

Since tomorrow is Martin Luther King day, I was curious about whether Dr. King had ever said anything about the environment. When I did a google search, this quotation popped up over and over again:

“Never, never be afraid to do what’s right, especially if the well-being of a person or animal is at stake. Society’s punishments are small compared to the wounds we inflict on our soul when we look the other way.”

But this seems to be a textbook case of how the Internet can spread misinformation. The quote got started somewhere, and then as it was repeated, it gained credibility since so many people had endorsed it.

There are a number of reasons to reject the authenticity of this quotation:

First, no source is ever given for the quote. It doesn’t appear in the [King digital archives](#). A search for the word “animal” produces only a couple of documents *contrasting* humans and animals. A search for “wounds we inflict” produces no documents at all.

Second, no context is ever given for the quote — neither the occasion when it was said nor any of the surrounding language. It is hard to imagine an occasion when animal welfare would have been relevant to the specific topic of a speech by King.

Third, the quote lacks the power and vividness characteristic of King. The phrase “well-being of a person or animal” is tepid and abstract. The “especially” clause is simply tacked on to the main body of the sentence, and the entire quote lacks a strong cadence. In short, the first sentence sounds like it was written by an academic, not by a great orator.

I’m a bit disappointed that the quote was bogus, since I was hoping for evidence that King was an environmentalist. So far as I can tell, however, environmental issues just weren’t on his radar screen at all. Maybe that would have changed if he had lived a few more years.