Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday Celebration Address
Kalamazoo, MI / January 16, 2011
by Eileen B. Wilson-Oyelaran, Ph.D.
President, Kalamazoo College

I would like to thank the City-wide Planning Committee and the “Northside Ministerial Alliance” for their outstanding work in making this celebration possible, and I want to give thanks for this wonderful children’s choir that has lifted its collective voice for our spiritual enrichment.

Now if anyone doesn’t think I feel pressure this afternoon you are dead wrong. For over a month, every time I have seen Rev. Dr. Warfield he would look at me and say, “now, when you speak, you give it to them, Doc.” I am also aware of the powerful voices that have been lifted-up, over the years, at this annual Kalamazoo MLK Celebration: people like the late Johnnie Cochran, Jr. or the late Dr. Zenobia Sykes: accomplished orators in whose footsteps I would fear to tread; clergy men like Bishop John Bryant, who can craft a sermon with such precision that the listener remembers it years later. So, to tell the truth, I really wonder why I am here. I am not a preacher; I am certainly not an orator; although, I must confess, that my father was both. My sister and I are both teachers, teaching is what we have been called to do. So those of you who are waiting for the preacher and those of you who are waiting to be swept off your feet by oratory, better luck next year.

The job of a teacher is to get you to think; and so, I ask you to think with me for a moment about whether Dr. King still matters and, if he does matter, what difference does it make to a place like Kalamazoo. I began to think about the continued relevance of Dr. King as I started to think about what I might say today. I did the math and I realized that if I divided my life into three equal parts, Rev. King had been dead for 2/3 of my lifetime. In other words, although it still feels like yesterday to some of us, Dr. King actually died a long time ago...

- Does Rev King still speak to us in 2011 in an age of desegregation, in the age of Obama, in the age of the internet?
- Does Dr, King still matter at a time when some people believe America is post-racial?
- Is his philosophy of nonviolent struggle still valid?
- Is the idea of the Beloved Community too simplistic for our complex global reality?

I think the answer is an unequivocal yes, even though, in many ways, there is a stark contrast between the 1960’s and the second decade of the 21st century.

For example:

- Cell phones did not exist in the 1960’s and superhighways were for cars not for the Internet
• In the 60’s horrifying pictures of racial lynching were on the covers of Newsweek and Life magazines. Today lynching is something students read about in history textbooks—if they learn about it at all.

• In 1968, there were no women on the Supreme Court and President Lyndon Johnson had just appointed Thurgood Marshall as the first African-American Supreme Court Justice. Today the court is multicultural and more balanced in terms of gender...

• In the 1960’s, television sets has only 13 channels and most of America listened to and trusted whatever they heard from Walter Cronkite on CBS news.

• In the 1960’s school desegregation was being introduced in only a few school districts and the battle for urban school desegregation had not yet reached its peak.

• 1967 was declared the summer of love and HIV/AIDS was nowhere on the radar screen

• The cold war was real, at least in the minds of some, and Russia was perceived to be our greatest threat

• There was no such thing as a Skype or Twitter. If you had a VHS and an 8 track tape you were in high technology.

So, without a doubt, 1968 is very different from 2011; and yet, in other ways there are some striking parallels between these two very different eras. Let’s consider three: lack of civility in our discourse; the expanding landscape of war; and the persistence of inequity in the richest country in the world.

The Growth of Incivility in our Discourse

The recent events in Tucson, Arizona provide a signature example of how far we as a nation have strayed from Dr. King’s vision of the Beloved Community, and keenly demonstrate why we need to stop right now an embrace this possibility. For Rev. King, the Beloved Community was not a lofty, utopian goal; it was an achievable possibility whose corner stones are non-violence and reconciliation. Although characterized by justice and by genuine inter-group and inter-personal living, the Beloved Community was not envisioned as a community without conflict. Rev. King recognized that conflict was an inevitable part of human experience. However, he believed that conflict could be resolved peacefully, that adversaries could be reconciled enough to interact, in a spirit of respect and goodwill.

In the Beloved Community, Dr. King tells us, individuals may disagree passionately and, in spite of this, they listen patiently and respectfully to one another. Their aim is not to win arguments/re-election; their aim is to engage in difficult, thoughtful and honest debate as they work to address those challenges that limit the full development of the human personality. Among these challenges would most certainly be persistent poverty, educational inequity, and the absence of health care, to cite a few.

