The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Editor’s Note: Mr. Farris publicly delivered this address on October 3, 2008, in the Power Center Ballroom of Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania at “MAKING SENSE OF THE SIXTIES: A NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON THE ASSASSINATIONS AND POLITICAL LEGACIES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., ROBERT F. KENNEDY, AND JOHN F. KENNEDY.”

Thank you for introducing me. Dr. Cyril Wecht, Dr. Frederick Fochtman, Dr. Peter Dale Scott, other program participants, and distinguished guests, it is a great pleasure to join you this morning and to be a part of this important symposium. Let me begin by thanking the Cyril H. Wecht Institute of Forensic Science and Law and the Duquesne University School of Law for presenting this symposium and for making possible my participation today.

The symposium organizers have done an outstanding job of bringing together experts on the three assassinations that had such a powerful effect on America’s history and culture. What I hope to do today is to shed some light on the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 2008, which is shaping up as yet another pivotal year for American history.

It is certainly true that you cannot make sense of the 1960s without understanding the assassinations of my uncle, Martin Luther King, Jr., President John F. Kennedy, and Senator Robert Kennedy. In addition to the profound impact the three assassinations had on our history and culture, they also deeply affected America’s spirit, and in a very real sense, we have not fully recovered.

When President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, my uncle turned to my aunt, Coretta, and told her—and this is a verbatim quote—“This is what is going to happen to me also. I keep telling you, this is a sick society.” It would not be the last time he warned her about the likelihood that he would be assassinated. He felt it

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was important to prepare her. They had received hate mail and threatening phone calls on a regular basis ever since Uncle Martin arrived on the national scene as the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955.

Their home was bombed once, and there was a second attempt to bomb their home after that. On yet another occasion, someone threw a pipe bomb at my uncle's feet, but one of his aides, the Reverend Fred Bennette, Jr. picked the bomb up with his bare hands and threw it off to the side. On yet another occasion, my uncle boarded a small plane with one of his aides, Junius Griffin, only to be informed that there was a bomb threat on the plane. When my uncle looked out the window, he saw people running away from the plane. My uncle said to his aide, "Are you still flying with me, Junius?" Mr. Griffin was a little shaken, like anyone would be. But he responded, "I'm flying if you are, Doc." The threats never ended, and it was impossible to tell when they were real.

Even after my uncle was assassinated, Aunt Coretta continued to receive threats and hate mail. It was just a continuing part of their life together and her life as his widow.

As you might imagine, living with death threats and hate mail can be terribly stressful. My uncle loved life and laughter and fellowship. You could not have blamed him if he said, "Okay, that's enough, I'm retiring," and got about the business of a quieter life. But he knew that somebody had to have the courage to lead, and not many were willing to make the sacrifice.

He had the good fortune—good judgment, really—to have picked a wife who was as strong as he was. Aunt Coretta never urged him to step aside. She was an activist before he was, and she understood that leadership required sacrifice. She made it clear that she was in it for the long haul.

In retrospect, it was amazing that he lived as long as he did. There were threats in every campaign of the civil rights movement. He led many marches against racial injustice, and he could have been assassinated by a sniper many times. But still he marched on, from Montgomery to Memphis, and Aunt Coretta insisted on joining him on some of the marches. She lived by the motto emblazoned on the statue of the great educator Horace Mann, on the campus of Antioch College, which she attended. It said, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." She took that challenge very seriously, and that is one reason why we have a Martin Luther King, Jr. national holiday.
I recount this history not merely in tribute to the heroism that Martin and Coretta King demonstrated, but also to make the point that a willingness to sacrifice and suffer, if need be, for a great cause is a vital part of their continuing legacy. Not everyone is willing to die for great causes. But we should all be willing to make personal sacrifices to make America a more just nation. This challenge is very much a part of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy in 2008.

Ambassador Andrew Young, who was one of my uncle’s closest and most trusted aides, has often made the point that my uncle’s assassination provides yet another example of the power of martyrdom. If, by some miracle, my uncle had not been assassinated, or if he died a natural death, we don’t know what would be the full effect of his leadership. But the assassination assured that his example would become a source of hope and inspiration for millions. The same can be said of President Kennedy and Senator Kennedy, as well as Malcolm X.

What assassins never seem to understand is that they often increase a leader’s influence. Because they live by the law of brutality, they never learn about the power of love. One of the still vibrant lessons of the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. is that unearned suffering is indeed redemptive. If you study the history of martyrdom going back to Jesus of Nazareth, you will find this to be true.

This year more than most, I have thought about my uncle’s legacy. Part of it is Senator Obama’s nomination, and the possibility that he may be elected America’s first African-American president. Senator Obama has read my uncle’s books and studied his teachings, perhaps the first major politician who has schooled himself in the philosophy and strategy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Win or lose, his story is an extension of my uncle’s legacy, and he has already made a great contribution to advancing America toward the fulfillment of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream. No matter what happens on November 4, we will be a little closer to the promised land as a result of Senator Obama’s candidacy.

