

Some Reflections on the Life and Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

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I appreciate the introduction and I feel very privileged to be giving a few remarks as part of the UD breakfast celebrating the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

When representatives of the organizing committee of this breakfast asked me to make these remarks, I asked them if they had not made some mistake.

At a breakfast like this you want someone who has civil rights experience and who has experience of giving a rhythmic and stirring talk that can rekindle the fervor for civil rights in the audience. I am an older white dude who is highly challenged in the area of rhythm — when our wonderful singers were singing, I cannot even clap in rhythm. I am certainly not a stirring preacher — on my good days I am a teacher who can help student frame good questions for inquiry and reflection.

In my work in the greater Dayton community I am not known for inspiring addresses; I am the person who doggedly brings people together in constructive conversations to talk about issues of poverty and justice. I am the uncomfortable “thorn in the side” of our local community who consistently asks, “How are we going to align our resources and programs to serve disadvantaged neighborhoods so that families can thrive and children succeed?”

But the organizing committee persisted that I give the talk. After praying over their request for some time, I said yes! In prayer the Good Lord, in a faint whisper, said to me, “If you are serious about your commitment to bring faith and social justice together, it is time that you stretch beyond your comfort zone. If one of my assets or strengths is being a “thorn in the side” of a community, then I thought that maybe this is a good approach for this talk. If I do this talk well, all of us all will leave this breakfast with some nagging questions about racism in our greater Dayton community, and racism is our own hearts — a thorn in our side.

I. Why Do We Celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?

I would like to start off with a reflection why it is important for the University of Dayton to celebrate the life and heritage of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As an undergraduate engineering student and later as an engineering faculty member at the University of Dayton, I had the opportunity to meet many people who were concerned about racial and social justice. One of those persons was Fr. William Ferree, S.M. Fr. Ferree wrote his doctoral dissertation at the Catholic University of America on *The Act of Social Justice*. In that dissertation he summarized Aristotle’s and Thomas Aquinas’s concepts of general justice or what we today call social justice. Inspired by Blessed Father Chaminade, the Founder of the Marianist Family, whose feast we

celebrate today, and building on the social teaching of Pope Pius XI, Fr. Ferree developed an innovative thesis. The *act of social justice* — what we do when we do social justice — involves organizing people and groups to change social institutions so that there is a greater realization of the common good — i.e., greater opportunities for all people in a community or society to realize their human capabilities and to strive for human flourishing.

Under the guidance of Fr. Ferree, the University of Dayton's Board of Trustees introduced a social justice perspective into the purposes of the University. The University of Dayton, like every major university, has purposes of teaching, scholarship, and public service. In addition, the University of Dayton is to serve as a critic of society. We read in the Statement of Purposes:

The University of Dayton exercises its role as critic of society by creating an environment in which faculty and students are free to evaluate, in a scholarly manner, the strengths and weaknesses found in the institutions developed by man. While, as an organization, it remains politically neutral, objective and dispassionate, it encourages its member to judge for themselves how these institutions are performing their proper tasks; to exposed deficiencies in their structure and operation; to propose and actively promote improvements when these are deemed necessary.

To me, it is a great statement. The University, as a community, has to be a container — a vessel which creatively holds multiple conversations by students, faculty and staff about the strengths and weaknesses of the institutions of our society and how they can be transformed to a better realization of the common good. Working for social justice is embedded in the very purposes of the University of Dayton. This social justice perspective is not only to be applied to society outside of the University, but also to ourselves as an institution in society. To be a champion for justice, we ourselves must be just. When we ask our student, faculty, and staff to embody “Learn, Lead, and Serve,” we want them use their learning and scholarship to lead social transformation — to bring about a greater realization of the common good.

We celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. today because he exemplified many of the great traits of a transformational leader for social justice. He was a person who took the life of learning seriously. He used this learning to explore and internalize the themes of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures and the Christian community's rich tradition of justice. He used this learning to analyze the evils of racism that existed in the South and throughout the United States. Drawing on his experience as a preacher, he could speak with eloquence and energy and used imagery and metaphors that focused both our mind and our hearts on the injustices of our nation.

