"Zeitgeist," a word that means "the spirit or time of an age," is made of up two German words: Zeit, which means "time," and Geist, which refers to "ghost" or "spirit." The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word to mean "the spirit or genius which marks the thought or feeling of a period or age." We often do not know when a zeitgeist moment is occurring until the period of time has ended; it is a perfect moment in time when the right people and the right movements, change the social and political landscape — often resulting in a change in policy, social, moral and cultural norms.

To further understand the transcendence of zeitgeist, we return to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s August 1957 sermon, "Conquering Self-Centeredness," at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. King, preaching extensively on what was called the "Problems of Personality Integration," mentioned the term in his effort to separate himself from the glory of the moment and the temptation to think that where God has called us to, in any given time, is because of our own doing. King tells a personal story about his growing popularity around the nation, making it both impossible to go anywhere undetected and the growing temptation to think of oneself greater than he or she should.

"One of the problems that I have to face and even fight every day is this problem of self-centeredness, this tendency that can so easily come to my life now that I'm something special, that I'm something important." King goes on to say, "And one of the prayers that I pray to God every day is: 'O God, help me to see myself in my true perspective. Help me, O God, to see that I'm just a symbol of a movement. Help me to see that I'm the victim of what the Germans call a Zeitgeist and that something was getting ready to happen in history; history was ready for it. And that a boycott would have taken place in Montgomery, Alabama, if I had never come to Alabama. Help me to realize that I'm where I am because of the forces of history and because of the fifty thousand Negroes of Alabama who will never get their names in the papers and in the headline. O God, help me to see that where I stand today, I stand because others helped me to stand there and because the forces of history projected me there. And this moment would have come in history even if M. L. King had never been born.'"
King understood that the impact of his life was not because of his own doing, but because he was living in the spirit of a time where the call for justice was ripe and a part of the spirit of the time. King understood that whether it was him or someone else, the boycott in Montgomery would have happened – one way or the other – because the spirit of the time would have deemed it so.

Our understanding of King's life and legacy and zeitgeist is essential to understanding how we give attention to the work we do for justice today. Our ability to lean into the liberative work of Jesus today is the result of the zeitgeist moments of yesterday. And our attention to these present moments will leave a legacy that, in hindsight, will be the social and cultural movements that impact years to come.

**For consideration:**

What would you call the "spirit of the age" for 2018? For example, consider the social and political movements around race, gender and class.

Where do you see yourself situated in this zeitgeist moment of today? Are you in the center, actively changing the world around you? Are you on the margins, taking a passive role? Or are you somewhere in the middle?

For more free resources on The Rev. Dr. King’s influence, legacy and theology, please visit [www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/king](http://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/king).