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THE CHALLENGE OF BLACK LEADERSHIP IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY*

David Hall**

It is a special honor to be asked to come and speak at this Dr. Martin Luther King celebration. I would like to thank the students, faculty, and Dean Teree Foster for extending this invitation, because you have brought me back to a city I love and to a law school I have long admired, to commemorate a man who was such an inspiration in my life.

It is fitting and appropriate as we move toward the close of the twentieth century and the dawning of the twenty-first, that we reflect upon the life of Dr. King, upon the crises and challenges facing Black people, and upon the fundamentals of leadership. Dr. King will be remembered as one of the greatest leaders of the twentieth century. At the close of this century we need to better understand his gift of leadership. Therefore the title of this talk is *The Challenge of Black Leadership in the Twenty-First Century*.

I deeply believe that Dr. King's life and story provides not only African-Americans, but society in general, with an excellent lens through which we can gain a deeper understanding of leadership. At this historical juncture where this country's president faces impeachment, where congressional leaders are being criticized for their handling of this matter, when a society is becoming more cynical about leaders and their capacity to lead, we must pause and reflect upon this mantle we call leadership. What are the things that in the long run really make a difference in one's ability to be an effective leader? In reflecting upon Dr. King's life I have extracted five key attributes which I believe capture the essence of what we must understand about leadership. I extract them not so that we can place them on a shelf and analyze them from an intellectual perspective. I extract them not so that we can hold up a high standard by which we measure others. I extract them so that each of us can look at ourselves. I extract them in hopes that they can serve as a mirror through which we examine our

* David Hall delivered this speech at DePaul University's 1999 Martin Luther King Day celebration.

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role in addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century. For the twenty-first century will demand leadership from each person in this room. There will be no messiah like Dr. King coming to deliver us from these intellectual and emotional chains we wear. "We are the ones that we have been waiting for." So as you listen to these attributes, think about what they gave to Dr. King, and think about what they can give to the world if they are manifested in your life and mine.

First, Dr. King was authentic. He was not someone who was thrust upon the people by forces that wanted to control or pacify our quest for freedom. He was authentic in that he was chosen by the people, for the people, and was always of the people. He was very reluctant to assume the leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association, and only after he went deep within and responded to a calling that was upon his life did he accept this awesome responsibility. He was authentic in that there was no personal or political ambition that drove his effort. He was driven by a deep desire to uproot racism and poverty, and by a belief that the principles he read and preached about in the Bible could be liberating and radical catalysts for change. Authenticity is critical to leadership because artificiality and superficiality will only last and inspire others for a short time. Authenticity means that we are true to the values and principles that give us life and meaning, and we do not easily change because of the shifting political winds. Montgomery and the whole movement which followed was not orchestrated so that Dr. King could become more visible and powerful. The movement did not serve him. He unselfishly served the movement and the people who were in need. Authenticity means that you embrace the role of leadership with great reluctance and trepidation because you realize the awesomeness of the responsibility and fragility of the human spirit. Authentic leaders realize at a deep intangible level that the call to leadership is an uncontrollable and unceasing mandate to serve others.

Second, Dr. King was a visionary. Dr. King saw beyond existing circumstances and shared a new imagined reality with those around him. His famous *I Have a Dream* speech is a classic example of the power to see beyond what exists; to paint a picture worth pursuing; to inspire those around you to sacrifice in order to bring that new reality into existence. For there is an inherent power within a meaningful vision. Dr. King could "see" the real meaning of that term. Before he died, he said, "I have been to the mountain top, I have seen the promised land, I may not get there with you, but we as a people will get to the promised land." Some cite these words as evidence that he foretold his death. I cite them as evidence that he invoked a vision of

victory, a vision of good triumphant over evil. He left us with a deep faith in the inevitability of justice, and some of us still faithfully pursue that vision today.

Yet visionaries must not be so limited in their vision that they cannot see its unfolding and expansion over time. Through the years his vision expanded and embraced poverty as well as racism, it embraced an end to the Vietnam War, and it ultimately embraced a deep love for all humanity. He shared with us a vision of a society where love and justice triumph over war and oppression. To be in a leadership position and not have vision is to imprison and stifle the spirit of those around you. Vision is the gift of inspiration. It is the wings upon which we give flight to our secret yearnings. Through vision we empower people to reach for the stars. And during a period in this country when Black people were being told through laws, signs, and death threats to stay in their place, Dr. King eloquently reminded us that our place was among the stars, the stars of freedom, dignity, and self respect. Dr. King was a visionary.

