



MLK DAY SPEECH

Annual Theme - Where Do We Go From Here?
Chaos or Community?
January 19, 2015

Welcome brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors, clergy and elected officials.

At the very birth of our nation, we chose these words to boldly declare our independence:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

As Americans, these words are our promise to each other. It is our civic covenant, the thing meant to bind us together as one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

But something has gone terribly wrong. In the United States, instead of being indivisible, we are divided. Divided by race. Divided by class. Divided by income.

Indeed, it has been a generation since a diverse group of women and men of iron will and clear minds came together to destroy Jim Crow, but even now the battle goes on.

Old wounds still fester, inequality grows, and now after riots in Ferguson and demonstrations roiling the rest of the nation, we ask the same question Dr. King posed many years ago, “where do we go from here? Chaos or Community?”

Dr. King gave us the answer – community. A house divided against itself cannot stand, but to heal our divisions we must be able to hear each other, see each other, understand each other. We must choose community.

If we make that choice, once we start to listen rather than speak, see rather than look away we will realize a simple truth.

We are the same. We all want the same thing – peace, prosperity and economic opportunity.

Everyone wants to be treated fairly. No one wants to be a victim of crime or collateral damage, whether the bullet comes from a drug dealer’s gun, a police officer’s pistol, or someone else shooting in fear. Until all lives matter, we won’t make progress.

But today instead of a celebration of ALL life, we hear a constant drumbeat of death. So much wasted potential, so much hurt.

And the pain stretches from Trayvon Martin's family in Florida to the Browns in Ferguson and Garners in New York. But it doesn't stop there.

This year past, 150 mostly African American men murdered in New Orleans, nearly 15,000 murdered across the country. Victims of this terrible culture of violence on the streets of America.

The community cries out for justice, and on any given night in every corner of our great nation, you find dedicated police officers trying to find the killers, trying to keep us safe.

And just as the community demands an end to the terrible practice of racial profiling which targets people based on the color of their skin, not by actions, the community should likewise judge individual police officers by their actions not their profession. The overwhelming number of police officers in this nation show up every day and do the right thing, the right way for the right reasons.

However, it is equally unwise to simply dismiss legitimate concerns raised about some in law enforcement, because the problems are real, and must be dealt with honestly and fairly.

We can talk about where we were at 50 years ago and how far we have come, but we still must be able to acknowledge that we have a long way to go.

We need to bridge a very real divide between the community and the police, use procedural justice and make sure everyone is treated fairly and with respect – both citizens and police.

After all, police officers are people too. They are our brothers and sisters. And the streets are a dangerous place for those who protect and serve.

Let us remember New York City police officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos, ambushed, shot and killed in cold blood.

And let us remember New Orleans Police Officer Rodney Thomas. He was my friend and the 110th member of the NOPD to be killed in the line of duty. Trying to help and protect us.

The loss and pain is searing. And in the eyes of Mrs. Rosalyn Thomas I have seen the overwhelming grief of a wife who will never see her beloved again. It is the same look, the same grief as Patrina Peters and so many other mothers who lost their children to the streets, the same sorrow I saw in the eyes of Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin's mother. Each is left with an empty spot at their family table, gone but not forgotten.

We all can understand this pain; it is our shared humanity, the tie that binds us together. And from here we can understand the simple truth, our rallying cry – ALL LIVES MATTER.

From the riots in Ferguson, to the shootings of police officers, and the daily death and destruction on our streets... make no mistake – it is all part of the same whole – poisonous fruit harvested from the same tree.

Until we choose community over chaos. Until we all weep and all march for every life lost. Until we break down the barriers between the police and the community. Until we speak up for each other's rights and strive to fulfil the great promise of America, we will not know peace.

Some are cynical and believe that we cannot change.

In New Orleans, we are proving them wrong – we are moving forward, making great progress, working together, united as one.

With our comprehensive murder reduction strategy NOLA FOR LIFE we focus on prevention and stopping the shooting. Now, murder is at a historic 43 year low.

With the Welcome Table for racial reconciliation, we seek to build bridges and heal old wounds. Now, we are chipping away at the walls that have divided us for too long.

And with our new economic opportunity strategy we say that no one is going to be left behind and that anyone willing to work hard should be able to find a job; their pathway to prosperity.

In both word and deed we in New Orleans follow the wisdom imparted to us by Dr. King. We have made our choice.

To have a future, we choose community. We choose each other. This is what it looks like when people move forward together

And just like 50 years ago, when 20-somethings like Dr. King and John Lewis led the struggle, conscientious young leaders of today like Dee-1 and BMike are picking up the mantle of leadership from their elders. They show us the enduring, galvanizing power of art and music, and how in a brave new world of instant communication we can address some of our age old problems.

This is their and all our task –keep moving forward, together.

After all, the struggle for justice did not begin or die with Dr. King; he was a fellow traveler and witness on history's road to freedom and a better world. Now it has fallen to us, to each and every one of us to carry on.

Indeed, each generation comes to this point.

Each generation makes a choice.

Each generation for a moment grips that arc of history and bends it, one way or another, forward or back.

We are not only the heirs of King's legacy; we are its stewards. It is in our care. We are responsible, lest Dr. King's dream becomes a dream forever deferred and therefore denied.

We can get there, but only if we go from here choosing each other/choosing community/marching together as one.