

**Remaking America:  
Building Community By Design**

**By**

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Let me congratulate and thank you for setting aside this time to celebrate the life and honor the legacy of Martin Luther King. Around the world, people have been gathering in solemn assemblies like this: some to honor his memory as a hero who gave his life for the ideals for which they stand; others as a dissident who dared to challenge the prevailing social, political and moral orthodoxy; and some as a moral leader who called us to a higher and nobler purpose.

Each of these is an appropriate way to remember Dr. King, but I want to speak of him today as a patriot who in the tradition of the framers of the American constitution understood that if we were to form a more perfect union, we would have to first establish justice.

The historian Tacitus once defined patriotism as praiseworthy competition with one's ancestors. It seems fitting to recall that definition of civic virtue to this audience because it reminds us that each generation has a responsibility to contribute something as significant, as meaningful and even as extraordinary as those who preceded them. So while it is great to annually affirm Dr. King's message, it is even better to help carry on his mission.

The movement Martin Luther King led reached its peak during a period of intimidation and assault against people whose differences in culture and condition were regarded as a difference in status and kind. Forty three years after he gave his spell-binding "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial, we find new groups among those targeted, but the prejudice and discrimination remain just as insidious and the need for the engagement of people of goodwill just as critical.

Despite our best intentions and some times heroic efforts to walk in the footsteps of Martin Luther King, bias and bigotry still traffic the streets of our nation with an intensity that distracts from our national ideals, diminishes our national image and saps our national strength. It is with this in mind that I want to address the challenges we face in continuing his work. I think of him today as a patriot because when the framers of the American constitution thought about how to form a more perfect union, they wrote that we would have to establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare.

Dr. King sought to remind us in his life and work that these principles were not only good for the leaders of that time, but good advice for all times. Those who wrote the constitution were seeking to build an independent nation. We are seeking to cope with an interdependent world. They were trying to integrate a diverse people into a national community. We must learn to live in a world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time. Yet, I am convinced that the original principles still apply and want, thus, to look briefly at the implications of three of them for our engagement with the great issues of our time.

### **The Principle of Community**

Consider, first, the idea of community, our continuing efforts to form a more perfect union. Wherever Americans gather and whenever they are given a public voice, we hear the songs of a new patriotism and feel the solidarity of a new nationalism. Shortly after 9/11, pollsters and pundits suggested that we were more united than at almost any time in our history. I worried at the time, as I do now, that we might have been lulled into a sense of community that is not sustainable. We were clearly united in our pain and grief and we were both healed and bound together by our many acts of

generosity toward those who were the victims in New York and Washington. But I worried then, as I do now, that we may have been so busy celebrating the new spirit of community that we have not thought enough about how we sustain it.

As I stand here today proud to be an American and pleased with the many symbols of national unity, I am reminded of the caution offered some years ago by the psychiatrist and writer Scott Peck who wrote that we build community out of crisis and we build community by accident, but we do not know how to build community by design. He went on to suggest that the problem with building community out of crisis is that once the crisis is over, so usually is the spirit of community.

The question leaders in all sectors of our society must now address is how do we build community by design. How do we sustain the sense of community we so recently shared when the intensity of the crisis has diminished? How do we include all of our citizens in the new solidarity we embrace? When we think about the social glue that binds us together as a people, many point to the observations of the Frenchman Alexis deTocqueville. He thought he had stumbled on to the unifying element and he called it civic participation. He mused about everyone “taking an active part in the affairs of society.” But those who analyze civic engagement – voting and other forms of public activity – tell us that America’s social capital is on the decline.

Another foreigner and keen observer of American life was Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish economist and sociologist who wrote the American Dilemma. He saw the unifying element as “the American creed,” that cluster of ideas, institutions and habits that affirm the ideals of the essential dignity and equality of all human beings, of inalienable rights to freedom, justice and opportunity. But we find ourselves needing to depoliticize the discussion of values; for those who talk most about promoting “good values” too often want simply to argue that someone else has “bad values.” We need to use the concept of virtue in ways that heal rather than hurt, uplift rather than downgrade and promote openness to new forms of community rather than boundaries that circle the wagons around old prejudices and stereotypes. And here it is important to remember that when we took to the streets as deeply religious people in the 1960s, we did not seek to transpose the private virtues of our faith into the public policy of the nation. We called on the nation to live by its own values.

