

Presentation at 31st Annual Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration
"Preserving His Dream: Past, Present, and Future"
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Sunday, January 20, 2013
Pilgrim Congregational Church in Pomona, CA

We are here today to celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King and the legacy he left for all of us in "preserving the dream: past, present, and future" - of going beyond divisions to find the common issues and common ground that unites us. I remember when Dr. King was unjustly taken away from this world and the powerful influence this moment had in my life. I was at a Jr. College and two of my roommates were Black, Bing Howell from the Island of Trinidad and Walter Carmen from Chicago – both track stars. I remember that we were struck with grief – as though we had lost a close family member – and, at that moment, we remembered our parents – our grandparents – working bent over in the fields, in the garment factories, in the meatpacking plants – and all the sweat that they had given – so that we might have a better education. And we, together thought about Martin and the social movement that made him who he was – and how that movement had been bringing to light our parent's conditions, struggles, -- and the way forward for creating social change. And as we embraced each other, we remembered the letter of solidarity that King had sent to Cesar Chavez not too long before he was killed:

"As brothers in the fight for equality, I extend the hand of fellowship and good will and wish continuing success to you and your members...You and your valiant fellow workers have demonstrated your commitment to righting grievous wrongs forced upon exploited people. We are together with you in spirit and in determination that our dreams for a better tomorrow will be realized."

And, in that moment, like Martin, we decided to turn our frustration, our anger, our grief – into a collective voice of action. We made a leaflet with Martin's picture on it and in one day organized hundreds from all backgrounds in a candlelight march, not only to remember Martin, but to make a common commitment to not stop – but to continue to use our lives as Martin did – to empower others – and to work to make the dream of equality a reality. That moment is so vivid to me today – and I won't forget it --- Just like I won't forget two years later when I graduated from the University of Colorado and again I was angry – angry because the farmworkers, under the leadership of Cesar Chavez, had been demanding bathrooms in the

fields, better wages with benefits – and had gone on strike in the grape fields. Angry – because just when the strike and boycott were effective – the defense department under the Nixon administration was buying tons of those boycotted grapes and shipping them to feed the soldiers, the majority being young people of color, on the front lines. I questioned, like Martin had done, and asked what kind of justice is this when the sons of farm workers are fighting abroad when their fathers and mothers can't even get the right of bathrooms in the fields. I was angry – but rather than reacting, with only \$57 in my pocket and the consciousness of making the dream of equality a reality, I took a bus to Delano, California to experience and be part of a farm worker movement that espoused the same principles of how to use our lives – that Martin and the civil rights movement had stood on. And again, there was that moment – that life-changing moment when Cesar Chavez spoke and challenged us as how to use our lives: In challenging the young students volunteering with the union, Cesar proposed that “we have only one life to live” and that “the highest level of using your life is in service to others.” I heard Cesar say this when I was 22 – and now I am in my 60's – and I want all of you to know that the influence Martin, my two roommates, and the civil rights movement had --- that the words Cesar and the farm worker movement conveyed – have led me to use every day of my life since that time – in service to building community, to empower others, and to make the dream of equality a reality..

In a presentation that I recently made when I received an award at the Nathaniel and Elizabeth Davis Civil Rights Legacy dinner, I thanked the organizers for honoring me as an intellectual and a community organizer. Similarly today, I thank the organizers of this event for having me as a keynote speaker. And, as I mentioned in that presentation, “like many of my other community organizer friends here today or out there in the trenches, we don't often hold any high positions and we don't have a lot of funds. We do a lot of acts that no one knows about – but the persons who are the recipients of those acts – know – and our reputations come to be based on our principles and values. Because we are troublemakers with a lot in spiritual value but with little in material capital – we are not often honored or recognized. We are often thought of as crazy! – You know – when I returned from having met Cesar Chavez in Delano back in the early '70's and I turned to organizing to make the dream of equity a reality – my parents thought that I had lost it. My mother confronted me outright and told me that I could be using my education to make lots of Money. I responded – Mama usted me enseñó – you taught me – and I reminded her that she had taught me to pray to San Martin De Porres (as a role model) – a black

saint, who as the patron saint of the poor, was always giving what little he had to those in the lower classes.. I told her “that is all that I am doing.” And it was at that point – that she, and my father, began to understand what I was all about.

