

MLK Symposium Opening (1/21/91)

Theme: MLK: Making His Dream a Reality

Good Morning and greetings to Michigan colleagues, honored friends and guests

Very special welcome to our speaker today, Regent Adelaide Sanford,
to our Native American artists,
and to the students from Detroit and local schools.

We are delighted that you can share this day with us.

Once again the University of Michigan community

comes together to honor the life
of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,
to learn from his teaching,
and to renew our personal and institutional commitment
to help achieve his dream for peace and justice in the world.

Some might say that anything we do

as individuals or as a university
can't possibly be important
in making Dr. King's dream a reality
that we are too insignificant, inadequate or inherently flawed
to be take an effective part of the struggle for justice.

Indeed, there is a lot of fatalism/pessimism in the world today.

--a lot of it on our campuses--

a feeling among some that we are helpless pawns
of large and sometimes seemingly malignant forces that determine our
fate

or the belief of some that we are so fundamentally flawed
in our character or history or institutions
that hatred and injustice are our inescapable legacy.

And such pessimism might be understandable.

Certainly, as I and many others have been proclaiming
our university and our world are being transformed
by mighty forces of change abroad in the world
change that are completely transforming
our population, economy, society and culture.

Clearly we can't deny that the challenges we face are formidable .

Nor can we escape the reality that our human flaws are deep and abiding
and lie at the root of our world's most pressing problems.

We need only look about us to see the sad evidence.

For our campus is a microcosm of the world today.

We feel here most of the divisions and conflicts--
the racism, prejudice, discrimination, fear, intimidation.
that so painfully afflict the world at large--

This is especially so today as the effects of war reverberate among us.

Our Arab, Arab American,

Palestinian and Muslim students and colleagues are fearful
and have already felt the stings of unreasoning prejudice and
harassment.

Our Israeli and Jewish students are also anguished and afraid.

Our community is divided about our nation's role in this war and in the world.

Some of our students, faculty and staff are serving in the military
and many have friends and loved ones in the conflict.
and they fear for them--- feel proud of them.

Some among us support this war as the only means to enduring peace
while others oppose this war or all war out of equally deeply held
conviction.

I think many may also feel uneasy that the burden of this war
is being borne disproportionately by those less advantaged in our society.
while we on campus are granted the privileges of uninterrupted study.

In keeping with the meaning
of this day honoring Dr. King,
I hope that despite our differences,
we will all unite in a spirit of compassion, concern,
for all who will suffer and die in the war
as well as for those on our campus and community
who are deeply feeling its effects.

Let us show respect for each other and for reason
in the resolution of our conflicts.

The Gulf war is only one of the many dangerous conflicts

that divide the human family.

Prejudice and discrimination and the oppression of one group by another
is an enduring burden of our human experience.

Apartheid in south Africa, Protestants and Catholics in Ireland,
Basques in Spain,
Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in South Asia,
Chinese and Tibetans, Muslims and Christians in Lebanon,
Latvians, Estonians, Russians and Georgians in the Soviet Union.

The painful truth is that no continent and few nations are free
of conflict, fear and hatred among peoples
based on race, religion, caste, language, ethnicity, ideology, class, gender.
And we see many of these divisions and conflicts
reflected here in our campus.

We humans are, indeed, tragically flawed

by our drive to define ourselves by rejecting and oppressing “others”.
And out of this primitive and deep rooted human impulse
flows much of the injustice and suffering we see in our world.

But just because a problem is old

or seemingly universal and intractable
does not mean we can absolve ourselves
of responsibility for trying to overcome our defects.

Indeed, we must do so.

In today’s world, we can’t afford

to tolerate racism, and prejudice and discrimination
any longer.

We cannot live divided from one another.

Our world has become one world, one society.
glorious in its rich diversity of peoples
but indivisible in our shared fate.
what happens in one corner of our globe now is felt in every other.

Dr. King believed in our common humanity.

Dr. King was no pessimist.

He never felt we were helplessly to bring change.

Instead, Dr. King was a dreamer.

Dr. King taught us to be hopeful.

He taught us to have faith in ourselves and confidence in one another.
He believed that together we could overcome our own shortcomings
that we could change ourselves, our society and our institutions for the
better.

Dr. King's dream for us--

is that we will bring justice, freedom and peace to the world
that we will overcome hatred, violence, and oppression,
not with the force of arms

but instead armed only with hope, faith, love and courage.

He proved the truth of his dream every day of his life.

showing that one individual, willing to think and act courageously,
can change the whole world.

Dr. King dies for his dream and, in doing so, he proved

that not even death can end the power of his dream.

In dying, he endures and inspires all of us.

Dr. King showed us that we can change

we can come together.

He proved in his life that a single person can make the difference
can overcome and change the world.

Dr. King was a peacemaker.

But, as he said:

“True peace is not just the absence of tension;
it is the presence of justice.”

What he did not say

was that it would be easy
to pursue his dream.

He showed it was hard, that we would have to sacrifice and struggle

He taught that we cannot leave the task to others.

If we believe in his dream, if we want to make it a reality,

We have to begin somewhere, we have to take a stand.

High Goals

Here at the University of Michigan

we have the chance to lead the way to the changes
that must come to our world.

Our University has a Mandate to build

a new model of a learning community

that thrives on the glorious and unique differences

each brings to our collective life
but at the same time is unified by our commitment
to democratic and scholarly values
---values that affirm justice, equality,
freedom and dignity for every person.

We have set for ourselves and our University the highest goals.

I don't know if we will make made Dr. King's dream a reality here.

But I know that we are trying.

Of course, I also know that we will sometimes fail.

We will take the wrong turn, stumble, lose our way at times,

be confused, not have all the answers.

But there is an old saying among us engineers.

If you never fail you just haven't set your goals high enough.

So a few misteps or mistakes shouldn't bother us

so long as we hold to our basic ideals and direction.

What must not change or falter is our personal and institutional

commitment to lead the University in a direction

that serves all the people of our society.

Of course I know that we can't accomplish

all of Dr. King's dream by ourselves.

But we must work together to do our part.

Together we can make a difference.

Together we can carry on Dr. King's great work

Together we can make his dream our reality.

And now, it is my pleasure to introduce one of the co-chairs

of the University's committee that has planned and coordinated our extensive program honoring Dr. King, including today's Symposium. Dr. Bunyan Brant is a very distinguished member of our faculty noted for his teaching and research in our School of Natural Resources. He currently heads the Detroit Area Study and is breaking new ground in our understanding of the interrelationships of race, economics, hazardous waste and environmental integrity. He is also a prominent community leader known for his commitment to positive social change.

I know you will all join me in thanking Dr. Bryan, co-chair, Anne Monterio, and their many colleagues and staff of the Office of Minority Affairs for their hard work.

I hope you will be able to take advantage of the many of the exciting and stimulating opportunities for learning that are planned today.

Now please join me in welcoming Professor Bryant.