So how do we build community by design? It is has been my experience that when neighbors help neighbors, and even when strangers help strangers, both those who help and those who are helped are not only transformed, but they experience a new sense of connectedness. Getting involved in the needs of the neighbor provides a new perspective, a new way of seeing ourselves, a new understanding of the purpose of the human journey. When that which was “their” problem becomes “our” problem, the transaction transforms a mere association into a relationship that has the potential for new communities of meaning and belonging.

In other words, doing something for someone else – what John Winthrop called making the condition of others our own – is a powerful force in building community. When you experience the problems of the poor or troubled, when you help someone to find cultural meaning in a museum or creative expression in a painting, when you help to dispel prejudices or fight bigotry directed at your neighbors, you are far more likely to find common ground, and you are likely to find that in serving others you discover the

genesis of community. So the message of Martin Luther King for you today is to help transform the laissez-faire notion of live and let live into the principle of live and help live.

### **The Principle of Security**

Let me now say a word about the principle of security, what the framers of the constitution called promoting the common defense. It is increasingly very difficult to think of community without thinking of security. But to suggest that there is something in the life and legacy of Martin Luther King that can help promote the common defense is to be accused of moral idealism without political realism. Many Americans who honor him for his courage, his conviction and his commitment have dismissed his emphasis on love and nonviolence as an outdated philosophy that may have been effective in his time, but which has very limited relevance for the dangerous world in which we now live. What Martin Luther King did so successfully was to introduce the idea of soft power in a world dominated by hard power. And that is what we need to reconsider as we find our nation with increasing power, but declining influence.

We have become so accustomed to the influence of hard power, the flexing of military and economic muscle, that we have too often overlooked the influence of soft power: the ability to attract, inspire and motivate through the use of cultural, social and moral messages; the ability to create social harmony based on respect for local cultures, the honoring of local traditions and the elevation of local aspirations even as we seek to introduce new ways of thinking and new ways of being. As Professor Joseph Nye of the Kennedy School at Harvard put it, hard power is the ability to get others to do what we want. Soft power is the ability to get others to want the same things we do. The former is based on coercion. The latter is based on attraction. While hard power is the ability to inflict or prevent pain, it is soft power that is most likely to create influence or attraction that will endure.

I saw the impact of soft power first hand during my tour of duty as Ambassador to South Africa; for Nelson Mandela represented the epitome of soft power. His moral standing and political stature in the world went far beyond that suggested by the size of the military or the Gross National Product in South Africa. His influence came from the power of his ideals and the elegance of his humanity. He is the prototype of the leader who seeks power to distribute it rather than simply dominate it, the kind of leader who not only transforms, but also elevates all those with whom he/she is involved.

What Martin Luther King called loving the enemy, Nelson Mandela calls reconciliation with old adversaries. Both would agree, however, that it is not only the differences between racial, religious and cultural groups that must be reconciled but conflicting images of the past and competing visions of the future as well. Both would also agree with Archbishop Desmond Tutu that there could be no future without forgiveness because anger, hostility and resentment are corrosive of both the personality of the individual and the community. Both would agree with Desmond Tutu when he reminds us that forgiveness is part of a continuum that must include restitution if healing and reconciliation are to be enduring.

Here is what Desmond Tutu had to say in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*: “Once the wrong doer has confessed and the victim has forgiven, it does not mean that this is the end of the process --- confession, forgiveness and reparation are part of a continuum.”

He goes on to say “In South Africa the whole process of reconciliation has been placed in very considerable jeopardy by the enormous disparities between the rich, mainly the whites, and the poor, mainly the blacks. The huge gap between the haves and the have-nots, which was largely created and maintained by racism and apartheid, poses the greatest threat to reconciliation and stability.” The argument here is not over whether or not there should be some form of restitution, but over how it should take place. To quote again the Archbishop, who is affectionately referred to as The Arch, “Unless houses replace the hovels and shacks in which most blacks live, unless blacks gain access to clean water, electricity, affordable health care, decent education, good jobs and a safe environment – things which a vast majority of whites have – we can just as well kiss reconciliation good bye.”

These are not the words we tend to hear about South Africa from those seeking reconciliation in the Southern United States. The emphasis is on story telling and forgiveness from those who have been the victims while very little is said about reparations from those who have benefited and what form of restitution is morally defensible and politically feasible.

If Martin Luther King were alive today, he would still dream of a world where little white boys and black girls would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. But he would have no illusions about the corrosive power of the new civility that wants to ignore race rather than deal with its legacy. It is still true that if you break a man’s leg it is an illusion or a cruel deception to place him at the starting line of a 100-yard dash and claim that he now has an equal opportunity. There is simply no equal opportunity until the broken leg is taken into account and special efforts are made to mend it.