That is why it is an honor to be here with you today on this special day. As community organizers, we usually are climbing many hills everyday – and we face obstacles that try our resilience. I have had many of my students ask the same question that was asked of Martin Luther King – what is it that keeps you going? How is it that you have made your commitment for social change -- a life time commitment?

It is the same question that Barack Obama faced when, as a community organizer in Chicago, he read about the sacrifices ordinary people made during the civil rights movement, he imagined himself in their place, as a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee worker “convincing a family of sharecroppers to register to vote,” or as an organizer of the Montgomery bus boycott.. In doing so, he formed a commitment beyond himself to figure out how to develop new leaders with a strong consciousness.

When his fellow community organizers became tired, Obama had them look out of their office windows while asking, “What do you suppose is going to happen to those boys out there?....You say you’re tired, the same way most folks out here are tired....Who’s going to make sure [those boys] get a fair shot?” He challenged the organizers to think about why they were organizing – to look at some of the structural foundations of the problems those young people were facing. This led to the development of a long-term commitment among some of these organizers to create social change that went beyond the challenges that they were facing in the immediate world around them.

Martin Luther King was an intellectual – but he was also a community organizer. Oh yes – he was – there is a tendency to not teach that much about that part of him.

Oh -- Yes, we know that Martin entered Morehouse College at the age of 15, graduated with a B.A. degree in Sociology, enrolled in Crozer Theological Seminary, and received a doctoral degree at Boston University in Systematic Theology in 1955. Yes, Martin was a writer, a philosopher, a poet, an author, and the youngest individual to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

But a distinction of Martin, brothers and sisters, was that he was an organizer – he was there in the streets with the grass-roots people – and in so doing -- he put his studies, his philosophies, his principles, and values into practice for social change. We have to be very

careful, brothers and sisters, of how the mainstream historians, little by little, water down such leaders as Martin or Malcolm and the movements that made them.

And oh yes -- He had a dream and he knew that “thoughts are no better than good dreams unless they are put to action.”

Too often, I believe, this society tends to diminish the contributions of such individuals who dare to challenge the status quo and who dare to use both their intellectual and activist skills (against all odds) to fight injustice. We have many examples, in our history, who followed the same road as Martin. We have the example of Kenneth Clarke, Gloria Anzaldua, Fred Korematzu, Annie Dodge Wauneka, Russell Means, Chief Joseph, John Brown, Harvey Milk, Luisa Moreno, Carlos Bulosan, Sojourner Truth, Septima Clark, Coretta Scott King, James A. Hood (who just passed away this week) and those still with us – such as Nelson Mandela, Dolores Huerta, Sonia Sotomayor – and so many others.

While it is important to remember such individuals, who are often left out of our history books, it is also important to point out that they were – and are-- the products of social movements that were -- and are --making the dream of equity a reality..

Hence, while it is important to bring to center stage – the leadership of Martin Luther King – it is important to commemorate today – the thousands of people involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott between 1955 and 1956, the Greensboro sit-in of 1960, and the marches – such as the Selma to Montgomery marches of 1965 in Alabama.

It was the tenacity of the Montgomery Improvement Association to desegregate buses that made Martin Luther King a nationally known figure. It is important, brothers and sisters to remember the courage of Rosa Parks, a seamstress by profession and a secretary for the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, who took a stand and refused to move to the back of the bus. It is important to remember fifteen year old Claudette Colvin who, before Rosa Parks, was actually the first African American woman arrested early in 1955 for refusing to give up her seat.

