

Wyoming Martin Luther King Day Celebration Address

by
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Good afternoon.

I would like to thank Sandy Brooks, Rita Watson and all of the members of the organizing committee who are responsible for this glorious event. I very much appreciate the opportunity to address you today.

45 years ago, this very month, less than five years after the tragic assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a group of students at Cheyenne Central High School determined that it would be altogether fitting and proper to hold a school-wide assembly to honor the legacy of Dr. King, so they presented the proposal to the Cheyenne Central High Student Council. The Student Council, though probably at least 98% white, was imbued with the idealistic passion of youth and voted overwhelmingly to hold the Martin Luther King assembly.

When the Central High Student Council forwarded the King assembly proposal to the school principal, to their surprise and dismay, he announced that the school would not hold a mandatory assembly to honor Dr. King. He indicated that mandatory assemblies were only reserved for important activities such as the Homecoming Competition or for the Turnabout/Sadie Hawkins Day. But, Dr. Martin Luther King, a Nobel Peace Prize winner who led the greatest movement for social justice in the 20th century and who laid down his very life so that all of God's children might one day live in a world where they would be truly "Free at Last – Free at Last," such a man, was not worthy of having a mandatory assembly in his honor.

Though it was 45 years ago, some of you may yet remember what those young students did in response to the Central High principal's egregious display of racial insensitivity and discrimination. In the finest tradition of Dr. King and the magnificent Civil Rights Movement that he led, the students organized a demonstration and passed out leaflets protesting the principal's actions and demanding that a mandatory assembly be held. Because the protests were so zealous and because the black and white students were so united in their just demands, the principal was forced to allow an assembly to take place to honor Dr. King. And although the assembly was not mandatory, the majority of the students throughout the entire school insisted that their teachers release them from classes to attend, and the vast majority of them did, on this very day 45 years ago.

And what happened to the student leaders who organized the protest in support of the Martin Luther King assembly? Well, as we stand here today on the steps of the

Supreme Court of Wyoming, I am reminded that the principal rewarded the initiative and First Amendment advocacy of the student leaders by temporarily suspending ten of them from school and permanently expelling three of them.

And though we gather here today some 4½ decades later, I imagine that a few of you may yet recall that, yes, I was one of those three student leaders who was expelled from Cheyenne Central High School, banned from enrolling in East High, and never allowed to participate in graduation commencement with my classmates, because I had the audacity to stand up and to declare that the life and legacy of Dr. Martin L. King was worthy of celebration.

But, it was Dr. King who declared that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

And so it is, that this mighty arc has brought me back home to Cheyenne, 45 years after my expulsion, unbroken and unbowed, standing before this throng and God Almighty and declaring that the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is indeed worthy to be celebrated.

But I must confess that when Sandy Brooks first reached out to me several weeks ago to ask if I would be willing to speak on this occasion, I initially hesitated. But then I reflected back on that transformative experience at Central High 45 years ago and I knew that I had to come back.

Even more importantly, when I spoke to my 85-year-old mother, Mrs. Mary A. Tyler, about the invitation, and recalled all of the pain and anguish that she experienced 45 years ago, as she witnessed her child’s precious educational opportunities imperiled by misguided educators, I knew I had to come back, more so for my mother than for me.

Even more importantly, my mother advised me that there had been talk about actually cancelling this event altogether and that Sandy Brooks had assumed the heavy mantle of leadership and said “No! No, we will not cancel this celebration of the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King!”

Sandy Brooks’ reaction to those who felt that there was no longer a need for this event reminded me of Dr. King’s reaction to the white ministers in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, who expressed to him that there was no need for him to continue to conduct demonstrations in that city. In response, Dr. King wrote his now famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” declaring:

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town.

Yes, Sandy Brooks' insistence that this celebration continue clearly echoed Dr. King's admonition to the Birmingham clergy that he would not wait, but would press forward with demonstrations for freedom. Dr. King eloquently wrote further:

When you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; ... when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness" – then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

Dr. King knew why we could not wait in 1963 and so too did Sandy Brooks understand why we cannot wait today!

Unfortunately, the conditions that Dr. King described so poignantly in his 1963 letter are all too familiar to us today. Yes we have made tremendous progress over the past 50 years since Dr. King's passing. Indeed, we even had 8 glorious years with Barack Obama as our first Black President. However, as Biggie would say, "Was that all a dream???" For we now find ourselves in the nightmare of the Trump swamp with the bloodhounds nipping at our heels.

The KKK, Nazis and other white supremacists are emboldened and resurgent. They boldly march through the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia and elsewhere with torches in their hands and racist venom in their mouths. Rather than calling them out, our current president actually embraces them within his very administration. Worse yet, just this past week the president's lips were dripping with the words of racist disparagement and denunciation of Haitian, Salvadoran and African immigrants.

While today's climate of racist terror and antagonism mirrors that of yesteryear, so too does the socio-economic plight of African-Americans.

The standard of living for African-Americans, though vastly improved from generations before, remains woefully far below that of white Americans. Indeed, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that Black unemployment of 7.0% is more than twice the rate of white unemployment of 3.4% and remains near the highest level of white unemployment during the Great Recession. In other words, while white America has recovered from its Great Recession, we remain languishing within ours, but no one seems to notice or to care.

Our babies continue to die at a rate that mirrors some Third World countries and is entirely unacceptable. Indeed, a recent Kaiser Family Foundation study found that

the Black infant mortality rate of 11.3 deaths per 1,000 births is more than double the white infant mortality rate of 5.1 deaths per 1,000 births.

Our children continue to receive a lesser quality and quantity of education than their white counterparts. Indeed, U.S. Census data shows that the Black high school graduation rate is 6.3% lower than the white high school graduation rate, and the black college graduation rate is 13.7% lower than the white college graduation rate.