There is much talk of the potential of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in the South. Can they bring us closer together? Can they help us build and sustain a spirit of community among the diverse groups that populate the region? When Archbishop Tutu proposed a truth and reconciliation commission for the United States, the response of many African American leaders was that what we need is a justice and reconciliation commission; that even those who wrote the American constitution understood that if they were to form a more perfect union, they would have to first establish justice. The South Africans also debated whether they should form simply an amnesty commission, a justice and reconciliation commission. They chose truth because they recognized that they also had to reconcile conflicting images of the past. In the American South, we may need to reconcile conflicting images of the present. When Ralph Ellison wrote *The Invisible Man*, he pointed out how we had made the poor invisible, but today every white family knows, or knows about, at least one black family that is doing well, so they assume that those who are not are the victims of self-inflicted wounds. They fail to see, and if they do see they fail to understand, the insidious legacy, not simply of slavery but of formal segregation that was our own intentional under development of a people.

The idea of truth and reconciliation commissions that simply allow people to tell their story may have some short-term therapeutic value, but if they are to contribute to long-term healing and reconciliation that can endure, they must seek not only forgiveness but restitution as well. When one thinks of similarities between South Africa and the Southern United States, we have only to recall the images from the recent disaster in New Orleans to remind us that both regions reflect the best of the first world and the worst of

the third world simultaneously. In both regions, there are reasons for optimism that the finest elements of the first world can be used to finally eliminate the vestiges of the third world. But there must first be a national will. There clearly is in South Africa, but we have a long ways to go in the United States.

### **Promoting the General Welfare**

And now I want to conclude with an observation about the third principle in the trilogy of public values that seem essential to continuing the work of Martin Luther King in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The framers of the constitution described it as promoting the general welfare, but the demands of an interdependent world are very different from those of a small agrarian nation. As Jim Wolfenson, the former president of the World Bank reminds us, security will be difficult as long as twenty percent of the global population receives more than eighty percent of the global income. Security will be difficult as long as the average income for the richest twenty countries is thirty seven times the average of the poorest twenty – a gap that has more than doubled in the past four years. Security will be difficult as long as 1.2 billion people still live under less than a dollar a day and 2.8 billion still live on less than two dollars a day.

Wolfenson goes on to say that the conflicts that now plague our world are not merely accidents of history. With all the forces making our world smaller, it is time to realize that we live together in one world, not two; time to realize that the fight against poverty, racism and marginalization is the fight for global peace and security; time to realize that we have a historic opportunity that we dare not allow to pass us by.

When Wolfenson talks about changing our way of thinking, we begin to see more clearly the relationship between community and security. Building community is no longer as simple as when we were a group of neighbors who helped build each other's barns or came together to sew in quilting bees. Martin Luther King understood that the real superiority of any form of government comes not so much from how its leaders deal with its friends, but how they deal with their enemies. He understood that the best way to demonstrate the efficacy of our democracy abroad is to demonstrate that it can work equitably for all of our citizens at home.

The more interdependent our world becomes, the more people in our own neighborhoods and even on our college campuses are turning inward to smaller communities of meaning and memory. Some people see this as reason for despair, but it may be that the first phase of the search for common ground is the search for beginnings and that remembering and even regrouping are often necessary preconditions for developing a more expansive sense of community.

As I travel around the United States and, indeed, the world, I hear more and more people saying that until there is respect for their primary community of identity, they will find it difficult to embrace the larger community in which they function. I am, thus, reminded of the statement of the African American mystic, poet and theologian Howard Thurman who was fond of saying "I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you." Can you imagine how different our world would be if more Americans were able to say I want to be an American without making it difficult for Arabs to be Arabs, Africans to be Africans and Asians to be Asians. Can you imagine how different our communities would be if more Christians were able to say I want to be a Christian without making it difficult for a Jew to be a Jew, a Muslim to be a Muslim or a Hindu to

be a Hindu. It is only as we develop this sort of discernment that we come to truly understand and appreciate the life and legacy of Martin Luther King.

So there you have it, the three public values that should have primacy in our continuing efforts to form a more perfect union. I hope some of you will pledge this evening to help demonstrate each in your own way that diversity need not divide, that pluralism rightly understood and rightly practiced is a benefit and not a burden, and that the fear of difference is a fear of the future. The Greek mathematician Archimedes is reported to have said "Give me a lever long enough and I can move the world." Those of you at this university have been given the lever; I hope you will use it not simply to help improve the quality of life in the local community, but to walk in the footsteps of Martin Luther King and to help move the world.