But Dr. King was also a strategic thinker. He chose his battles wisely and was guided by deep thought and a clear analysis. It is easy for us today to second guess some of his choices and the places he chose to venture. But we should not underestimate the intellectual and thoughtful analysis that went into those decisions. He used his mind to think about the reactions of people and society to his actions. His decisions to be arrested, to shift the movement up North, to recruit celebrities and the clergy were all part of a brilliant strategy that mobilized a whole nation. Leadership involves making hard choices, but it also requires that we bring all of the mental energy and power we can muster from ourselves and those around us to those critical choices. Part of being a strategic thinker is the realization that you do not have all the answers. It is the collective mind that a leader harnesses, it is the group wisdom that a leader learns from, it is the synergy that emerges from the many thoughts that Dr. King used to build a blueprint for freedom.

Dr. King was also holistic. He had the uncanny ability to communicate with the powerful and commune with the powerless. Though his focus was on the struggle and condition of Black people in America, he embraced the universal struggle for justice in the world. In his quest for justice, he did not overlook love. In his quest for love he did not overlook justice. The reason we celebrate his birth this day is because he responded to a deep human desire and passion that exists within us all regardless of our race, gender, or station in life. Dr. King was able to walk in many circles, but he always had his feet on the

ground. He saw the oneness in the diversity of ideas and people, and the oneness in various struggles for justice. He embraced this value when he boldly wrote in the letter from the Birmingham jail that "a threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." In response to those who saw their issues and struggles as separate and distinct from the struggles of others, he reminded them that "we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny." Dr. King knew at a very deep level that he could not lead a part unless he understood and appreciated the whole.

Last, but not least, Dr. King was a leader who was spiritually grounded. Although his intellectual power was important, his spiritual depth was even more essential to his success as a leader. Dr. King demonstrated that there is a fundamental link between our spiritual life and our ability to be consistent inspirational leaders. His willingness to tap into the spiritual power that existed within him and around him compelled him to greatness. It was not because he was a minister, for that was a title he wore. His greatness emerged because he lived by the spiritual values he professed. Those values were embodied in him and became his source of strength and power. He became a vessel through which the power and purpose of God was manifested. To be a true leader, there must be some source of inner strength, some intangible, but real support we seek in difficult times. Dr. King faced death threats, bombings, assassination attempts, criticism, and intimidation of all sorts, and yet he remained true to his task and to his calling. In moments of doubt and fear he sang boldly to the world, "ain't going let nobody turn me around, turn me around." That was a spiritual command. Dr. King's spiritual foundation was a source of power for his authenticity, his vision, and all of the other attributes of true leadership. He had an internal moral compass that was fed by his deep spiritual yearnings.

Authentic visionary, a strategic thinker who was holistic and spiritually grounded—these were the attributes that fashioned a world leader from the segregated red clay of Georgia. These are the attributes that are needed in the twenty-first century as Black people continue our quest for freedom and security, and these are the attributes that are needed for this nation as it aspires to live up to the ideals it professes.

When we examine some of the critical problems that confront African-Americans in this country, it becomes clear that each of us must pick up the mantle that Dr. King so eloquently carried, and we must not lay this mantle down hoping that another generation will pick it

up. For we face this challenge today because prior generations chose to defer a dream instead of giving birth to a vision.

We need to be authentic leaders who can help combat the critical challenges our youth confront. We need leaders who can set intellectual and spiritual standards which inspire them to dream and transform their lives. Leaders who can inspire them not only with our words but with our lives. We must be able to see beyond the present realities they confront and paint a picture of academic excellence. We must find a way to paint a vision of peace in their world, which is ruled by violence.

In our quest for civil rights and open accommodations we forgot that there is a stark connection between economics and politics. We have been forced to realize in the twentieth century, as our brothers and sisters in South Africa are discovering daily, that political power is limited when economic power does not exist. So the leadership of the twenty-first century must assist in creating viable and inclusive economic strategies. The economic development that we must strategically develop must not be limited by the twentieth century notion of individualistic capitalism that only benefits those who do not live within areas that are dominated by Black people. There must be a plan of empowerment that enriches the communities in which Black people live. Otherwise we will have tremendously rich individuals and consistently decaying communities. This will only occur through visionary leadership that is able to think critically about how to develop and collectively own capital in ways that empower members of our communities who are normally left behind. We must develop a nationwide strategy of economic empowerment that is consistent with the Constitution, yet mindful of the history of racism in America.

