Project Director in Laurel, Mississippi during 1964 Freedom Summer & beyond, Board Member, SNCC Legacy Project

To register for the national webinar and to find more information please go to: [kingandbreakingsilence.org](http://kingandbreakingsilence.org). **Please spread the word** about the webinar and encourage your friends and colleagues to register.

### **Local “Breaking Silence” readings in your community**

In addition to viewing the national webinar reading and discussion, we hope you will also consider convening a reading and/or discussion in your community. Public readings can take place where it is safe to gather, given Covid-19 safety precautions and guidelines. Readings

can also be done in your home, on Zoom or other virtual platforms to which you can invite family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. Please customize your event to your community's culture and traditions by reading all, or parts of, the speech that are the most meaningful to you, combined with dialogue or cultural aspects your local group chooses.

### **Why Convene a Local Gathering?**

Rev. Dr. King's "Breaking Silence" prophetic speech is an invocation to examine the root causes of inequality and violence in U.S. society. His profound statements invite us to examine what we hold sacred, what deeply resonates with us, and evokes our aspirations. To fully absorb the meaning, learnings and context requires reflection, and collective dialogue which are more likely to create coordinated and more powerful actions.

Convening a local gathering gives us the opportunity to again hear Dr. King's words through the intergenerational voices of local activists and organizers, to connect people locally and continue to build coalitions which can work on the intersectional issues of racism, materialism, and militarism, to achieve needed transformations.

### **Ideas for convenings**

- **Religious gatherings:** Places of worship are natural environments for readings. Some religious groups may be able to meet in person, other services may be online. Because April 4, 2021, is a religious holiday, we are suggesting that local readings take place during April.
- **Schools, classes, universities, technical institutions:** Teachers can use the speech as a basis for classroom presentations and discussions. Students can invite other students to join them.
- **Labor unions:** Workers gathered together or at a union meeting can read sections of the speech.
- **Civil rights, peace organizations and advocacy groups:** Local advocacy groups might make the reading, or excerpts, part of local meetings or actions.
- **Libraries:** Convene a reading at your local library if it is open to the public and can hold in-person events.
- **Locations where racial violence has occurred:** Horrendously, numerous places around the country are sites where police and other racist violence have taken lives and caused harm. Holding readings at those memorial places would be fitting.
- **Racist memorials, statues, buildings and streets with racist names:** Remembering that Dr. King's warnings about racism, militarism, and an unjust and inequitable economy may make events at military bases, Confederate monuments, buildings or streets named after racists appropriate places for readings that may contribute to campaigns to remove them or change their names.

- **Locations of hope** such as the Highlander Center in Tennessee, The Beloved Community Center in Greensboro, N.C., the Boggs School in Detroit, a thriving Black owned urban or Southern farm, houses of worship or similar could be considered.
- **Places of despair and degradation** might be included, such as, Mankato, Minnesota where 38 Dakota Sioux were publicly executed by hanging on Dec 26, 1862, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas School in Parkland, Florida, Tewa Pueblo land adjacent to the Los Alamos Nuclear Lab, military bases named after Confederate generals, the Pentagon itself and other similar sites.
- **Jails, prisons, detention centers:** Sharing the speech with people who are incarcerated and their families might be done to highlight a prison experiencing high Covid19 death and infection rates or other issues. Perhaps prison chaplains would participate and devote time for a reading.
- **In your home or outside in your neighborhood:** Invite people to your home if it is safe to convene or arrange for friends and family to gather outside.
- **Online:** Use one of the many digital platforms to inform your network of friends, family and activists to share parts of the speech, or listen to the audio recording of the speech on the website.
- **Be creative, use your imagination**

**To help you organize a local event here are a few practical steps to consider.**

- Create a Google sheets document (or other list) of the primary organizations you want to invite to co-create and co-sponsor the event. Core organizers can create and update the list to include organization name, key contact, priority of organization being solicited, constituency represented, contact information, who will reach out, status of the invitation, etc.
- Create an invitation to be used by organizers when talking with organizations that want to participate and refer to the national website [link](#).
- Work the list with the goal of holding a local planning meeting where core partner individuals and organizations co-create the event together. Have this be an open process, not a prescriptive one, where diverse voices collaboratively shape the event.
- Create an event plan document with roles and responsibilities including presenters, tech roles. We encourage a tech-savvy person to handle tech issues that may arise, including preventing being Zoom-bombed by those seeking to undermine the event.
- Keep reaching out
- Dry run the event
- Be gentle with yourself. Hiccups will happen. It will work.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Please go to [kingandbreakingsilence.org](http://kingandbreakingsilence.org) for:

- Sample media release
- Reply form to keep in touch and inform you of other events
- Full text of the speech in English and Spanish.
- The speech divided into 16 sections
- Highest quality audio version of the speech [here](#).
- Poster to promote your event
- Registration and information about the April 4, 7 pm ET webinar

Please go to these external resources for:

- **Michelle Alexander** gave a phenomenal talk at the Riverside Church 50th anniversary program [here](#).
- A video version of actor Michael Ealy reading the speech (partial) [here](#)
- Tavis Smiley's perceptive documentary about the sermon and its consequences is available [here](#).
- **"The MLK Speech We Need Today Is Not the One We Remember Most"** an essay by Viet Thanh Nguyen in [Time Magazine](#) on the relevance of the Riverside Church sermon to the present. "King's prophecy connects the war in Vietnam with our forever wars today, spread across multiple countries and continents, waged without end from global military bases numbering around 800.
- **"Exceptional Victims"** is an essay by Christian Appy in the [Boston Review](#) linked to King's speech. "The resistance to the Vietnam War was the most diverse and dynamic antiwar movement in U.S. history. We have all but forgotten it today."
- **Racism, Yes, But What About Militarism and Materialism? Martin Luther King's Giant Triplets.** by Andrew Bacevich, Published on June 23, 2020 by TomDispatch. Bacevich is a Professor of History and International Relations at Boston University, and President of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft [here](#)
- Five simple tips to prevent Zoom-bombing [here](#)

Please send information about your local event and any questions you have to:  
[info@kingandbreakingsilence.org](mailto:info@kingandbreakingsilence.org)