Martin Luther King, Jr. as Spiritual Leader
Martin Luther King, Jr. Unity Breakfast, Lexington, KY
January 16, 2017

Thank you Mr. Jackson, Chairman Everett, and the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity for this invitation. I am honored to be here.

I have been asked to reflect on Dr. King as a spiritual leader. Initially, as a philosopher and person of faith, I welcomed the opportunity. But as I began to review Dr. King’s life and work, I found myself unexpectedly uneasy. I had studied Dr. King in the past, and I thought a brief review would be enough to clarify what I wanted to say. I quickly discovered, however, that Dr. King’s writings do not let us rest contentedly on how much we know, or how bravely we fought, or how sincerely we have embraced his message. And very soon, my smug familiarity dissolved into discomforting introspection.

I found my disorientation particularly unexpected and unsettling for several reasons. First, I was forcefully reminded that, if we are paying attention, if we are serious about our lives, an encounter with Dr. King will shake us to our bones. If we are willing to pay attention, his work will remind us of how necessary work is never easy, of how short we often fall, and, if we are paying attention, of how staying the difficult path is our only choice.

Second, I was discomforted because I intended to focus my words on hope. On an occasion like this, it seemed appropriate to reflect on a theme that would uplift, inspire, and affirm when so much of what we are exposed to does otherwise. More importantly, I believe that we all rely on hope all the time, even when we don’t recognize it. In fact, we start each day with hope when we open our front door to face the world. Parents go to work in the hope of a brighter future for their children; spouses hope for their partner’s happiness; teachers hope for the success of their students; and we all hope that goodness will follow that first step across the threshold.
Indeed I would argue that Dr. King was driven by hope, that it was hope that animated his spirit and made him a spiritual leader. As Professor Danton Dawson writes, “it takes hope, to argue as King did, that love...[should] be used as a tool for social transformation. The creation of a society where justice is an actuality and not just a conceptual possibility, or, the formation of a beloved community can be realized only if hope resides at the center. In each of these cases,” Dawson continues, “hope is logically prior to love, justice, and the beloved community. Hope is the necessary condition for all social and political desires.”

I would add that hope is the center of our spirituality. It is the source of strength that animates the imagination and fortifies the spirit. Without hope, Dr. King could not have seen beyond the water cannons and snarling dogs. Without hope, his letter from that Birmingham prison cell would be a cry of despair rather than a shout of defiance. Without hope, not even he could have stood the church bombings, the murders, the racism disguised as justice. Instead, with full awareness and acknowledgment of these brutal facts, hope allowed Dr. King to imagine a just society and a beloved community. It gave him the courage to trust his imagination, to believe in the spirit of God working in our lives, and to risk his life because he saw that the alternative was no life at all.

But you might ask, what has 250 years of hope gotten us? Poverty, Racism, Militarism, the evils Dr. King sacrificed his life fighting, still oppress us. Why, then, should we continue to hope?

We begin by remembering that Dr. King’s hope for us was not mere fantasy, not an escape from reality. His hope confronts reality clear-eyed, deals with the facts as they are, and acts accordingly. His hope demands that we have faith; that we believe that change can happen. Hope is the faith we have in our children, in our students, in our will, and in our skills. Hope is the belief we will get our work done, that we will navigate the challenges of our days, and that we will return in the evening to home and hearth having made a difference. His hope, our hope, is grounded in the belief that the universe is just, and when we align ourselves with that reality, justice will prevail.
Memory, then, gives us inspiration. Dr. King's spiritual leadership, and his strength to resist violence when lesser men were compelled to strike out, was rooted in his deep belief in the essential goodness of human nature. As well as anyone he knew this was an imperfect world, but when he spoke of living in a Beloved Community bound together by love and justice, he knew we were made for better. He resisted the taunts of enemies and the chiding of friends because his hope allowed him to see human nature beneath the racism, the violence, and the indifference of his oppressors. Somehow, in the face of the most heinous acts, he continued to hope, that even the worst among us could be beloved if they would only let go of their ignorance and allow God's love for them to overcome their hate for others.

However, Dr. King did not wish to simply inspire us. The injustice he taught us to oppose is everywhere still. In the face of the false gods of wealth and power with their engines of terror and technology, we need to act out his hope, our hope, for a beloved community wherein we can overcome injustice by firmly and fiercely resisting those who would push us down, push us aside, or demean our lives.

Dr. King found much of his guidance in the gospels, which remind us that it is most useful to look to our hearts for the evidence of hope. Let us hold fast, then, to Dr. King's message that humans were beloved by God long before they were oppressed by man. Let us remember that his hoped-for Beloved Community depends on our willingness to act for those who need it most. That is what Dr. King knew and understood. That is why he always returned to the consoling reality that while the world, the nation, the city, waited to live in the Beloved Community envisioned by the prophets, we, here, now—like Henry V's soldiers at Agincourt who defeated an army four times its size—we, we precious few, we band of sisters and brothers, we can choose now to make that blessed community: right here, right now, in this room, in this city, Lexington.