These King attributes are needed in the twenty-first century because we need leaders who will help transform our existing institutions. Our Black colleges, fraternities, sororities, and churches must speak to and address the fundamental needs and challenges we face as a people. Those needs are in part no different from those that Dr. King embraced. For, despite the fact that the signs of degradation and inferiority have been removed from public buildings, the remnants still remain too often in our minds, spirit, and in the culture of this society. Our institutions must uproot these seeds of doubt and plant seeds of faith and power. The leaders of our organizations are not called to blindly follow traditions of the past. Leadership is called to be bold and imaginative.

This is not only limited to Black institutions, this is needed throughout America and the world. So those of you who will find yourself, as

I do, in a leadership role in a predominantly White organization, must realize that we are not called to imprison the spirit of those around us in molds of the past, but to liberate the institution so that it embraces the wholeness of life. I deeply believe that those who have been excluded from the mainstream of life are called to give new life to the stream and transform it into a river of meaning and hope. And a source of that new life must be our spiritual strength.

In the twenty-first century, this value will become increasingly important, as more people seek a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life. More people are striving to find themselves and find balance in their lives. To unleash authentic meaning in an organization, one must have a key to the spiritual vaults which contain our most precious values.

So as you sit and gaze into the next century, reflect upon the challenges and even crises that we face as a people and as a nation. Then think about what role you will play in this new century. There are certainly those who would argue that the twentieth century brought an end to racism in America, not only in form but in substance. There are others who would argue that even if the twentieth century did not bring an end to it, the strategies of the twentieth century, such as forced busing, affirmative action, set asides, etc., are no longer viable theories because they only perpetuate divisions between the races. It is in the face of this opposition that we must develop a strategy and continue to pursue Dr. King's vision. In this regard our challenge is much more difficult than that of Dr. King. The enemy was clear during his time. The evil was obvious and the lines were most clearly black and white. We must force a quest for the end of racism when many cannot even see it. We must fight against an enemy that is encased in policies and practices that are neutral on their face. We must lead a movement to eradicate racism when the lines are multi-colored and often invisible.

I would violate the holistic attribute, if during this critical point in the history of this country, I would talk about the challenges of Black leadership as it relates to the eradication of racism, and not mention the role of White leadership in regards to this same challenge. For racism and its horrid legacy is not just a problem for Black people, it is a problem for this society. In a country that has been plagued with racial discrimination, it is important that all of us who find ourselves in leadership positions earnestly strive to uproot the social cancer.

Some try to pervert Dr. King's wish that his children should be judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin, by using it as a criticism of affirmative action. But if they are

willing to invoke character as the controlling standard, then they must be willing to understand the deep connection between character and white supremacy in this country. Being honest about the realities of racism and its continuing consequences is part of one's character development. Having sympathy and compassion for those who are the victims of racism, for those who are still hindered by the consequences of racism must be part of the definition of character. If the content of the character of white leadership as it relates to racism in America was at the level it should be then we would not need affirmative action. For justice would be done through the natural moral flow of life. We must not think that our contribution has to be as dramatic or historic as those of the past who risked their lives and prestige for a battle that was not directly theirs.

I would like to take this time to thank Dean Teree Foster for being one of those people at the University of Oklahoma who made Black law students feel as if we mattered. She came into an environment as a young and energetic faculty member when there were no Black people on the faculty. She embraced the cause of students of color, and became an advocate for us and a source of support. So within our day-to-day regular activities we can make a difference in the lives of people and in our own growth and development. We can make what could be a cold and insensitive world a more embracing and supportive one.

So I come to remind each one of us, regardless of our color, that the twenty-first century awaits us. "The future cannot begin without us." This new century awaits a people who will not just walk into a predesigned historical moment and blindly follow old patterns. Milestones occur in life so that we can take stock of the past and chart new directions. They occur so that we can at least pause and recommit ourselves to values which may have slipped away. Milestones and markers occur so that we can look inward as we celebrate outwardly.

As the new century and millennium approaches, know that there is a new century and new millennium residing in us. They do not exist somewhere out in space. They come into existence, they take shape by the efforts, decisions, and sacrifices of real people. We have the unique and privileged opportunity to create a century where racism no longer controls and limits our horizons. We can create a century where, in the words of John Hope Franklin, "we face history, face each other and embrace the best of who we are as human beings." We can create a century where, in the words of Derrick Bell, "economic rights and prosperity are as important as civil and political rights." We

can create a century where, in the words of Dr. King, “freedom, justice, and love truly ring from every mountaintop.”

This is our charge, this is our challenge, this is our calling of leadership. And if we see this day as more than just a ritual, but as a sacred time for each of us to search our souls, discover our calling and become leaders in the tradition of Dr. King, then we will fashion a twenty-first century in which he would have been proud to live—and he could then rest peacefully knowing that his people, and all people did get to the promised land.