No, it does not mean that the dream has been fulfilled. It does not mean that racism and discrimination have been conquered. It does not mean that poverty, hunger, war, and violence have been eradicated. We still have much work to do before we can say that these social and economic evils have been eliminated. But this is nonetheless a moment of inspiring historic significance and a great step forward in America’s journey to becoming a color-blind democracy.
No matter who wins the election, in the months ahead, a major monument honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. will rise up on the great Mall in Washington, D.C., alongside monuments to Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. This is appropriate, because America has had no greater champion of democracy and social justice, and freedom has never had a more eloquent voice.

Martin Luther King, Jr. will long be revered as one of history’s most courageous advocates of nonviolence and a voice for the powerless of all nations. He was a friend and brother to people struggling for human rights, social justice, and peace everywhere. That is his legacy for 2008.

When the national memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Mall in Washington is completed, he will have a place of honor, centrally located on the Tidal Basin between the Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln memorials in the nation’s capital. We can be sure that this will also increase interest in the King Center, and part of our challenge in the months ahead is to prepare to serve even greater numbers of people who want to learn more about his teachings.

The King Center is the official living memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr. Our facilities on this site include his gravesite and birthplace and the King Library and Archives, which is America’s preeminent research facility for studying my uncle’s life and work and the nonviolent civil rights movement he led.

Some of you may be aware that the King Center spearheaded the successful nationwide movement to make my uncle’s birthday a national holiday. We also serve as an educational resource center for groups and individuals from all over the world seeking to better understand his legacy.

Founded in 1968 as the living memorial dedicated to my uncle’s life and legacy, the mission of the King Center is to help educate people all over the world about his philosophy and strategy of nonviolence, and it is a mission we intend to carry forward into the 21st century with increasing commitment and effectiveness.

I mentioned that the Washington memorial to my uncle now being constructed will help to put his legacy on par with that of our greatest presidents. But there is a sense in which one aspect of his legacy transcends that of other great leaders on the Mall. Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln were all great leaders, but none of them advanced to the point where they embraced full racial equality as a central American ideal. Lincoln may have been moving in that direction before he was assassinated, but we will never know how far he might have progressed. But Martin Lu-
ther King, Jr. was completely committed to the ideal of full racial equality as a principle of American democracy. In addition, he was unique in that his method of nonviolence was as revolutionary as his goals.

The legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 2008 is not confined to the United States. Nearly a year ago, I visited Liverpool, attending the dedication of the International Slavery Museum, and I was very much struck by the repeated references to Martin Luther King, Jr. in speeches and conversations I had. He very much had a global vision of nonviolent action to protect human rights and secure world peace. In the beloved community of his global dream, racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry, and prejudice would be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood.

Indeed, nonviolent movements throughout the world, in nations as diverse as Poland, the Philippines, China, and South Africa, to name a few, all drew hope and inspiration from his leadership, and many leaders of these liberation movements have acknowledged his leadership as an influential force in their freedom struggles. Indeed, the Solidarity movement in Poland that launched the revolutions that brought down the Iron Curtain, used the documentary Montgomery to Memphis as a training film for its protest movement.

Freedom-loving people of all nations are realizing that nonviolence is the most powerful force for human rights at their disposal. Every day it becomes more clear that, if humanity is to survive and prosper, then nonviolence must be the wave of the future. We have only begun to tap the power of nonviolence as a force for peaceful conflict reconciliation, for social change, and for building community. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s example gives people of all races, religions, and nations hope and inspiration like no other American leader, and his name has a unique credibility that transcends national boundaries and cultures.

As we look to the future and our ongoing quest to fulfill his great dream, I think there is much to be encouraged about. We are entering an exciting new phase in the nonviolent struggle. Nonviolent movements are beginning to internationalize more energetically, thanks in part to the telecommunications revolution. In the years ahead, we must take full advantage of the new communications technologies to build and strengthen global nonviolent movements for social and economic justice on every continent.

Yet another dimension of the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. in our times is the way the King National Holiday has become a great day of community service across the nation. In 1994, eight
years after we celebrated the first King Holiday, President Clinton signed the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday and Service Act, which was requested by Coretta Scott King. This legislation designated the King Holiday as a national day of community service, interracial cooperation, and youth antiviolence initiatives.

As my aunt said, the King Holiday must be “above all a day of service. It is a day of volunteering to feed the hungry, rehabilitate housing, tutoring those who can’t read, mentoring at-risk youngsters, consoling the brokenhearted, and a thousand other projects for building the beloved community of his dream.”

We had hoped that a significant number of Americans would accept this challenge. The wonderful thing is, more people than we ever dreamed possible have done so. Community service projects are being carried out on the King Holiday all across America on an astounding scale.

The need for community service to help address unmet human needs in America remains great. Nearly one out of every four American children is living in poverty. Every city in America still has substantial populations of homeless people and those who live in substandard housing. Millions of young people are attending failing schools, have no health insurance, and live in crime-, drug-, and gun-infested communities. Their families need help. We can all help reduce social neglect and deprivation by volunteering our time and talents to help people in our communities.