Our young men continue to be incarcerated at a rate that itself should be considered criminal. Indeed, a 2016 study done by the Sentencing Project found that African-Americans are incarcerated at a rate 5.1 times greater than that of white Americans. In my adopted state of Georgia, as well as in 11 other states, more than half the prison population is Black. Even here in my native state of Wyoming – the “Equality State” where Blacks constitute just 1.6% of the population – we comprise 5% of this state’s prison population.

Tragically, the genocide of our young men at the hands of the police continues unabated. Just 10 days ago, on January 5, 2018, the Washington Post Database Project reported that police officers shot and killed 987 people in the U.S. in 2017. Astoundingly, while Black men only account for 6% of the total U.S. population, they accounted for 22% of all people shot and killed by the police last year.

While the entire world was gripped by the righteous demonstrations following the 2014 death of unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the Washington Post reports that in 2017 alone there were 19 other such unarmed Black men shot and killed by the police throughout the nation.

Where is the outrage? Do Black lives really matter?

Where is the demand for an end to this madness?

Who will resurrect Dr. King’s clarion call for this Nation to finally “rise up, and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”?

On this day when we gather to celebrate the majestic memory of the man named King, the perilous predicament of the present will not allow us to simply engage in nostalgic commemoration.

The task is not yet done. The journey is not yet complete. We must do more!

The vision preached by Dr. King a half century ago was that his four little children would one day live in a nation where they would not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. Sadly, the tears of Trayvon Martin’s mother remind us that far too frequently the color of one’s skin remains a license to profile, to arrest and to even murder, with no regard for the content of one’s character. Regressive stand your ground laws must be repealed. Federal anti-profiling legislation must be enacted. Comprehensive immigration reform must be adopted to end the

harassment of our brown brothers and to provide a path to citizenship for them today, just as was done for the millions of Europeans who passed through Ellis Island's splendid gate yesterday.

At the Immortal March on Washington in 1963, Dr. King insisted that we could not rest and be satisfied as long as black folk in Mississippi could not vote and those in New York believed that they had nothing for which to vote. Today with the Supreme Court having eviscerated the Voting Rights Act and with numerous states clamoring to legislatively codify voter suppression measures, not only must we not be satisfied, but we must fight back boldly.

Too many of our unknown heroes and sheroes fought, bled and died for us to have the precious right to vote, for us to now sit back and timidly allow our franchise to be taken away or diminished. We must not rest until the Congress of the United States restores the voting rights protections discarded by a Supreme Court blind to the blatant theft of the black vote.

Paramount to Dr. King's fervent dream was the commitment that African-Americans gain full economic opportunity and to "not be confined to a basic mobility from a smaller ghetto to a larger one." Today with 30% of all children of color in this country living below the poverty line, we know that the dream is far from being realized.

As we struggle to recover from the worst economic calamity since the Great Depression, America needs a Marshall Plan for our cities to provide jobs, infrastructure improvements and a true and lasting stimulus to the economy, that benefits those most in need – the least of these God's children.

While we are inspired today by the passion and power of Dr. King's exhortations of yesteryear, we must always be mindful of his fundamental imperative of love. He sought the Beloved Community where we would all live together in peace and justice and equality. We must embrace that love and cease the violence. No more senseless Newtown, Columbine, Pulse Nightclub or Las Vegas mass shootings. No more daily killings of our young people by our young people on the streets of the South Side of Chicago and countless other neighborhoods across the country. We need more gun control, but we also need more love.

Yes, we all need more love for each other: black and white and yellow and red and brown. Gay and straight. Christians, Muslims and Jews. All of God's children loving one another.

We must embrace love and hold on to that powerful spiritual which inspired Dr. King's generation and inspires us still today: "We Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around."

We ain't gonna let nobody turn us around,

We gonna keep on Walking

We gonna keep on Talking
We gonna keep on Voting
We gonna keep on Job Building
We gonna keep on Educating
We gonna keep on Mentoring
We gonna keep on Community Building
We gonna keep on Ending Violence
We gonna keep on Creating Peace
We ain't gonna let nobody turn us around
We gonna keep on marching down to Freedom Land!

So when I stand in your presence today and reflect on my personal journey over the past 45 years, and our journey as a people over the past 400 years since our arrival on these shores, I know that we are moving in the right direction.

Indeed, I can almost hear Dr. King humming that anthem of the Movement, "People Get Ready There's a Train-a-Coming."

People get ready there's a train a-coming.

A train that takes us to:

A land where we have decent housing and not dope houses.

A land where we have schools that teach our children and do not defeat our children.

A land where we have enterprising entrepreneurs and not incarcerated inmates.

A land where we have fathers who create stable families and do not merely procreate innocent babies.

Yes a train to Freedom Land!

50 years ago, Dr. King ascended into Heaven with a mighty torch to guide our train to Freedom Land. Here we are today standing in the midst of that eternal light. If we all could but catch a flicker from that ferocious flame of freedom, we could each light a small candle of courage and in our own voice cry out "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine!" If we each let our little light shine then we truly shall overcome! Yes,

if we each do our own small part in our homes, in our churches, in our synagogues, in our mosques, in our schools, on our jobs, in our organizations and in every aspect of our lives, to advance the cause of freedom, then surely “a change is gonna come” and “take it from me, someday we’ll all be free.”

And on that triumphant day we will offer up our praise to the “God of our weary years and the God of our silent tears, He who has brought us thus far on our way, who by His might led us into the light.”

And together we as a people, as a nation, and indeed as a world will proclaim in unison:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

His truth is marching on!”