

## Martin Luther King a drum major? If you say so.

The [memorial to Martin Luther King Jr.](#) has been a little controversial – but not for the right reason. Someone, somewhere along the line, made a decision that makes King look like something he was not: an arrogant jerk.

*“I was a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness.”*

That’s what it says on the right side of King’s enormous monument. At first it struck me as odd that this man, whose many other quotes on the same monument are beautifully worded and biblically informed, would refer to himself as a drum major. To me, silly hats and King just did not compute.

Then I saw the larger problem. This quote is awfully self-aggrandizing for a man who so often symbolized the strength in humility. It’s akin to memorializing Mahatma Gandhi with the quote, “Don’t you know who I *am*?” Even if the Mahatma said that once, it’s not as though that is what we remember him for.

When I looked up the King quote, I found that the sin was actually worse than simply shoe-horning in an uncharacteristically immodest statement. The quote carved into the memorial on the Mall is not what Martin Luther King Jr. said. This is the equivalent of a Hollywood publicist pulling four words out of context from a newspaper review to make a bad film seem good. Except in this case, it’s the reverse: It takes the good out of context and makes it bad.

King’s full quote:

*“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.”*

This comes at the end of a long and powerful sermon. The speech, called “[The Drum Major Instinct](#),” is about the desire in the human spirit to be great without doing any great, difficult things. To be at the front of the pack, drawing all the attention. This is folly, King says. And then, right at the start of the words at issue, he says, “if.” *If* you want to make me a drum major, then say I was a drum major for justice.

An “if” clause is an extraordinarily bad thing to leave out of a quote. *If* I had to be a type of cheese, being Swiss is best.

What makes this tragic is that King had the ability to say precisely what he meant, with enormous impact. In the speech, he is creating a bit of a straw man: *If* you see him as an attention-craver, a puffed-up drum major – if you call him out on this conceit, a weakness most people are prone to – then at least he would hope that you saw him doing it for the most noble causes.

Big difference, no?

As it happens, according to the memorial’s Web site, the [Council of Historians](#) that chose the quotes selected a more representative chunk of the whole quote, with the “say that’s” intact. This version would have made it clear that King was not declaring himself a drum major. But at some point in the process, some unknown editor – in life, as in art, the villain is so often an editor – made a dreadful cut.

I say, let’s undo the mistake. Let’s get the chisels back out.

Let’s remember the words he chose and not let this be one more way we’ve failed King.

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