

Quote me not



From the MLK monument, Washington

As we celebrated Martin Luther King's birthday this year, I came across and re-read his "[Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#)". It's a powerful and eloquent argument for his work, and it's often quoted.

I love great quotes and I used to share them, a new one daily, in the signature line of my emails. But from reading King's long letter and from work I've been doing to better understand writing and communicating, I'm now much less sure about the value and power of 8 or 12 or 20 word quotes in their ability to truly convey meaning and change minds. I also have in mind the controversy of the truncated quote carved into the new MLK monument in DC: "I was a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness."

The monument designers shortened away King's true meaning, giving it, in fact, a different meaning, one not true to King's ideas. Originally he had written: "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." The truncated quote is off the mark, and surely not true to Dr. King's eloquence.

What happens with a short quote is that the author's argument is trimmed away, leaving a better than average risk that the meaning a casual quote reader brings to it will be wrong. Not enough is there to supply the logic, argument, and rationale for what the author wanted to convey.

In our soundbite world, over-brief clips and quotes seem inevitable, but you see what happens to them: the quoter and the reader or hearer supply alternate meaning—there's room for that. The originator has lost control, and the meaning is at risk. And though I am a Twitter user, I also see the limitations of communicating in those short phrases and sentences. We have to be ready to make our meaning known, and to let others explain themselves to us too, beyond

the fragments we might draw from them for use on monuments, in Tweets, in newspapers, and in PowerPoint shows. Give depth of argument a chance, let the details back in. And if you quote me on this, make it a long quote!

Image: Glyn Lowe Productions, via Flickr, Creative Commons attribution license