He developed the discipline to keep focused on the important task of organizing for civil rights. He continually reminded us that this country was founded on the principle that all people were created “with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

He used his rhetorical skills to weave for us a dream of justice — a dream of becoming a nation where whites, blacks, and all people of color could love one another as brothers and sisters. That they could sit down around a common table not only to share food and fellowship, but enter into conversations that would transform the vast inequalities of our nation so that all would have an opportunity to flourish as human persons.

He also identified a key civil rights challenge that needed to be overcome, if the dream was to be realized. He understood that emancipation of the slaves did not bring freedom for people of color. While the slaves were freed over 100 years ago, blacks and other people of color could not fully participate in the political or economic life of our nation. He understood that unless all citizens of color had the full opportunity to participate in governing this great country, the dream of social justice could not be realized.

Dr. King collaborated with others to organize a social movement that would address these key civil rights challenge. As a pastor, he was in touch with the multiple grassroots conversations that were addressing these civil rights challenges. He never lost contact with the wisdom of the people and knew how to bring their longing and their pain to the attention of our nation. He could carry the pain of the people and make their suffering productive for change.

He collaborated with others leaders within the movement to shape a shared agenda that would direct the energies of the movement. This required great skill of weaving together the ideas of people with strong opinions and egos, transcending pettiness, and forging objectives that all could realize in the given circumstances of a divided nation.

He understood the importance of power — not the power of coercion but the power of persuasion — not the power of violence but the power of non-violent resistance. He knew how to mobilize boycotts and marches to demonstrate the injustices of how cities and counties were organized. He knew that unless the movement could bring the brutality of racial injustice to the attention of the large American public, there was not going to be any change within the states or at the federal level.

We celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. because he exemplifies the knowledge and skills of a transformational leader for justice. His life illustrates what we desire to come out of our learning community called the University of Dayton. So my first nagging question I want to leave you with is, “Are we, as the University community, willing to commit ourselves to educating women and men who collaborate with others to name the injustices of our community and in the institutions of our community? Are we willing to experience the pain and suffering of those who suffer injustice, to enter into dialogue and conversation with others, especially those who suffer, to create shared visions of racial justice and strategies to realize the shared vision? Can we courageously mobilize the political will to bring about justice?”

If Martin’s life is to be meaningful to us, then we must accept this challenge.

He worked with other to mobilize a political network that could bring about change. This network had not only connected the leaders of the civil rights movement but also

engaged key politicians in Washington, religious communities throughout the nation and people in the media. Without this network of relationships and the demonstration of power, there would not be this movement toward justice.

II. A Civil Rights Challenge in the Greater Dayton Community

Let me frame my second question by sharing with you how I see the civil rights challenge in our greater Dayton region.

You can't be the President of the University of Dayton without being involved in the key issues shaping the greater Dayton region. A major turning point in my commitment to justice was chairing the Child Protection Task Force that examined the problem of child abuse and neglect in our community. With the help of Dick Ferguson, who was the assistant to the president for community and regional affairs, we were able to guide a 35-person task force through the discovery of issues and problems, the articulation of a community vision, and the construction of a set of recommendations to improve the child protection system in Montgomery County. Several of these recommendations actually provided leverage for the county commissioners to transform the child protection system.

While this task force experience had many flaws and missteps, it indicated to me and others that the social justice perspective of Fr. Ferree and Dr. King had potential for community transformation. The task force experience also made me aware of the insidious nature of urban poverty and the scandal of high-poverty neighborhoods.

Let me share some insights from my current work that relates to our concerns for racial justice in our greater Dayton community.

If we look at high poverty neighborhoods, where 30 percent or more of the people are living in poverty, what I call disadvantaged neighborhoods, we see some dramatic effects on opportunities for children. A vast amount of research has shown that even when family income is held constant, families living in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to struggle to meet the children's basic material needs. They are more likely to face food hardship, have trouble paying their housing costs, and lack health insurance than those poor families living in more affluent areas. Children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods are also more likely to experience harmful levels of stress and severe behavioral and emotional problems than children overall.

These problems also affect a child's ability to succeed in school. In fact, students from disadvantaged neighborhoods have significant lower kindergarten readiness scores and achievement scores throughout their school experience.

A major study of patterns of literacy in the United States coming out John Hopkins University indicates that students from disadvantaged neighborhoods enter high school with average literacy skills five years behind those of high-income students.