It breaks my heart to say this, but many of our public servants and a significant portion of the media on the left and on the right, are letting let the American people down. At a time when we face difficult and complex challenges our political leaders have modeled a level of incivility and...
what my grandmother would call, “downright stubbornness” that would make Dr. King weep. Our media present distorted and simplistic views of complex problems, and we as consumers of the media only listen to the side we want to hear. This is hardly a formula for reconciliation and problem solving.

Now that Congress has re-familiarized itself with the United States Constitution, my deepest wish is that tomorrow morning political leaders all over this country will convene on their respective Capitol steps and read excerpts Dr. King’s *The Strength to Love*. Such an exercise might reconnect our leaders with the moral dimensions of their work. It might enable our leaders to see that what we need most at the critical juncture in our nation’s history are public servants who model what Dr. King called “dangerous unselfishness,” individuals who are willing to make difficult and unpopular decisions because these will result in the greatest good for the largest number of people, especially the least among us. Individuals who will make these decisions even if it means they will lose something themselves.

**The Expanding Landscape of War**

As was true in the 1960’s, our country now finds itself at war – this time on three fronts rather than one. And again, there are important differences. We are at war in an era in which the adversaries are not specific countries – the adversaries are those who would do harm both inside and outside their particular country – to ensure that their view of the world gains prominence. At a time when terrorism is global, interconnected and intercontinental, Dr. King’s moral vision of a world without war poses an incredible challenge with which we must grapple as we develop and implement our foreign policy.

When Dr. King broke his silence on the Vietnam War in 1967, he said, “We must speak out with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.”

I, for one, speak with very limited vision and a great deal of humility. I do not presume to know how one addresses the complexity of crafting a non-violent world in an age of terrorism. As we attempt to address this complicated predicament; Dr. King’s philosophy is deeply relevant.

If we believe in love and non violent struggle, we must ask our policy makers in the White House and in the Congress, regardless of party, to confront what Dr. King saw as the link between the cost of military spending and our inability to address domestic challenges like inequitable schools, lack of health care, homelessness, and the growing budget deficit. We must ask them to grapple with his conviction that, “Wisdom born of experience would tell us that war is obsolete. There may have been a time when war served a negative good by preventing the spread and growth of an evil force, but the destructive power of modern weapons of warfare eliminates even the possibility that war may any longer serve a negative good”.

Do our current wars serve a negative good? Despite our benevolent intentions, are these wars causing more harm than good both at home and aboard?

**The persistence of inequity in the richest country in the world**

Various forms of structural inequity persist in our society. In Dr. King’s day, the focus was primarily, although not solely, on racial inequality. Today, although racism persists at the
institutional, cultural, and personal levels, and we are nowhere near a post-racial society, the effects of economic inequality are as deleterious and inequality based on race. If you are poor, life kicks you every day no matter what color you are.

Income inequality is actually much more egregious now than it was in 1968. The income gap between those we see as poor and those we define as rich has grown exponentially, and the current economic crisis has generated great fear among those who for many years saw themselves in the middle and working classes. Many of the poor have become increasingly marginalized. Some have argued that our society has actually abandoned the poorest of the poor, isolating them in the urban core or in outlying rural communities, and offering them limited opportunities for participation in the American dream. As a result some authors have argued that these abandoned poor face a deepening cycle of dysfunction.

In recent years we have paid particular attention to one glaring demonstration of the inequity in our society: the variation in educational achievement among children classified by racial categories. We in Kalamazoo, only Thursday, were stunned to learn through a report by the Education Trust –Midwest that the achievement gap for African-American children attending KPS was among the highest in the state when assessed based on the MEAP tests of 4th grade reading proficiency and the 8th grade mathematical proficiency. I applaud our Superintendent Rice who did not need this report to determine that improving the academic performance of all of our students was a number one priority and who has been addressing this issue in a variety of ways since he arrived in Kalamazoo some years ago. However, if we think about what this gap means not only in Kalamazoo but throughout our country, we must come to the conclusion that this gap in educational performance is one of the most pressing civil rights issues of our time.

