

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

An address by The Rev'd Erl G. Purnell
January 20, 2008
Old St. Andrew's Church, Bloomfield, CT

An excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech December 10, 1964.

Today I come to Oslo as a trustee, inspired and with renewed dedication to humanity. I accept this prize on behalf of all men who love peace and brotherhood. I say I come as a trustee, for in the depths of my heart I am aware that this prize is much more than an honor to me personally.

Every time I take a flight I am always mindful of the people who make a successful journey possible -- the known pilots and the unknown ground crew.

So you honor the dedicated pilots of our struggle who have sat at the controls as the freedom movement soared into orbit. You honor, once again, Chief (Albert) Luthuli of South Africa, whose struggles with and for his people, are still met with the most brutal expression of man's inhumanity to man. You honor the ground crew without whose labor and sacrifices the jet flights to freedom could never have left the earth.

Most of these people will never make the headlines and their names will not appear in Who's Who. Yet when years have rolled past and when the blazing light of truth is focused on this marvelous age in which we live -- men and women will know and children will be taught that we have a finer land, a better people, a more noble civilization -- because these humble children of God were willing to suffer for righteousness' sake.

I think Alfred Nobel would know what I mean when I say that I accept this award in the spirit of a curator of some precious heirloom which he holds in trust for its true owners -- all those to whom beauty is truth and truth beauty -- and in whose eyes the beauty of genuine brotherhood and peace is more precious than diamonds or silver or gold.

On a hot October afternoon in 1966, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the Student Union at the University of Pittsburgh. I was there.

A year before, when I had turned 19 in the summer of 1965, the civil rights movement was on the move. Of course, I had heard about the Montgomery bus boycott. I knew King was the leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I had been blown away by the power of his *I have a dream* speech on the mall in Washington in March of 1963. And, when King received the Nobel Peace Prize in the fall of 1964, I knew this extraordinary man was having a major impact on America, the world, and me.

I admit to wondering at the time, What difference did the plight of “negro Americans” make to a privileged white boy from the suburbs? King spoke about the plight of people of color and he insisted that their wellbeing had everything to do with me, my life, my moral and ethical values, my politics, the economy of the country, the military, and more. I thought I knew what he meant...but I didn't...and I needed to. The only thing I remember being sure about in the summer of 1965 was that people's lives were at stake and what King and other civil rights activists were saying and doing really mattered.

In those days in Pittsburgh, eight neighborhoods were euphemistically identified as “gray” areas. These neighborhoods were in deep decline and already overwhelmed by political oppression as well as economic, educational, transportation, and housing discrimination. For three months during that summer of 1965, I lived and worked as a community action volunteer in the Hazelwood-Glenwood section of Pittsburgh in the shadow of the Jones & Laughlin Steel Mill along the Allegheny River.

As famously happened to Paul, something like scales fell from my eyes and suddenly I could see what I had never seen before. At first, I glued myself to the side of Jimmy Smith, a 6'6" former pro basketball player who weighed 230 pounds. Jimmy knew I was scared. He also knew how to teach me about Dr. King's message in real-time, on real streets, in real homes, with real people. By the end of the summer he had set me free because I was no longer afraid. I had helped to establish the prototype program Head Start was modeled on, cleaned up abandoned lots, spent hours and hours in peoples' homes, taught a twelve year old to say the alphabet and write his name, knocked rats away from children's

cribs in the middle of the night, witnessed a shoot out, hung-out in pool halls, and become known as the “peace corps kid” because the local folks didn’t know how else to describe me.

During the school year, I stayed in touch with my new friends. And the following summer, when I was twenty, I managed to get a federal grant for \$100,000 to oversee the creation of twenty-two pocket parks in these “gray” neighborhoods of Pittsburgh. Slowly, people began to paint their doors, put out window boxes, and sweep the sidewalks. They brought their kids to clean, safe places to play. Old folks came to sit on benches, play checkers, and tell the old stories into the summer nights.

Who Dr. King was and what he was doing had propelled me out of a white cocoon of comfort in order to reach toward the dream he had so eloquently spoken about in 1963. So, when he came to the University of Pittsburgh, I wasn’t going to miss the opportunity to hear him. His speech that fall afternoon was not famous like *I have a dream*. Rather, Dr. King spoke with us as he had done scores of times in other student settings about how we might make a difference. He spoke, without a note, his thoughts perfectly organized, leading us through story and event to conclusions that were the hallmark of his ministry—non-violence, civil disobedience, speaking the truth in love, standing shoulder to shoulder in the light of Justice because it’s the right thing to do.

He never hemmed or hawed. He quoted the Bible—both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament—with comfortable ease and with a conviction as deep as the oceans. Above all, he was passionate...and his passion was infectious. You’ve heard him, when he reaches into the base of his voice so his ideas roll like thunder in a storm that’s bringing much needed rain to a parched and barren landscape. He fed and watered that jam-packed Student Union. After his oration but before a single clap, three hundred people exhaled the breath each had taken-in two hours earlier.

This has been a very self-referential talk. But, I can’t apologize. For, nobody was more influential in my development as a young man than my friend, Martin. He continues to guide and teach me about telling the truth as I see it, standing up against in-justice, racism, sexism, and all the other –isms, living a life of faith, tolerance, inclusiveness, and forgiveness, and always, always preaching the Gospel of Hope.

The dream that the interfaith clergy of Bloomfield have is the same dream that Martin Luther King, Jr. had. There is no other dream. There is no other dream! It is why we celebrate the life of this great teacher. Dare we stand in the fires of today and call for the systemic changes our own community deserves—excellence in education, affordable housing, universal healthcare, good transportation, job training, and peace on the streets? Dare we continue to work on behalf of the Dream right here in Bloomfield!?

Amen.

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