



*Classroom Conversations* brings together members of a school community to sharpen individual insight and critical thinking through community interaction and meaningful dialogue. Conversations are focused around a shared text and a set of thought-provoking questions, encouraging students and teachers to reflect on the issues raised by the reading and discuss how they impact our lives and communities.

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## **Resources for MLK Day**

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**'The Drum Major Instinct' (excerpt)**

**A Speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta  
February 4, 1968**

...If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's your new definition of greatness. And this morning, the thing that I like about it . . . by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love. And you can be that servant...

...Every now and then I guess we all think realistically about that day when we will be victimized with what is life's final common denominator—that something we call death. We all think about it. And every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral.

And I don't think of it in a morbid sense. Every now and then I ask myself, "What is it that I would want said?" And I leave the word to you this morning.

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize; that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards; that's not important. Tell him not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say, on that day, that I did try, in my life, to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.

And that's all I want to say . . . if I can help somebody as I pass along, if I can cheer somebody with a word or song, if I can show somebody he's traveling wrong, then my living will not be in vain...

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## Discussion Questions for

**'The Drum Major Instinct' (excerpt)  
A Speech by Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta  
February 4, 1968**

- Is Dr. King being sincere, in your view, when he repeatedly says that it is 'wonderful' to want recognition? What is wonderful about the desire for recognition?
- What does King mean by 'service'?
- Why does King stress the things you don't have to be or to have in order to serve?
- What, according to Dr. King, do you have to be or to have in order to serve? Do you agree that these are the things one needs in order to serve?
- Why, when King talks about the eulogy he envisions for himself, does he say he 'tried to give his life serving' rather than simply 'gave his life serving'? Why does he continually insert this word, 'tried', throughout the passage selected here?
- What does it mean 'to love and serve humanity'? How does one do this?
- What, according to Dr. King, are 'the shallow things that will not matter'? Do you agree that these things are shallow?
- What, in King's view, gives service its depth and significance?
- Why does there seem to be such a strong link, for King, between death and service?
- To what extent do you find King's exercise—thinking about what will be said at one's death—productive?
- Is it important for your service that it be recognized? If so, who should recognize its importance, and why?
- What do you make of King's "new definition of greatness"?
- Dr. King says near the end of this passage that he just wants "to leave a committed life behind." To what would you most like your life to be committed, and what form might this commitment take?
- What impact do you hope to make through your service? What would you like your community legacy to be?

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## Tips for Hosting a Classroom Conversation

Classroom Conversations encourage thoughtful, engaged dialogue using a short reading to foster discussion. The goal is a comfortable, lively conversation—we hope the following suggestions will help you create an enlightening environment for you and your students.

Please refer to the [Common Questions](#) page on our website for additional information.

### **Your classroom conversation should promote critical thinking among your students:**

- Discussions are based on shared inquiry among students. Good conversations involve give-and-take interactions.
- Ask questions, listen, mediate the discussion, and invite response.
- Students should think and respond conversationally, rather than participate in question-answer dialogue.
- Teachers should not pass judgment on students' responses; conversation should entertain multiple ideas, opinions, and thoughts. There is no right or wrong answer.

### **Getting started:**

- Establish some basic guidelines with the class: Raise hands to share, be respectful, and focus your comments on the reading.
- Prepare by reading the text out loud together, encourage note taking while reading to capture ideas, or quick-writes to help students focus.
- As a warm-up, break students into partners or small groups and have them discuss their ideas before the entire classroom assembles.

### **Guiding the conversation:**

- Remember that the object of classroom conversation facilitation is not to elicit correct answers or direct interpretation, but to moderate a discussion through reflective questioning and listening.
  - Ask questions that invite students to express ideas; ask for clarification or restatement.
- Students should do most of the talking. Listen carefully, move the conversation forward and if necessary, redirect with a new question or a new approach.
  - Help students focus and narrow in on concerns; link other ideas from the discussion to help students develop their own interpretation.
- Continue to use the provided discussion questions to explore the reading in greater depth. You do not have to address the questions in order but rather as you feel is appropriate for your students and the nature of your discussion.
- If the conversation gets off topic, you can gently ease the group back by asking guiding questions that are thematic and open-ended. Follow up with leading questions that focus on an aspect of the discussion.

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## **Tips for Hosting a Classroom Conversation**

### **To foster full classroom participation:**

- Create a supportive classroom atmosphere in which students feel comfortable speaking up and are encouraged to contribute.
- As facilitators, you need to be careful listeners and observers so you can determine when and what kind of support students require to discuss and think about the text.
- The decisions you make about your classroom conversation should reflect your style and students' needs.

### **Closing the conversation:**

- Students should understand that the thinking and discussion can be continued beyond the classroom conversation.
  - Summarize key ideas, note changes in perspectives, and point to concerns not yet adequately expressed to leave room for further exploration.
- Provide further resources for follow-up, ask personal questions for students to think about at home, and offer ideas for service projects that can be carried out.
- Follow up with the New York Council for the Humanities to report on aspects of your conversation: student thoughts and reactions, what went well, suggestions for improvement, comments (email thoughts to Tracy at [tvarites@nyhumanities.org](mailto:tvarites@nyhumanities.org)).