It is equally important to remember all the community organizers who responded to the arrest of Rosa Parks and historical segregation through developing their own system of carpools – through cycling and walking – as alternatives to riding the bus. I point these historical actions out – not only to bring to center stage community organizers, leaders, and organizations that sacrificed so much – but to also point out that their efforts were not in vain. Their sacrifices, in

clearing paths to making the dream of equity a reality, resulted in a 1956 Supreme Court ruling – that Alabama’s racial segregation laws for buses were unconstitutional.

Martin’s dream for a more peaceful world – led him to take a stand that was most unpopular at the time – but helped clear the path for peace – by taking a stand and uniting thousands from all backgrounds in opposing the War in Viet Nam. Martin’s Dream of a union of people with equitable wages and benefits led him to Memphis, Tennessee to support a strike of hundreds of working people of all colors, ages, and genders who were aiming their efforts – not at each other – but at the bosses who controlled their standard of living.

Although Martin Luther King was killed in Memphis – his actions helped clear the path for making the dream of a union a reality. Ultimately, this 64-day strike ended with a union contract for the sanitation workers – and it gave life to an ongoing union movement in Memphis and public employee union organizing in other parts of the South. What was most important in organizing to turn MLK’s dream into a reality – was the building of coalitions – around principles that advocated using non-violent methods to solve conflicts – and using one’s life to empower others. This is something that was in common at that time – and is something that we need to have in common now. Particularly – when there is so much violence – at a time when there is an economic crisis – high unemployment – so many of our people incarcerated in the jails rather than being admitted into our halls of higher education. There is a tendency to take out one’s suffering – one’s pain – on one’s self – or on each other – rather than using that energy to organize others – to empower others. MLK did not just do service in our communities by writing, by speaking, by singing – by holding hands and singing “We shall Overcome” – he was part of actions that included marches, sit-ins, fasts, and boycotts. He reached out to all people of all backgrounds . He built multi-racial unity and stood with the working poor, immigrants, and unions. He went against the grain – and placed principles and values – what was right – in the forefront.

Today, we are still working to make the dream a reality – and we are facing the challenge of different paths before us. Even after the results of the recent election, we are still facing different directions in this country. One path -- wants to take back all the victories that leaders like MLK and movements such as that of civil rights, women, and labor – were able to win (such

voting rights through the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965. Oh yes – taking back – when in the last election there were well-funded efforts in state-after-state to curtail the participation of poor and minority voters by the use of unjust voter ID requirements. Oh yes -- “taking back” recently hit close to home when some groups sought to take back the history of a more diverse city council by turning at-large elections to district elections (that came out of challenges in the courts to allow for more equal representation from communities of color). In Arizona, laws have been passed to wipe out ethnic studies. This is a trend that is thriving on creating fear and divisions in our diverse communities and using their genuine concerns to blame immigrants, poor people, women, LGBT communities, unions, and working people from all background-- for the economic problems in this country. In this trend, there are those who place profit above everything else – who vilify working people for all they have achieved – calling Medicare and Social Security – and Head Start – and unemployment insurance – hand-outs – when those changes came through the strategies and efforts of such individuals as those we are celebrating today. There is a tendency to call any effort that provides avenues to full health care to our

communities as “the government intervening in our lives” – as a mispending of funds. They make it out to look like the funds that are being spent -- are not our funds. Brothers and sisters, that is our tax money – and we have a right to have a voice in how our tax monies should be spent. Now I don’t know about you – but I would rather have my taxes spent on a solid infrastructure with good jobs and good benefits, good teachers, a quality education, good health care, good pre-school programs, a clean environment -- than on bail-outs to corporations and banks that the Wall Street Journal just reported, are already making the biggest profits ever.

Brothers and sisters, there is another trend – that represents the legacy of Martin Luther King -- it is here before us – look around – we are people of all colors here – all backgrounds here – celebrating the trend that has been seeking to build unity among this society’s diverse groups in building the types of alliances and partnerships that are necessary to meet the challenges of a global economy. This is a trend that is seeking to turn the energy of frustration into building a new society – where the Gross National Product is not just defined on the basis of profit – but is gauged on whether production is truly helping all of us to have a better quality of life.

