

After reading the speeches “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and “Hope, Despair, and Memory,” write an essay in which you examine both authors’ beliefs about the importance of remembering the past. Why is it important to remember painful aspects of the past rather than forget them? Support your discussion with evidence from both articles.

Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

1 We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.

2 Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was “well timed” according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “wait.” It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This “wait” has almost always meant “never”. It has been tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration.

3 We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our God-given and constitutional rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.

4 I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say “wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year old daughter why she cannot go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people.

5 When you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; when your first names becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodyness”-then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

6 There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

Elie Wiesel "Hope, Despair, and Memory"

7 Just as man cannot live without dreams, he cannot live without hope. If dreams reflect the past, hope summons the future. Does this mean that our future can be built on a rejection of the past? Surely such a choice is not necessary. The two are not incompatible. The opposite of the past is not the future but the absence of past. The loss of one is equivalent to the sacrifice of the other. A recollection. The time: After the war. The place: Paris. A young man struggles to readjust to life. His mother, his father, his small sister are gone. He is alone. On the verge of despair. And yet he does not give up. On the contrary, he strives to find a place among the living. He acquires a new language. He makes a few friends who, like himself, believe that the memory of evil will serve as a shield against evil; that the memory of death will serve as a shield against death.

8 This he must believe in order to go on. For he has just returned from a universe where God, betrayed by His creatures, covered His face in order not to see. Mankind, jewel of his creation, had succeeded in building an inverted Tower of Babel, reaching not toward heaven but toward an anti-heaven, there to create a parallel society, a new "creation" with its own princes and gods, laws and principles, jailers and prisoners. A world where the past no longer counted-no longer meant anything.

9 Stripped of possessions, all human ties severed, the prisoners found themselves in a social and cultural void. "Forget", they were told. "Forget where you came from; forget who you were. Only the present matters". But the present was only a blink of the Lord's eye. The Almighty himself was a slaughterer: it was He who decided who would live and who would die, who would be tortured, and who would be rewarded. Night after night, seemingly endless processions vanished into the flames, lighting up the sky. Fear dominated the universe. Indeed this was another universe; the very laws of nature had been transformed.

10 The next question had to be, why go on? If memory continually brought us back to this, why build a home? Why bring children into a world in which God and man betrayed their trust in one another?

11 Of course we could try to forget the past. Why not? Is it not natural for a human being to repress what causes him pain, what causes him shame? Like the body, memory protects its wounds. When day breaks after a sleepless night, one's ghosts must withdraw; the dead are ordered back to their graves. But for the first time in history, we could not bury our dead. We bear their graves within ourselves.

12 For us, forgetting was never an option. Remembering is a noble and necessary act.
How is it going