Since Dr. King’s death, as a society, we have become more aware of many other forms of structural barriers: barriers based on gender, immigration status, sexual orientation, physical and mental differences. We also recognize that the sources of inequity are multiple and complex and we have become much more sophisticated in analyzing inequity. Unfortunately, we have made very limited progress in eradicating its most pernicious forms.

When we consider our divisive discourse, the expanding landscape of war, and persistence of inequity, can anyone argue that Dr. King is no longer relevant? Can anyone argue that his message was just for the black people? Dr. King’s philosophy is transcendent and timeless. He is relevant to all of us. He is our Gandhi, our Prince of Peace.

Given the national scope of Rev. King’s work, one could rightly ask what does it mean for us right here, right now in Kalamazoo.

I am sure this question could be answered many ways, but today I want to focus on our children. What does the status of our children today portend?

- For their individual futures
- For our collective future and
- For the future of our community.
Are we providing our children with the opportunity to develop what Dr. King would call, “their full human personality”? Not surprisingly the answer is yes for some of our children and the answer is no for many others. We are taking very good care of some of our children and must redouble our efforts to support others. While some are excelling others are languishing. While some of our children are flourishing others are stagnating.

Many of our children, regardless of economic circumstance, where they happen to live, or how well they are doing in school ---care deeply about the community in which they live. There are many examples, but I’ll share just this one: On a frigid fall Saturday, it warmed my heart to see K Central students in front of Harding’s on Drake and Main “Stuffing the Bus” to support Loaves and Fishes. The energy and commitment these young people brought to that effort, as their principal Von Washington, Jr, cheered them on; was particularly uplifting. They were serving and they were having so much fun!!Like many other shoppers, I bought more than I had planned to help “stuff the bus” and I left the store filled with hope because of the commitment of these young people.

Some of our children are able to take full advantage of extraordinary support for post secondary education that is available in our community. Some make full use of the Kalamazoo Promise or the Heyl Scholarship; others venture farther away in pursuit of post secondary education. Others are not so engaged or fortunate.

According to the 2009 census data one in every five people in our county is living in poverty. In the city of Kalamazoo the figure rises to one in three persons! The situation is even more critical if you are a child. In the city of Kalamazoo, 44% of our children under 18 experiences poverty. In the county 23.3% of lives in poverty; but this figure is quite misleading. There are communities in the county with very little poverty and there other communities with large numbers of children experiencing poverty each day. Throughout the county, 41.5% of our children qualify for free and reduced lunch. If you are a very young child, the picture is even grimmer. Over half of children aged five and under in Kalamazoo City live in poverty, in the county the figure is almost thirty percent.

Many of our children are born into or are currently living in family circumstances that suggest the future will not be particularly easy. According to the Michigan Kids Count data, in 2008, almost forty percent of the babies born in the county were born to women who were not married, and over 10 percent were born to young women under 20 years of age. Fifteen percent of the babies born in the county are born to women who have not completed either high school or a GED. None of these figures predetermine what will happen to a child. They do, however, indicate that the outcomes for these children would be vastly improved if we, as a community, community wrapped them in our arms.

Throughout the county one in nine of our children will not complete high school and, whether we want to talk about it or not, too many of our more privileged children are engaged in the use of dangerous drugs. We have had to bury too many of these young people, just as we have had to bury too many children in the city because of random acts of violence.
The impact of these facts of life is felt most immediately in our classrooms. In the longer term, these circumstances have the possibility of rendering a significant cohort of our children

- incapable of bringing their multiple and wonderful talents, fully developed, to our community,
- incapable of participating fully in our democracy.
- Incapable, as Dr. King would say, of developing their full human potential.

A bit earlier I referred to the Education Trust Midwest publication in which Kalamazoo Public Schools were cited for the significant achievement gap between African-American and Anglo-American children. The findings of this publication received first page coverage in the Gazette as well they should have. But here’s the rub: the headline read: “Report Underscores Challenges facing KPS.”

Whoever wrote that headline got it all wrong: Folks, this is not a KPS challenge.

It is not Dr Rice’s challenge

Folks, this is Kalamazoo’s challenge. And, every time we speak about this crisis as if it does not belong to us all, we unconsciously feed the notion that we are not our brothers and sisters keepers; that we are not bound together by the invisible cloak of destiny that Dr. King described.