In the last election – the door wasn’t completely opened – but it was opened somewhat. And we have to thank a movement of Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, LGBT

communities, workers from all backgrounds -- who built a movement that built multi-racial alliances and coalitions, galvanized new voters, and united hundreds of thousands around a “social change” agenda. In moving large numbers of people around the ideas of equity and full participation in the life and direction of U. S. society, this social movement had the particularity of bringing diverse communities in raising their voices that “we cannot continue as it is – with 50 million in poverty – and a structure that sidesteps the waste and toxins in our communities that are 30 percent higher than at any time in history.

In the development of this movement, it is important to laud the spirit and tenacity of the young immigrant students (many who were brought here at an early age, grew up here, and who have succeeded at all levels in our society) and who, like Martin Luther King, had a dream to be treated with dignity as human beings -- Dream Students who did not give up when the Dream Act was voted down in Congress but continued to organize until a deferred action policy was implemented – and are still organizing today --- alongside broad grass-roots coalitions -- for the legalization of the 12 million undocumented immigrants (who have contributed billions to the economy and now have the capacity to contribute even more if they are rewarded, rather than being criminalized, for those contributions).

It is important to laud those new leaders who have positioned themselves in political offices with new visions about how to run cities and schools in a new way -- how to support our local businesses to keep the revenues in our communities (you know, if we shop in our local small businesses, out of every \$100, \$68 goes back into the community) – to make big corporations socially responsible. Yes, important to laud those new leaders who are questioning how we take care of the environment, how we deal with the trash problem, and who want to ensure that these problems aren’t placed in the living spaces of people of color and working people. We are heartened by the rise of emerging leaders who were out there getting out the vote, to save collective bargaining, to save our libraries, and to support those propositions that invest in our toddlers/our children, in our precious teachers, and in our schools – (who worked daily to stop the cycle of having to put so much of our tax dollars in prisons rather than in the preventive pre-school and school programs that have shown to be effective in stopping this cycle).

We can easily be sidetracked. Brothers and Sisters – the reality is that – although African Americans, Latinos, Asian Pacific Americans – overwhelmingly voted for Obama – that the

majority of white male did not – and surprisingly for many – even when one trend castigated women -- the majority of white women did not. Brothers and Sisters, there is no getting around that we are still a polarized society – and that the verdict about which way this country will go – is not finalized. We know what can happen when scapegoating becomes the trend – we know what can happen when the sincere anger of working people for lack of jobs and quality of life – is channeled into violence against immigrants, women, LGBT communities, unions, poor people, and families on assisted living..

We cannot let these appeals to irrational emotion – lead our communities in blaming each other – so we beat each other up. No, instead, in the tradition of Martin Luther King, we need to turn anger into opportunity – and build a movement of turning our collective dreams for equity into a reality. Much like those who refused to sit in the back of the bus during Martin’s time -- we must now say – I will no longer sit at the back of the decision-making process – and, with my brothers and sisters alongside – we will move to the very front by voting with our feet and with our minds – to build a movement in this country – one which can help advance a quality of life for all – a just quality of environment for all, a just quality of education, health care, employment, education, and human rights – for all. This is the legacy of Martin Luther King --- not only to celebrate his life and the thousands who won so many victories through the civil rights movement – but to walk out of here and make a commitment for the rest of our living days – to not rest – in developing a new direction --- developing a future that is emerging -- that will draw out the common legacies in the contributions that we have historically made to this society – That will build alliances of collaboration -- That will build a political power base for the kind of equal and just world that we all have the right – to live in. This is truly how we can celebrate the meaning of Martin Luther King’s legacy – and make Martin’s dream of a “transformation” a reality – a “transformation” where little black boys and black girls (and today we say people of all backgrounds) will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls (and people of all colors) and walk together as sisters and brothers. Today, brothers and sisters – we are truly brothers and sisters. Si se Puede – yes we can, yes we can, yes we can.