Understanding by Collaborating: A Reflection on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"We must learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools." These words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. set a goal that American society has been striving for since long before the words were spoken. This idea was enacted into a mindset by Dr. King's followers and spread throughout our crippled nation. In the face of violent oppression, those who stood up for freedom did not yield. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, led by Dr. King, is a paradigm for this. For 381 days, African-Americans protested segregation of the public transit system—the exact opposite of "learning to live together"—and overcame violence, injustice, and ridicule. They only stopped when they got what they wanted and what was right: an equal seat on the bus. Slowly, but surely, progress was made toward the greater understanding of races and cultures. This progress presented the idea that each individual in the world is of equal value and deserves recognition as such.

However, this idea is rarely honored. We live in a so-called "post-racial society," yet minorities are being discriminated against by our justice system. Members of our community are living paycheck to paycheck, or worse. There is still great disparity in the achievement gap. It seems as though our social progress is moving half as fast as time is. At the base of this are bias, prejudice, and misunderstanding. This all comes back to Dr. King's words. Physically, people of all races, cultures, creeds, genders, ages, sexualities, and backgrounds live together as neighbors. Yet, we prejudge each other, base our opinions of each other off of biases, and don't want to listen when presented the opportunity. In the words of Dr. King, "People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other." We are all human,

but we are not all humane. If we were to participate in positive, constructive discourse, we would achieve the first step of understanding each other. We will see that, fundamentally, we are all humans made of the same things, and that we are different because of our experiences. Sharing our experiences will create the foothold for the understanding that will spark progress.

As Senator Robert F. Kennedy said in his speech announcing the assassination of Dr. King, "We can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love." The future is indeterminate, but the present is unacceptable. We, as a community, as a country, and as a society must find a way to collaborate to value each other and solve the plagues of our nation. We must find a way to redefine what it means to be "free at last."