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THE LIFE OF MARTIN LUTHER KING:
AN EDUCATIONAL IMPERATIVE

Remarks by
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INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much Mary Futrell, my dear friend and one of the greatest and most influential educators in the nation. You have brought both conscience and reason to the debate about the nation's schools, and we are deeply in your debt.

Mrs. King, you have developed the Commission to carry on the essential message of Dr. King. But more importantly, through the example of your own life, we have been consistently and magnificently inspired by your spirit.

To Dr. Francis, you have brought a vitality to this meeting words cannot convey. The older I get, the more I am impressed by how we communicate, not just through words, but through the power of the visual arts and music, which often convey more fully than language, the message in our hearts.

It has been twenty years since the death of Martin Luther King, and it is now possible, perhaps, to put his life and his message in perspective. Looking back we can see even more clearly than before how the forces of social change and the life of one man were inextricably interlocked. He was a person who was not elected to high public office. He did not possess great financial wealth nor did he head a distinguished academic institution. In short, he was a man who had none of the

trappings which our society associate with power and prestige. And yet, at age 26, the youthful Martin Luther King, Jr. became the central figure in a national crusade for human rights that stirred the conscience of the nation, brought down the legal barriers of discrimination, and inspired hope among the dispossessed all around the world.

We all rejoice, of course, that a national holiday has been dedicated to the memory of this extraordinary individual. But it is my conviction--and it shall be the theme of my brief remarks this evening--that if we fail to bring the message of Dr. King into the nation's classrooms, memories will fade, our celebration will become increasingly superficial, and the holiday will be a time when we will remember only the symbols, and not the substance of his work.

I.

First, I am convinced that all students should study the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. to understand more precisely the social and intellectual heritage of our nation. Professor E.D. Hirsch, in his provocative and insightful book Cultural Literacy, reminds us that our common heritage is a bridge that brings us all together. Edmund Burke called it "a pact between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn."

We humans do have this remarkable capacity to recall the past and anticipate the future. Indeed, as far as I know, we are the only creatures on the planet that have the capacity to place ourselves in time and space. I am convinced that to ensure academic excellence in the nation's schools, there is an urgent need for young Americans to study history, to learn about our roots and to understand the long-running social currents that have shaped the contours of this nation. All students should learn about the unspeakable tragedies of slavery, the evils of segregation, and the historic struggle for civil rights led by Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the most heroic figures in the history of this nation. We cannot comprehend our own heritage if we do not understand his life and the causes that he so vigorously pursued.

Students should know that on December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, a forty-two-year-old unknown seamstress named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white man and that

she was immediately arrested. All students should know that four days later, the Montgomery bus boycott began and that Dr. King launched a nonviolent crusade for human rights that dramatically changed the nation.

Listen to the simple, yet powerful language of Dr. King when he announced the Montgomery bus boycott, twenty-three years ago. He said, "We have no alternative, but to protest." English teachers would like that construction. "For many years," he said, "we've shown amazing patience." Another punchline. "We have sometimes," he said, "given our white brothers the feeling we liked the way we were being treated." And then he added, "but we come here tonight to be saved from the patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice." That is poetry!

The Encyclopedia Britannica, in assessing the historical significance of Martin Luther King, said he was the black leader who was able to turn protests into a crusade and translate local conflicts into moral issues of nationwide concern. "Successful in awakening the black masses and galvanizing them into action, he won his greatest victories by appealing to the consciousness of all Americans." King was only 39 at the time of his death, the time when most people think they're just starting to live. And the analysis continued, "A leader in this mid-passage, King regarded himself as a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness."

The encyclopedia concludes its assessment of Dr. King's life by observing that although he never wavered in his insistence that nonviolence must remain the essential tactic of the movement, nor in his faith that all Americans would someday obtain racial and economic justice, he did not take for granted the immediate future, either of his own leadership or of the causes for which he fought. "Well, I don't know what will happen to me now," he said in his last address in Memphis, "but it really doesn't matter because I've been to the mountaintop. I may not get to the promised land with you, but I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will . . . "

This assessment captures both the political power and the moral impact of the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. And I am convinced that to be truly informed about the heritage of the United States, all students should study his legacy. They should understand the meaning of nonviolence, and they should learn about the freedom movement which Dr. King so dramatically inspired.

But I wish to make another point. I am convinced that a study of the life of Dr. King also will provide students a perspective that is not only national, but global. In his historic Letter From Birmingham City Jail, Reverend King defined the universal nature of his message. He said, "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and all states." He said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." What a

stunning phrase. He said, "We are tied to a single garment of destiny." Connections. "Whatever affects one," he concluded "directly affects us all." Here was a message not parochial, but universal.

Lewis Thomas, former chancellor of the Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, captured the same spirit of global interdependence when he wrote, "if this century does not slip forever through our fingers, it will be because learning will have directed us away from our splintered dumbness and helped us to focus on our common goals." I'm suggesting that this was the essence of Dr. King's crusade for human rights. His crusade must be viewed in a global context, because he was appealing to that which makes us not just American but that which makes us truly human.

Let me state my first proposition quite succinctly. I believe that no student in American schools can be considered well-educated if he or she does not learn about this nation's long and agonizing crusade for civil rights, or about the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., who sought change and moved the nation through the moral imperative of nonviolence. Nor can students be academically or civically well-prepared without grasping the global dimensions of his message.

II.

