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25th Annual Martin Luther King Jr., Celebration Dinner, 2010

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25th Annual Martin Luther King Jr.
Celebration Dinner
January 24, 2010

Welcome, and let us extend great thanks to Kelly and all of the 2010 celebration committee – what a wonderful and timely gathering.

Indeed, this evening, as we gather for the 25th annual celebration of the life and the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., we cannot turn our eyes away from the news and images from the nation of Haiti, an ongoing catastrophe of death, destruction, and suffering that's almost impossible to comprehend.

From the moment we first heard the news, this university and this community have joined millions of others in an effort to rush money, resources, people and equipment to help the Haitians, who are so close to us in geography, so intertwined in history, and part of many of our families.

Memories of other devastations, Katrina and its aftermath, are still fresh, and so we're also asking ourselves: How can we do it right this time?

As we work to send aid and support right away, we must also think about how to be helpful as the Haitians rebuild over the long run, about how to make connections that can be sustained. "Let's emphasize being part of that," Professor Paula Johnson of our College of Law told me. "Let's not just drop in. Let's be there for the long term."

When the news cycle changes and Haiti is no longer the main story, it is not an option to shrug our shoulders and turn away, even though, as Dr. Paul Farmer, the founder of Partners in Health in Haiti, has said, it is the curse of humanity "that it learns to tolerate even the most horrible situations by habituation."¹

But we cannot walk away because, as Dr. King wrote in his letter from the Birmingham jail, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."²

¹ Quoted in Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World* (New York: Random House Paperbacks, 2004) 61.

²The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," April 16, 1963, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986) 290.

We and the Haitians are one, and the act of helping them demands what we ourselves would want: respect, compassion and humility. For now, even if we can only send money, even if we can just watch from far away, we must make that effort to truly *see* the Haitians. When a broadcaster describes “looting” and the camera clearly shows us a group of thirsty little boys gathered over a pack of water bottles, each of them taking just one bottle and walking away, we do not need to be like passive smokers, as Lani Guinier would say,³ inhaling the toxic fumes of an oppressive discourse. We can choose to *see* them as if they were *our* thirsty boys; to see their plight, even as we understand that lawlessness is not the answer that the Haitians want either.

Justice requires that we *see and hear* each other at home and abroad. This is urgent for us here today, as our larger Syracuse and Central New York community is home to many families from Haiti, and our students at Syracuse have deep Haitian roots as well.

Yet, these local – global resonances go beyond the immediate too, imploring us to make other connections between suffering abroad and the suffering right here at home. When there are more African American men behind bars than in college, when one in nine black men between the ages of 20 and 34 is incarcerated, we must make those connections.

When millions of people are out of work and the great gulfs between rich and poor keep growing, we must heed Dr. King’s warning---even more true today than it was in 1967--- that for the poor people in America, as well as the poor in other nations “there is a kind of strangulation in the air.”⁴

The revolution in values that Dr. King called for, the new structure for social justice, must begin with our connections to each other, as people and not as things, in conversations characterized by respect and reciprocity, of the kind that gives rise to the “trustful talk among strangers”⁵ that is the essence of both democracy and justice. These conversations may be full of disagreement, as the social theorist

³ Lani Guinier, “Race and Reality in a Front-Porch Encounter,” *The Chronicle Review, The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 20 July 2009.

⁴ The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., “The Trumpet of Conscience,” from sermons given for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation during November and December 1967 as part of the seventh annual Massey Lectures, in *A Testament of Hope*, 644.

⁵ Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v Board of Education* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) xxii.

Danielle Allen has written, but they must be free of mutual disdain,⁶ and therefore build trust without erasing difference.

And as we have these conversations, we must pay special attention, today and every day, to the connections we make with the children – they are our future; they will decide the fate of our democracy and they must end up in college not behind bars – either the real bars of prison or the effective barriers of poverty and racism. A community is judged in the end by how it treats all of its children – that is why we focus so intently on Saying Yes to Education.

As we carry on the legacy of this community, we emphasize education because we believe that this old industrial city, this cradle of abolition and women’s rights, this home of indigenous nations and the movement for disability rights, still welcomes the courage, effort, imagination, talent, and innovation in every child. And if we are to have a bright future, we must see the possibility for greatness in all their faces, which requires seeing them as people, and seeing all of us as one, whether in Haiti or in Syracuse.

Tonight, and tomorrow and the days after, let’s honor Dr. King by following his example, by working for a people-oriented, not a thing-oriented world, a just world with room enough for all. It is not too late to remember Dr. King’s advice that “the time is always ripe to do right.”⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ King, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” *A Testament of Hope*, 296.