

01.15.14 Remarks at the University of Chicago MLK Celebration

AS PREPARED:

Governor Deval L. Patrick
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Thank you for that very warm welcome. What a nice contrast to the weather tonight! Thanks for having me.

I am honored to be here at the University of Chicago this evening to commemorate the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Thanks to him, many of us work, study, live and play in settings that would have been unthinkable, in some cases even illegal, for our parents and grandparents. As I am convinced that it is impossible to reduce Dr. King's impact to a speech of reasonable length, I am looking forward to keeping my remarks short and spending most of our time together with your questions and comments.

As you may have heard, I grew up not far from here on 54th and Wabash. I heard Dr. King speak once in those years. He was addressing a crowd in a park somewhere on the South Side and my mother took my sister and me to hear him.

I think I was about 6 or 7 years old. Candidly, I don't remember a single word he said. But I do remember what it felt like. I remember the deep solemnity of the occasion. I remember how at that moment I felt connected to all those other people in that park – people like me of limited means but limitless hope. I remember feeling the power of that hope -- how it gave shape and purpose to the lives we were all trying to lead. Still does.

As I have come over the years to read his writings and listen to his speeches (and oh, these are speeches to be listened to), I am struck by how often he spoke of service. Like Christ himself, King understood servant leadership. His was a model of selfless leadership, of humility, of "outwardness." The "Beloved Community" Dr. King envisioned, and helped lead us to, was a place where people took responsibility for each other, where we turned to each other rather than on each other. As he put it: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: 'What are you doing for others?'"

I grew up in a community like that. I lived in a 2-bedroom tenement with my grandparents, my mother and sister and various other relatives who came and went. My mother, my sister and I shared one of those bedrooms and a set of bunk beds; we rotate from the top to the bottom to the floor, every third night on the floor. In the 50s and the 60s, over on Wabash Avenue, everything was broken. Broken playgrounds, broken sidewalks, broken families. There was a lot we didn't have. But one thing we did have was a strong sense of community, the kind where every child was under the jurisdiction of every adult on the block. If you messed up in front of Ms. Jones, she would go upside your head – and then call home. So you'd get it twice.

I have to digress here and tell you about a wonderful experience I had last year, when the street along my old block was re-named after me. I was dreading the ceremony – because it's a little embarrassing and because it's usually the kind of thing that happens to people who are dead. But it was a lovely ceremony, made more so by the unexpected presence of kids from a school in the next block who were permitted to come out and watch the scene and say "hello." I know from experience what can happen when you give a kid a chance to imagine what a positive path might be like.

In any event, after the new signs were unveiled, we took a walk down the block to take pictures in front of the place where I lived (was born, in fact). Some of the staff who were with me had heard me describe this place and this neighborhood in countless speeches, in terms very like those I used tonight. They had heard me describe Ms. Jones and assumed she was a metaphor for caring adults on the block. So, I was delighted when Ms. Carrie Jones came toddling up to see what all the fuss was about. Of course, she's only now the age I thought she was when I was a kid on the South Side.

She was more than just as curious as she had always been. She was just as caring.

Which brings me back to Dr. King's emphasis on service. His emphasis was not on the service elected to public office or appointed to high position; it was not about of volunteers alone – all of which is important. Dr. King was about service not as what you do, but who you are.

He said, "Everybody can serve, you don't have to have a Ph.D. to serve. You don't have to be able to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. . . . You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."

And this, for me, is the nub of it. Dr. King brought love into public discourse. Imagine that. When's the last time you heard a public figure talk about love as the motivation for policy choices? Even politically active faith leaders seem silent on the notion; and don't even get me started on the disconnect between Christ's love and the religious right's positions on marriage equality or health care security!

Love is not a substitute for wise policy or effective programs, or for personal responsibility or moral rectitude or perseverance. Love is not an excuse. But without love it's hard to make sense of compassion or common destiny or community itself.

We could use more of Dr. King's message right now.

In a society dedicated to equality, income inequality is getting worse. As we emerge from the global recession, for those already college educated and with transferable skills, the knowledge-based job market is wide open. Those already with money to invest benefit from the resurgence of the Dow.

But the ability of people to bridge that gap is harder than ever. The poor are no longer just the abject destitute: nearly half of food stamp recipients in Massachusetts are working people. Our homeless population living in motels recently hit an all-time high, many of them school age children. All this is a state where our children lead the nation in achievement, income is high, unemployment is down and the innovation economy is on fire.

Across the entire country, many middle class families where both parents work still can't get ahead, let alone imagine a better life for their children. According to Opportunity Nation, for the first time in America, today's young adults risk having lower educational attainment rates, on average, than their parents. Only six percent of children born to parents at the bottom make it to the top. Children in many European countries now have greater socio-economic mobility than those in the United States.

The American Dream is in trouble.

Why should any of that matter?

Because opportunity is central to who we are as a nation. Consider this:

We are the only nation in human history not organized around a common religion or language or even culture. We didn't come into being because of the natural forces of geography. America is organized around a handful of civic ideals. And we have come to define those ideals, over time and through struggle, as equality, freedom and fair play. That's what America has been about for more people, for a longer time, than any other nation ever.

Opportunity is what makes all our other civic ideals possible. Without opportunity our civic ideals are nothing but rhetorical flourishes. But opportunity is not inevitable; it doesn't just happen. Each generation of Americans has had to strive and to sacrifice to make opportunity real. Whether it was freeing the slaves or giving women the vote in one era; the GI Bill, rural electrification or the interstate highway system in another; the struggle for civil rights in Dr. King's time and our own; or expanding broadband and early education, and closing the achievement gap today, making opportunity real requires action.

I think you can reason your way to practical solutions with many others on these and other issues. But without love, you cannot fully appreciate why addressing them is so urgent.

My job, my mission, in my current role is to help somebody, every day in every way I can. I have governed with the belief that government can be a powerful tool in helping people help themselves.

But for a society to prosper, we need so much more than what government can do. We need more than just what governors and mayors and presidents can do alone. Dr. King taught us that service is power. Transformative power. We need hearts full of grace and souls generated by love.

One thing I have tried to do is draw attention to the power of service.

At my second inauguration in 2011, we gathered together 8th graders from every one of our 351 cities and towns in the Commonwealth who were themselves service leaders. I figured the athletes and scholars and artists have channels to flourish and be recognized for it, but not always the servant leaders. We called it Project 351. They came to Boston to talk about the power of service and to go out to do a project together, before we send them back to spread the word...just a way to their kindness and loving spirit.

Since that Saturday three years ago, Project 351 was re-imagined as a youth service organization dedicated to building unity and leadership. Every year since, on MLK Weekend, an 8th grade Ambassador from every city and town in Massachusetts comes to the State House for a day and a message of service. The network of ambassadors has grown and remained active. We have reunions and service days and we are training these magnificent young people to be the servant leaders of tomorrow.

Every time I attend a Project 351 event I am reinvigorated about what the future holds for Massachusetts, and for the entire country. I usually get them to talk about the spirit of service, what motivates them. I haven't come right out and claimed the spirit of love yet, because I don't want them to get all squirmy and embarrassed. But this Saturday, when the next class of ambassadors convenes, I just might. Because that more than anything will lead us to the "beloved community" Dr. King envisioned.

Thank you again for having me.