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Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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Today, we are gathered here to commemorate the birth of one of the most influential and inspirational men of our time. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A man of peace, a man of justice and a man of God. He was truly a great leader, a man whose strong character and moral values continue to shine as an example for us to follow. He not only preached the word of God but lived each day of his life in accordance with his interpretation of the teachings of our Lord.

Like many men of his time he followed in his father’s footsteps. But let us think about his time. He was born in 1928 in the South. In those days we could dare to dream of becoming a teacher or a preacher. Martin Luther King became both. But because of him, he taught us to dare to dream of becoming what our abilities can make us......astronauts, physicists, engineers, Wall Street Analysts, Nobel Laureates and even Deans of southern white universities.

Thirty two years ago, in Montgomery, Alabama, Martin Luther King set a direction and began to carve out a path for the black, the poor, the disenfranchised to follow. We have not yet reached the Promised Land of total equality and opportunity. We in this generation will remember what it
was like to be disenfranchised, without hope, without promise, but we came alive and dared to dream. Many of our dreams and hopes are now realized by a new generation of black Americans. Many of them do not appreciate where we have been and from whence we have come and they have no idea or appreciation of the long difficult struggle. The struggle is not over and we should not let them forget. We have to take up the mantle which Martin Luther King laid down at his death and pass it on, until total justice, total equality, total freedom, total opportunities and the total promise of the Constitution are ours and ensured for all generations.

We thought we had overcome the racial violence of the pre-1970 years, and yet there is Howard Beach, the Citadel, the Klu Klux Klan in North and South Carolina and police brutality in Tampa. There still exists the subtle racism right where we live. My younger son and I were riding our bicycles in our neighborhood some time ago. As youngsters do, he rode ahead of me. He was stopped by an old white couple and asked "What are you doing here? Where are you going? Where do you live?" I had caught up with him by then and I enquired what was the problem. The man dared to say that many black kids come into the neighborhood
Yet

who do not belong here. Many white kids ride their bicycles into the neighborhood, they do not live there, but they are never stopped and questioned. Racism is alive and well. In Syracuse, New York, 1978, after living in a neighborhood for two years, I received a note with no return address...."Nigger, get off our street." Racism is alive and well up north....it is not regional because it pervades all of American society.....in the workplace and where we live.

So we must constantly remind ourselves that Martin's quest for freedom becomes our individual responsibility and a responsibility which must be assumed by every black American, every day of his/her life....and by all succeeding generations. It is our duty to remind ourselves of the individual responsibilities that we must assume to overcome violences against each other and encourage family unity, rather than tolerating such inequities as rising illegitimate births and black-against-black crime. We must teach our children respect for the necessity of a strong, supportive family and the role they must play in it; we must educate them constantly in the dangers of the many drugs that continue to permeate and poison our community; and just as importantly, we must motivate them to take advantage of the opportunities they do have to acquire an
education for themselves, to seek and accomplish the personal training that will enable them to become caring and contributing citizens of our country and our community.

Although we are commemorating the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we are also celebrating his life and the legacy he left at his death. In his dying, he passed on to all of us a part of the struggle. His life and untimely death are reminiscent of the lives and times of other great men:

Mohatma Gandhi, whose philosophy of non-violence and peace changed India's destiny and inspired and shaped Martin Luther King's own philosophy of non-violence;

Abraham Lincoln, who once said "If slavery is not wrong then nothing is wrong", who became the emancipator and changed forever the destiny of the United States; and

Jesus Christ who died to set all men free, changed the destiny of the world. Martin Luther King's life and time have changed forever the destiny of the blacks, the poor, the hungry and the oppressed because he gave us hope for a brighter future and the fulfillment of the American dream.

We are engaged in a battle of survival—not only for survival for our rights but of our existence. There is a new kind of racism which allows many people to feel
comfortable. It has many names....conservatism and many religious labels, but the message is the same, that is, there is no place in this society for the poor, the disenfranchised, the uneducated, and the unskilled, most of whom are black.

There is a lack of moral leadership which contributes to an environment of selfishness and no care or thought for one’s brother. This lack of leadership in this country results in budget cuts for affirmative action programs, medical care, aid to dependent children, aid to housing, aid to education, aid to farmers and aid to all those programs which aid the poor, the homeless and the needy. Yet this moral lack of leadership allows us to send millions of dollars in clandestine aid to support many foreign causes including the war in Nicaragua, Angola and the Iran-Iraq conflict. In addition, our government provides billions of dollars annually to further create the build-up of arms and to contribute financially to the wealth of big business.

Who bears the burden and suffer from the build-up but the poor, and the poor are mostly black! Just two days ago some published studies revealed an alarming situation. Because of the poverty among blacks in New York, which poverty prevented them from seeking and obtaining early and adequate
medical care, the incidence of detectable cancer among blacks was 18% higher than whites. Also, by the time most blacks obtained medical care at hospitals in Harlem, approximately 50% of them had incurable cancer. And similar statistics could be cited for crime, unemployment and homelessness. Just two weeks ago in Los Angeles, several hundred homeless men, women, and children were forced to leave their tent shelter and find refuge in the access ramp leading to the City Civic Center. These are among the reasons that Harvey Gantt, Mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina, said a few days ago in Tampa: "The central issue of the 1980s is to insure against the development of two societies, one affluent and predominantly white, the other poor, black, and minority."

It was the combined mixture of weak moral leadership in this country, injustices of all sorts, segregation, discrimination, bigotry, racial hatred, presumed racial superiority, poverty and suffering that stirred Martin Luther King into creating a movement which has become history—a movement which has and will change the course of history.

As an educator, I would like to leave two final thoughts with you. They are not unique; they are not new, but they
are matters of great importance. The first concerns the strength, security and survival and beauty of the black family and black brother/sisterhood. We need each other; we need not stray far from that idea. We overcame slavery because we knew that we were one—the family. Like the fingers on a hand, each is different, but each is absolutely essential. We must keep alive the flame of kindred spirit and work toward the improvement of the total race, remembering that if one is chained in poverty, ignorance, oppression and disease, then none is truly free.

The second thought is that we must use the means of education and educational opportunities wherever they may be, to prepare all succeeding generations for the tasks we have already described. We must use education to lift ourselves to a higher plane and insure that future generations will truly overcome, and together we can join hands and climb the mountain top and look over the Promise Land; the homeless, the poor, the needy, the sad, black and white together, the afflicted, the disenfranchised and all of us everywhere, can shout from the summit-------Free at last. Free at last, Thank God Almighty, We are free at Last.