Serving others is a cornerstone of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s teachings. He once said that we all have to decide whether we “will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. Life’s most persistent and nagging question,” he said, is “what are you doing for others?”

On other occasions, he would quote Mark 9:35, the scripture in which Jesus of Nazareth tells James and John, “Whosoever will be great among you shall be your servant; and whosoever among you will be the first shall be the servant of all.”

Serving God and humanity was always his central concern, and very much so during the final weeks of his life. In one of his last sermons—on February 4, 1968—he spoke about humanitarian service as the hallmark of a full life. He spoke about what might be said at his memorial service, and he said, “I’d like somebody to mention on that day, Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others,” he said. “I want you to say on that day, that I did try in my life... to love and serve humanity.”
And carrying his challenge forward into the 21st century, Corretta Scott King said, "The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate acts of its citizens."

One of the beautiful things about community service is that it does not have to wait for the slow-grinding wheels of justice to help balance the scales. My uncle once said, "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Very true. But he also understood that human beings could accelerate the bending of the arc through service to those who have been the victims of injustice.

By giving our time and talents and resources to help people, we accomplish four important things. First, we are reaching out to lift up people who need help. Second, we are setting a beautiful, contagious example of caring and compassion. I say contagious, because acts of kindness and generosity have a way of multiplying and encouraging others to open their hearts to serving. Third, we are building the spirit of goodwill that is the heart and soul of a great community. And fourth, we are enriching our own lives with a deeper sense of meaning, purpose, and nobility.

Every year, the King Holiday is proving to be an introduction to community service for millions of Americans, and that is truly a great legacy. Our hope is that this introduction will be so fulfilling for many that they will embrace service to others, not only on the Holiday, but also as a way of life. And—so far, so good—this is what is beginning to happen in cities and towns across America. More than a half-million Americans engaged in community service on the last King Holiday. Community volunteers, students, union members, company employees, and all kinds of groups work together on a dazzling variety of service projects. They paint and restore homes and plant trees and gardens in housing projects. They hold events like the "Beloved Community Food Drive" in Oklahoma or the "Gang Intervention Summit" in another city. Other groups hold workshops on nonviolence. They rehabilitate playgrounds and shelters for victims of family violence. They feed the hungry, house the homeless, and comfort the aged and infirm in cities across the nation. They conduct blood-donor drives, tutor young people, build homes with Habitat for Humanity, hold scholarship fundraisers and gun collection programs. Every year, the list of community service projects grows, and more and more people begin to embrace serving others as a way of life.

Yet, we must acknowledge that service alone cannot address all of the pressing needs of our disadvantaged fellow citizens. It is a beautiful thing to be generous with your time and make signifi-
cant donations to worthy causes. But it is equally important that we do our civic duty with respect to social change and the political process. Engaging in nonviolent protest activities is still a critically important need in the 21st century. And we face an even more daunting array of global challenges today.

And if we truly want to create the beloved community of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream, all of us must become outspoken champions, not only of tolerance and the “live-and-let-live” philosophy. We must also serve our communities as champions of brotherhood and sisterhood—the kind that transcends race, religion, ethnicity, gender, age, or any of the demographic boundaries.

In addition to community service, Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated serving humanity by protesting against poverty, racism, war, and violence. But his philosophy of leadership required that protest against injustice always “be conducted on the high plane of dignity” and that we embrace a nonviolent spirit in dealing with our adversaries, no matter how violent or vicious they may be.

I would encourage everyone to learn more about the matchless power of nonviolence as a tool for conflict resolution, and how it can be used in our homes, communities, nation, and world. Indeed, the study and practice of nonviolent social change and conflict reconciliation may prove to be the most important and enduring aspect of the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. If you will take some time to study his works and make his wisdom part of your life, you will develop a growing sense of personal empowerment.

And so, we are called by Martin Luther King, Jr.’s example to lead the nation to a brighter future, in which citizens of all races have opportunities, for jobs and education, decent housing and health care. It will be a day when no American child need fear the ravages of violence and social neglect; a day when fear and hatred are obliterated from our communities; a day when peace and justice will prevail in a beautiful multiracial mosaic from coast to coast.

And so, we go forward into the uncertain future with his inextinguishable dream still burning as a flame of hope in our hearts. With renewed determination, we go forward to proclaim a new mandate to transform the suffering and inhumanity of our troubled times into a future filled with hope and opportunity for all people. With this faith, and with this commitment, one day in the not-too-distant future, the dream will no longer be a distant ideal; it will become a luminous reality.

I will leave you with a vision of hope and challenge for the future from Coretta Scott King, delivered at the 2004 King Holiday
Commemorative Service. On that day, she said that Martin Luther King, Jr. “showed us the way to the beloved community, and as we commemorate this holiday of hope and healing, let us pick up the pace of our march on the road to the promised land. With this faith and commitment, the long night of violence, injustice, and oppression will surely come to an end. And, with God’s blessing, we will awaken to the dawning of a glorious new day, when the morning stars will sing together and the children of God will shout for joy.”

Thank you, and God bless you all.