



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

ADDRESS FOR THE MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY OF REMEMBRANCE

Presented by President Julio Frenk at The Rock
on the University's of Miami's Foote University Green
on January 19, 2016

Thank you, Beja and thank you to the United Black Students for inviting me to share in today's Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Remembrance.

Even as we honor this great leader and teacher, we cannot help but look at his legacy through the lens of events taking place around us today.

We know that the struggle against racism and discrimination continues today. That while our laws can provide protection and even retribution, they require a relentless devotion to the rightness of their intention and the fairness of their execution.

While segregation and discrimination no longer enjoy legal protection, we can still see and feel their lingering impact in the painful events that in their current round, began at Ferguson and have continued throughout many other communities. The true protection of civil rights requires that we embrace both the letter and the spirit of our laws.

More than any appeal to legality, it comes down to a simple statement: "Civil rights is a moral issue."

These words are as relevant today as when Dr. King first spoke them on this very campus in 1966—almost 50 years ago—when he addressed a crowd of fifteen-hundred students, faculty, and staff who gave him a standing ovation.

He was invited by University of Miami President Henry King Stanford and our Department of Religious Studies to discuss "The Church's Involvement in the Civil Rights Program."

Dr. King warned that if the churches wanted to remain relevant, they would have to confront what he called the "basic immorality" of segregation.

Recent events on campuses across the U.S. remind us that if any institution is to remain relevant—and that includes universities—it must reject the “immorality” of excluding, oppressing, and, at its worst, dehumanizing, any person because of the color of his or her skin.

It is precisely Dr. King’s appeal to our ethical sense of right and wrong—not just anger and indignation—that has struck such a resounding chord within so many of us—even decades after his loss.

Dr. King’s great contribution, which led to his receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, was to emphasize not the struggle but the connection between all people.

By highlighting our interconnection and interdependence, he made it clear that if you violate another person’s rights, you diminish yourself as a human being.

He was a very powerful voice for the oppressed, but he was also talking to the oppressors, showing how that oppression diminished them as human beings. This was a very powerful and threatening message to the status quo.

Many people don’t realize that Dr. King had originally been scheduled to speak on campus the previous year. In a telegram dated January 29th, 1965, and signed by Andrew Young, who was Dr. King’s executive assistant and would later become mayor of Atlanta and serve in Congress and as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Dr. King expressed his “deepest regrets” that he must cancel his appearance—and I quote—“because of the present temper of events in Selma, Alabama at this time.”

These words are haunting because we know the tragic event that awaited just a few years hence in Memphis.

I was fourteen years old when Dr. King was assassinated, and it happened exactly at the time I was awakening politically.

His murder had an enormous influence on me and on my thinking about issues like oppression and injustice. In fact, I used to have a poster of his “I have a Dream” speech on my wall to inspire me. It is an incredibly profound speech that can still awaken our own sense of devotion to what is right and morally just. The depth of his writings continues to shape how I do my job today.

I remain very committed to building on his legacy, and, as I said in my letter regarding the Presidential Taskforce for Addressing Black Students’ Concerns, we are taking a “comprehensive and deeply introspective look at racial issues on our campus.”

We should feel incredibly proud of our diversity, but we must do all that we can to “build a culture of belonging—a place where everyone—regardless of their race or ethnicity, (and I would add, religion) feels safe, valued, and respected.”

My favorite quote—not just of Dr. King’s but for all-time says that: “It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

So many years have passed since Dr. King was on this campus, but his message, his position, his idea of interconnectedness is as vibrant and relevant as ever. Working together and using Dr. King's life as our inspiration, we can "weave" that single garment that is our universal humanity.

Thank you.