Eradicating the disparity outlined in the article is everyone’s business. It is everyone’s responsibility.

So what are we going to do about it?

Each of us has a role. There many things our children need and I want to highlight three: unconditional love, mentoring, and an infrastructure of support.

The first thing all our children need is unconditional love, especially parental love. It’s funny how children think about love. Our children often determine that we love them based on the time we spend with them and the undivided attention we give them. My father was a minister and a lawyer. That meant he worked in the office all week long and at the church all weekend. Even as a young child, I had some idea that what he did was important for other people, YET, what I cherished most and what I still remember most were those few weekends when he didn’t have to preach and we could go to the beach on Sunday morning and just be together as a family. What I cherished most was when he came home from work and opened the front door, saying, “How’s my sunshine!!!”

It’s funny how children repeat the behavior of their parents. I too have been guilty of over commitment to work. Several years ago when my son was in middle school, I was down stairs in my study working away one evening. He knocked tentatively on the door and apologetically asked, “Mommy are you available?”

It hit me. Here I was at home, having worked a ten hour day in the office and my own child was not sure if I was available to spend time discussing something that was important to him. His innocent question: “Are you available?” really meant: Mommy can you stop your work for a
moment to pay attention to me.--Mommy am I worthy of your attention? This realization was like a slap in the face and made me stop and think about what I was giving or not giving to my children.

Our children measure love in terms of the time we spend with them and focused on them. Now, love also demands some things our children may not value as much as they value our time: firm rules that are enforced consistently; high expectations; our demanding and accepting from them no less than their best.

Our children also need mentoring support. A significant cohort of our children is growing up in single parent families. I am not here today to say that one type of family structure is automatically better than another. I am here to say that child rearing is hard work and single parents need to be surrounded by a community that takes collective responsibility for providing a broad spectrum of support.

There are many models for such support. In one community I know over 75% of the members of the Chamber of Commerce participate in a program of mentoring for second grade students. Every company agrees to allow its employees to spend one hour each week in the public schools working with the same second grader for a full academic year. The research has shown significant improvement in the reading achievement among the children who benefit from this support. Equally important those who mentor develop an appreciation for the challenges that many low income, single parent families face. Many of the volunteers continue a mentoring relationship with their child and, in some cases the child’s family, long after the initial year.

In another community every synagogue, mosque and church is encouraged to adopt a school and to work in partnership with the school to mentor and support children whose backgrounds may be challenging.

Kalamazoo let us expand the ways we provide support for children who need additional mentorship and love.

Let us continue to work to create the conditions and the infrastructure that foster the optimal development of our children, good jobs, decent housing, adequate health care, employment opportunities for our youth, and early childhood education.

These are the things our children need to develop the full complement of their gifts. This is what our children need if Kalamazoo is to be the education community and the talent community” we hope it will become, the community where people want to live, the community in which people want to invest.

I think if Dr. King were to find himself in Kalamazoo tomorrow, he would love this place. He would say that Kalamazoo is a lot like him. Dr. King was far from perfect; Kalamazoo is far from perfect.

Dr. King used the gifts that he had to advocate for peace and justice and an equal playing field for all God’s children. I think Dr. King might say, Kalamazoo you have a long way to go but you have started down the road.
He might say, as we know he did, “I get tired sometimes, but I still have hope.”

He might say, don’t give up Kalamazoo, don’t lose hope.

He might say, as we know he did, “If you lose hope, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of it all.

He might say, “Kalamazoo, keep going in spite of it all”

He would remind us that God’s most precious gift is our children.

He would charge us to take care of them,

To build a just, fair and loving community in which every single one of them,

• regardless of race,
• regardless of class,
• regardless of gender
• regardless of ability
• regardless of country of origin,
• regardless of sexual orientation

can develop each of their gifts to reach their full potential.

How will you mark the holiday tomorrow; will you sleep, will you shop or will you serve? Will you find a child, one child who needs your support and commit to read a story to her, to help him with his math? Will you help an adult learn to read?

And, what will you do the other 364 days a year, will you serve?

Dr. King’s work is done. It is now our time. I hope that every single one of us will keep going in spite of it all.

Eileen B. Wilson-Oyelaran

Notes
