An idea without action is like a bow without an arrow

I have always found recourse by learning from my failures

If you have not been living under a rock over the past year, you would know that times are tough. People all around the US, from LA, New York and small towns everywhere are up in arms. This country is currently the most polarized it has been since the civil war. The gap between the haves and have-nots is approaching record highs. Income disparities between minorities and whites are also growing. Wages and unemployment are stagnant while food, energy, medical and tuition costs continue to skyrocket. And when the country looks to Washington for hope they see nothing but bickering, blaming and indecisiveness. It doesn’t take much to understand that times are tough and the future looks bleak.

Decades ago during Doctor King’s time, the situation was similar. Inequality and injustice were rampant while courage and activism was scarce. The triple evils of Poverty, Racism and Militarism which Dr. King set out to remedy are the same issues we face today. The obstacles to a better life were tremendous, the momentum and work required to achieve justice was colossal. This change did not come by waiting and passively enduring injustice, nor did it come through violence and fighting. Many people today believe that time will fix our problems, that the solutions are out of our hands. When most people are told about the issues which face us today, the most common reply is “well what can you do?” When Martin Luther King Jr. was told that he should take a step back and let time work against his opposition by his own supporters he replied,

“Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts of men, willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.”

Perhaps the most beautiful aspect of Dr. King’s philosophy was that we should love our enemies, forgive them and stand up for what is right. He was able to look past all of the death threats, arrests and hatred that spited him. He was able to remain true to his beliefs, even in the darkest moments of his life and this devotion spread like wild fire to everyone around him. In my mind, this is what makes someone powerful. True power comes from being able to execute on what you believe in and not letting that become soiled by hatred and violence. A person who has true power does not intimidate others or make them feel small. The reality is to the contrary; a person with true power empowers those around him.

But what can we do? I know that I am just a student and like most of my peers, I don’t have a job, I don’t have authority and I don’t have a following. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t have a voice and know right from wrong.
During the Fall of my sophomore year before a Fraternity party, I had received a silver reflective wristband. I looked at the risk manager at the time that handed by the band and asked him if could have gotten gayer wristbands. For years this was simply the way people around me and I referred to things we thought were stupid. One of the older brothers walking by overheard my comment, pulled me aside and told me that there were people in the house who would not appreciate that comment and I need to watch what I say. The entire exchange took less than 30 seconds, there was no animosity or violence involved. He did not berate me or question my character, he simply pointed out that what I had said was wrong. Not only had the way I use the word gay completely been changed in this moment but I also learned the power of speaking out against injustice.

Three years later I found myself in the position of having to intervene. I heard people casually abusing the word and felt an impulse to say something. Instead of mustering up the courage to say something I tried to vindicate myself. “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” I’m not perfect and don’t have a place correcting others. I am also an adamant believer in free speech think that people should be able to speak as they wish, especially with what I felt to be benign comments.

Well, a few weeks later one of these people went on to call someone another fraternity a “faggot.” This incident escalated into a much larger issue and is now under investigation. I witnessed something which I knew to be morally wrong and failed to act like many who have come before me.

It wasn’t until after reflecting on this and watching footage of Dr. King on Meet the Press that I found the answer. Democracy can’t work if people don’t participate. When Dr. King said the Jim Crows laws were unjust and spoke out about the police brutality and murders in Alabama he was not forcing anyone to do anything. All he did was stand up for what he believed deep down inside to be just. It’s a radical notion that changing the people around you, changing the world can be so simple but as my failures have taught me, simple doesn’t mean easy. I’ll end with a quote from Dr. King, “An idea without action is like a bow without an arrow.”