This leads me then to priority number two. I believe all students should learn about Martin Luther King, Jr., not only to gain historical perspective, but also to understand the power and the poetry of language. And I've already hinted to you about that this evening, because you cannot read or hear his words without being stunningly moved by the strength of his message. In Birmingham, Alabama on April 12, 1963, Dr. King, as you all know, was arrested and held in solitary confinement for disobeying an Alabama Supreme Court injunction against public demonstrations. On the morning following his arrest, King wrote his literary masterpiece, Letter From Birmingham City Jail, in response to eight clergymen who argued that the grievances of blacks should be settled in the courts, not through civil disobedience.

King's letter, which consisted of 7,110 words, has been described by scholars as, "persuasive and logically compelling with its varied syntax, elaborate metaphors, and rich historical illusions." As one reviewer put it, "The rhetoric of this letter has an elegance that is timeless."

Perhaps the letter's most impressive stylistic feat is a 331-word sentence, in which Dr. King uses parallelism in a climactic fashion, each clause beginning with the word "when." The sentence comes in response to the suggestion by the eight

clergymen that blacks should simply wait for justice rather than take action now. Dr. King replied and I quote in part, "that when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and your fathers; when you have seen hate-filled policemen; . . . when you have seen the vast majority of your Negro brothers and sisters smothered in an airtight cage of poverty; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she cannot go to a public amusement park and you see tears welling up, and you see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in that little mental sky; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: 'Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?' when you are humiliated day in and day out; when your first name becomes 'nigger'. . .; and when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of nobodiness; then you'll understand," he said, "why we find it difficult to wait."

With stunningly powerful passages such as this, Martin Luther King carried on a crusade, not with military weapons, but with the majesty of his words. And I am convinced that all students, through a study of his communication, can better understand why language is the most essential priority of their education.

There is yet another lesson related to the eloquence of language. In our dangerous interdependent world, with messages that conceal more than they reveal, students can learn from Dr. King that language is not only a powerful way to communicate

one's feelings; it is also a sacred trust. Wayne Booth of the University of Chicago has said, "All too often, our efforts to speak and listen to each other seem to be vicious cycles spiraling downward. We somehow do not listen; we shout, and we pause for time to rearrange our prejudices during communication." But Booth went on to say, "We all experience moments when the spiral moves upward, when one party's efforts to listen and speak just a little bit better produced a similar response, making it possible to try a bit harder--and up the spiral to moments of genuine understanding." It seems to me that this goal--this spirit of verbal reconciliation--was at the very heart of Dr. King's communication.

In his Letter From Birmingham City Jail (and bear in mind he's reacting to eight fellow clergymen who in letters to newspapers chastised him for following his own conscience), Dr. King concludes by saying with gentle rapier-like observation, "If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth, and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me." But he didn't stop at that; he was a man of too much integrity. He went on to say, "If I have said anything in this letter that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me." Now that's integrity.

I'm suggesting that the messages of Martin Luther King, Jr.--his Letter From Birmingham City Jail, his Nobel Laureate acceptance speech, his enduringly powerful "I Have a Dream speech"--represent literature. His words provide a rich and essential addition to the English curriculum, both for the study of structure and an appreciation of the power of language. Through his message, students can also understand the importance of communicating not just with clarity, but with integrity. For language unguided by conscience is, perhaps, the most dangerous weapon on the planet Earth. Martin Luther King understood the honesty that must guide the weaponry of words.

III.

This leads to one final observation. All students should study the life of Dr. King to understand more fully the relationship between what we learn and how we live.

On April 3, 1968, one day before his assassination, Reverend King made these prophetic observations: "Every now and then I think about my own death and I think about my own funeral. If you get somebody to deliver the eulogy," he said, "tell them not to mention my awards. . . . I'd like somebody to mention that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I won't have money to leave behind," he concluded, "I won't have the luxurious things of life to leave behind, but I just want to leave a committed life behind."

During our study of the American high school, I became convinced that we have not just a school problem, but a youth problem in this nation. Students today feel isolated, unneeded and unconnected to the larger world. There are only a few causes that seem to inspire them. I see an alarming gap between the lessons in the classroom and the realities of life, and then we wonder why students are dropping out. For far too many of our children, schooling has become a kind of holding vat, a place where we expect them to be out of sight and socially disengaged. Students are rarely asked to spend time with older people, to clean up litter on the street or to tutor children who

have not learned to read, but then after graduation, we expect them to somehow become socially and civically empowered. It will not work that way. To have 15 or 30 years of lethargy cannot be followed by a time of intense social interaction.

I believe that we must find a way to present the moral imperatives of education revealed in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. In his Letter From Birmingham Jail, Dr. King talked about what he called the real heroes of our culture: "Young high school and college students courageously and nonviolently sitting at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience's sake," he said. "These people were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream, and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage."

In our book High School, we conclude that students today urgently need a sense of mission, and we propose a new Carnegie Unit--a term of voluntary service for all high school students when they might serve in hospitals and nursing homes and art galleries or help their fellow students. It was in this spirit that Vachel Lindsey wrote, "It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull. Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap; not that they serve, but have no God to serve; not that they die, but that they die like sheep." The tragedy of life is not death. The tragedy is to die with commitments undefined, convictions undeclared and service unfulfilled. A study of the life of Martin Luther King would encourage students to link the lessons

of the classroom to community concerns. That was the essence of his message.

Here then is my conclusion. The life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. must endure, not as a sentimental memory, but as an educational imperative. Through a careful study of his life, all students will more fully understand first, the heritage of our nation; second, the power of the written and the spoken word; third, the moral imperative of human justice, and to be truly human one must serve. These are the lessons that must be passed on from one generation to another.