Clearly the structures and the organization of disadvantaged neighborhoods have a devastating effect on the opportunities young people have to succeed in learning, to earn a wage to support a family, and to participate in society as citizens.

Even more disturbing is the fact that in the United States children of color who are poor are significantly more likely than white children who are poor to have the adverse consequences of living in a high-poverty neighborhood. In Montgomery County, for example, the latest census data tells us that over 60 percent of black children in poverty live in high-poverty neighborhoods while only about 25 percent of white children in poverty live in high-poverty neighborhoods.

This pattern is true of almost all metropolitan regions. A good example is a study by Angela Blackwell's Policy Links Group that reported a black child in a disadvantaged neighborhood in Oakland, California, is 1.5 times more likely to be born premature than a white infant in an affluent suburb of Oakland, seven times more likely to be born into poverty, and four times more likely to have parents with only a high school education.

The risks accumulate and worsen over the life course of the black baby

- 2.5 times more likely to lag in vaccinations as a toddler
- 4 times *less likely* to read at grade level in fourth grade
- 5.6 times more likely to drop out of high school

In adulthood:

- 5 times more likely to be hospitalized for diabetes
- 3 times more likely to suffer a fatal stroke
- 2 time as likely to die of cancer

The black infant from a disadvantage neighborhood in Oakland can expect to die almost 15 years earlier than the white infant born in the affluent suburbs.

These facts help us define a major civil rights challenge for our region. The greater Dayton regional community, like every other metropolitan region of the United States, is organized by "tacit rules of the game" that keep a majority of families and children who live in disadvantaged neighborhoods from realizing opportunities for prosperity and fuller human flourishing. The largest percentage of these families and children in disadvantaged neighborhoods are racial minorities, people of color — African Americans and Hispanics.

There is a tragic gap issue of structural racism in our community. The way we are organized in our metropolitan regions — our public policies, our institutional practices, and other norms work to reinforce and perpetuate racial group inequity. Our metropolitan regions are organized so that privileges associated with "whiteness" and disadvantages associated with "color" are sustained overtime. If the status quo prevails, the future will hold even greater inequality of opportunity among the races.

So a major civil rights challenge for the greater Dayton community is how we transform these structures that perpetuate racism so that all families and children in high-poverty neighborhoods have the opportunities for prosperity and for fuller human fulfillment.

Out of our University we need people who, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., are both dreamers and organizers of a social transformation. If our time would permit, I could easily name three or four persons or groups that are working on these issues.

This leads me to the second nagging question I would like leave you with. Am I — are you — content with the status quo that will continue to exacerbate the inequality between the “haves” and the “have nots,” between the whites and people of color, or am I and you going to make a commitment to somehow, some way, do something about racial injustice in our community? How will I and how will you incorporate the issue of racial justice in the greater Dayton community into the work of our learning community? How will we expand our service-learning to meet this challenge? How will we as students, faculty, and staff give our time as volunteers — working as tutors, as people helping to support families struggling with poverty, and in a variety of other services to help the greater Dayton community work toward racial justice for all? I hope you leave this breakfast wanting to work with others for racial justice in our community.

III. Confronting Our Racism

Let me move briefly to my last point — perhaps my most controversial one in this reflection. To work at eliminating poverty and economic inequality requires that we enter the struggle for racial justice. But to work at racial justice, we must confront racism in our community and in ourselves.

Dr. King once said, “The great majority of Americans are suspended between these opposing attitudes. They are uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay the significant price to eradicate it.” During these days I have been asking, “Am I willing to pay the price to eradicate racial injustice?”

Racism is a highly charged social issue and very difficult to talk about. If you would call me racist, I can guarantee you that I will become defensive. I suspect that many of you would also react in a defensive posture. While the subject of racism is more complex than I treat in this reflection, let me share with you how my work on poverty and racism led me to confront the racism that is lodged in my own habits of thinking, feeling, and acting.

Maureen O’Connell in her book, *Compassion, Loving Our Neighbor in an Age of Globalization*, develops a concept of compassion that I find very challenging because it touches the reality of justice and love. For O’Connell, the virtue of compassion demands:

- the ability to perceive my connections to the causes of others’ suffering;

- the willingness to interpret the context of injustice from the perspective of those who suffer; and
- an active commitment to create new relationships with the capacity to transform the neighbor, ourselves, and the social reality.

