

We got FDR's memorial fixed. We can do the same for MLK's.

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Opinions

By Mary E. Dolan-Hogrefe October 7, 2011

Upon learning of the request from the disability community to add a statue of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a wheelchair to the nearly complete FDR Memorial in Washington, the landscape architect Lawrence Halprin stood his ground: He didn't want anyone to mess with his vision for the memorial. Such hubris is not uncommon among artists. Also, not uncommon is for artists to miss - for reasons personal, generational, cultural, and more - the full scope of their subject's influence and potential for lasting inspiration. Such was the case for Halprin.

A similar situation appears to have arisen with executive architect Ed Jackson Jr.'s resistance to addressing the clumsy abridgement of the "drum major" quotation on the new Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial. The quote that is currently inscribed for perpetuity reads: "I was a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness." But the full quotation was: "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." King delivered those words in 1968 at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church in a powerful sermon touching on what could be said of him in his own eulogy. He was seeking to play down his accomplishments. Big difference.

Originally, the FDR memorial glossed over the former president's disability. Some of the Braille was indecipherable, and the single reference to his use of a wheelchair could easily be missed by visitors. Now, there is a statue of FDR in a wheelchair, at eye level, away from the wall to allow for wheelchair access from all sides and placed at the front of the memorial. Big difference.

The initial memorial design overlooked the centrality of the disability experience to Roosevelt's character and that the time was right in America for FDR to be shown as he truly was a leader who was both great and who had a disability. In fact, many believe that disability was the source of the compassion and perseverance he displayed during the struggles of the Great Depression and World War II.

In its original design, the FDR memorial was undeniably glorious, but without a prominent representation of Roosevelt's disability, future generations would have been robbed of the chance to understand a key component of his life, to be inspired and to see themselves in his struggles. So, it is with the king memorial. Without the proper words in their proper context, future

generations will be robbed of the chance to be inspired by the true Martin Luther King Jr. and to see themselves reflected in his words.

The statue of Roosevelt in his wheelchair was dedicated in 2001, almost four years after the memorial was opened. Notably, by then Halprin had come to embrace the addition.

Memorials are a messy business, and many hands are involved in their making. But the vision of the lead designer is indelibly stamped upon the work. You will be stuck with what you get, unless you make a big stink. The creators of the MLK memorial should look for a positive way to resolve the controversy. A good place to start would be thinking beyond the Oct. 16 dedication to see how addressing this issue presents a further opportunity to raise awareness of King's life and message. MLK – like FDR - is too important in our history for future generations to not get it right. It's time to mess with the MLK memorial.

The writer was vice president and chief of staff of the National Organization on Disability when it led the effort to add a statue of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his wheelchair to the FDR Memorial on The Mall.