For me these requirements of compassion are a profound challenge:

- How am I, Ray Fitz, connected to suffering of families and children of color in Dayton's disadvantage neighborhoods? How am I, Ray Fitz, in some way implicated in maintaining this situation of injustice in our community?;
- Am I, Ray Fitz, willing to interpret the situation of injustice that I am addressing from the perspective of those families and children of color that were suffering?; and
- Am I, Ray Fitz, willing to make an active commitment to create new relationships with these families and children of color so that we can together transform the structures of racism in our community?

As I examined my deeply ingrained habits of thinking, feeling, and acting I found that I take the privilege of "whiteness" for granted. I had been trained all of my life to see how racism disadvantages or burdens people of color. I am not accustomed to see how racism results in advantage or benefits for me as a white person that are not available to persons of color. I don't see myself as having a racial identity or status; I rarely have to think about what it means to be white. I have begun to see that in many ways the racial injustice in our organizations and community comes about as an effort to preserve and protect the privileges that I and others have as white persons.

I realize raising this question of "white privilege," especially without any attempt to address it in some thoughtful and systematic manner, is problematic. I simply want to say to all of us at this breakfast that we, as an outstanding Catholic and Marianist University, can address the question of connection between racial justice and white privilege.

Less my sisters and brothers of color think they will get out of this breakfast without a challenge, I would like to share another part of my experience in working for racial justice. It seems to me that once some persons of color reach the security of middle- or upper-income status, and I purposefully say some, they forget the struggles of their sisters and brothers in poverty. We need sisters and brothers of color who will be role models of what it means to be a responsible woman and man of color, roles models of how one builds strong families and engaged communities.

So my third nagging question is, "Can we as University community address the connection between racial justice and white privilege as well as the connection of successful persons of color with their brothers and sisters who live in poverty?" I believe we have the intellectual and moral resources to do it. The question is do we have the courage to undertake this challenge?

IV. Conclusion

In this reflection on the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I promised to raise three nagging questions — what I refer as “thorns in the side.”

First, in the spirit of Dr. King, are we willing to be a learning community that raises up women and men who are transformative leaders for racial justice who are willing to see the tragedy of racial injustice, to be with those who suffer, and to collaborate with others for the transformation of our communities toward greater justice?

Second, are we content with the status quo of racial injustice in our greater Dayton community or are we willing respond as a University community to be a major force in working with others to bring about racial justice and solidarity among all of our brothers and sisters?

Third, are we as a University community willing to examine through conversation and dialogue the connections between racial injustice and white privilege and the responsibilities of successful sisters and brothers of color to the sisters and brothers in poverty?

In conclusion, I ask you to join me in taking these difficult questions before our good God in prayer.

Let us pray.

Good and Gracious God,

We come before you in thanksgiving for the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. — A prophet who spoke your message of justice and solidarity to a nation.
Who unsettled a nation at a time when it was complacent about the needs of our brothers and sister of color.
Who proclaimed a dream — that embodied your message of human dignity, equality, and solidarity among all persons, races, and cultures.
Plant Dr. King's message of justice and solidarity deep in our hearts.

Spirit of God, open us to the wonder, beauty, and dignity of diversity found in each race and culture, in each face, and in each experience we have among us. Come, fill us with generosity, as we are challenged to let go and allow others to share with us the goods and beauty of your creation.

Come, heal our divisions that keep us from seeing the image of God in all women, men, and children — especially those who suffer the indignities of poverty, the lack of opportunity, and oppression

Come, free us to stand with and for those who have suffered the pain of racism in our community. Forgive us the evil we have caused through our sins of racism — for our clinging to our privileges of whiteness. Forgive those of us of color who have

become indifferent to the pain and suffering of our less-fortunate sisters and brothers.

Come, Spirit of God bring us understanding, inspiration, wisdom, and the courage needed to embrace change and to stay on the journey of justice and reconciliation. Allow us to be a University community committed to raising up issues of racial injustice — exposing the pain and suffering of racism. Let us be a community committed to providing a message of hope — of a dream where all our brothers and sisters can live in love, justice and peace and can experience a greater fullness of human happiness.

And let all the people say – Amen.