

Interfaith Prayer Breakfast
Celebrating
Martin Luther King, Jr. Day 2010

Hosted by Mayor Cindy Rosenthal and the Norman Human Rights Commission

Remarks by Dr. George Henderson

These words still haunt me:

“Has anybody here seen my old friend Martin? Can you tell me where he’s gone to? He freed a lot of people, but the good die young. I just looked around and he was gone.”

On some quiet days, I can almost hear Dr. King’s muted voice demanding social justice, freedom and reconciliation.

On some dark nights, I imagine Dr. King’s smiling face whispering softly to me “Finish the civil rights agenda, and do it with compassion and integrity.” It is my honor and privilege to be the keynote speaker at what I hope will become an annual City of Norman celebration of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday.

I proudly stand here as a descendant of slaves. I live in this city where my ancestors were not allowed to be after sundown. Through me, they have completed the long and tedious journey from racial segregation to integration, from poverty to affluence, from hate to love. Dr. King gave me the courage to move to Norman. Sam and Sally Matthews and Mokie Webb were the realtors who made that move possible.

Destiny brought the Hendersons to this place of sorrow, joy and uncertainty. Whatever you think about Martin Luther King, Jr., I ask you to remember that he challenged our fundamental beliefs about human rights in the United States and the world. His words of wisdom still reverberate with considerable profoundness in the recesses of my mind.

He said: "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be." He became an American icon. What will you and I become?

He said: "Along the way of life, someone must have the sense enough and the morality enough to cut off the chain of hate." He led by example. How sensible and moral are we, the new leaders?

He said: "Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability. Instead, it comes through continuous struggle. We must straighten our backs and work for our freedom. A man can't ride you unless your back is bent." Whose backs are we riding on? Or, equally important, who are we carrying on our backs?

He said: "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear." He loved people more than money, cars, clothes and fame. Have we found something more important than people to love? If so, shame on us.

He said: We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people." He spoke out against hateful individuals. How many of us remain silent in the presence of hateful people? One of us behaving that way is too many.

The memories I have of Martin Luther King, Jr. fade in and out of consciousness like an old-time movie. There is a disturbing fuzziness about these sketches. Even so, he was much more to me than an "I have a Dream" speech. He was like life itself, reminding me through examples that I can and must exorcise from myself the demons of bigotry. When I least expect it, his words come to me. Perhaps you have heard them too.

He said no lie can live forever and truth crushed to the earth will rise up again. Unfortunately, the lies of oppressors are the dominate speeches too many children hear and believe.

He said the time has come for an all-out war against poverty. But there appears to be no large-scale movement by affluent people to use their wealth to develop the underdeveloped nations, to school the unschooled or to feed the unfed peoples. It is a sad commentary that the war against poverty, if there ever was one, has been called off.

Closer to home, he said true compassion is more than giving a few dollars to beggars or homeless people. We must alter the social systems that produce beggars and homeless people. Sadly, the gap between the poor and the affluent has widened.

He said that all people ought to be able to make their way through life on Jericho's road without being beaten and robbed by civilians or government officials. Alas, innocent people are victims of crimes every minute in every city, state, and nation.

He said people in multi-religious societies should coexist peacefully. But even as I speak, countless Christians, Jews and Muslims are responding to clarion calls for interfaith violence. Where are the peace, love and justice deeds that are touted on television by apologists of religious fanatics? Most members of different religious denominations play hide-and-seek with each other but seldom find enough common ground on which they can stand – or want to stand.

Martin Luther King, Jr. left us a lot of unfinished business, such as building a nation where as many people as possible have safe housing, a top quality education, meaningful work, adequate wages and good, affordable health care. In the end, our nation must become a place where all citizens die a timely death unhurried by poverty or bigots.

Who will assume partial ownership of King's nation building business and make Norman more culturally inclusive? If not us, then who? If his work is not done here in Norman, where will it be done? Of all the cities in Oklahoma, I believe Norman is among the most likely ones to do it.

When we honor Dr. King with appropriate social justice action, we honor ourselves. When we honor ourselves, justice rolls down our streets like righteous waters. This kind of dedication to Dr. King takes us beyond school integration. It takes us into neighborhoods, jobs, places of religious worship, social clubs and the other nooks and crannies of our lives.

Like Martin Luther King, deep in my heart I do believe that we descendants of migrants, immigrants, and slaves will build a better nation. But first, we must build better communities. If we do not create a more culturally inclusive City of Norman, life will continue to be merely fantasy, hypocrisy, and false prophecy for us "in group" folks. It will be full of sound and fury – signifying rejection – for "out group" peoples.

Through the looking glass of history, if we dare to peek, is this plain truth. Our future is now. Now is the time to accept and respect people who are culturally different from us. Now is the time to chastise the hate mongers among us and to lend a helping hand to their victims.

Now is the time to use the priceless societal stimulus funds of compassion, empathy, and love to improve the lives of downtrodden individuals. Yes, now is the time to rebuild the broken human relations infrastructure that our nation's Constitution refers to as "We the people." Dr. King and his multiracial, multi-religious followers asked that we do no less. As we try to finish Dr. King's unfinished business, let's remember what has happened to us.

We are not what we want to be,
We are not what we ought to be,
And we are not what we are going to be,
But, thank God, we are not what we once were.

I hope those words succinctly summarize the sentiment inherent in this celebration.

Recounting our accomplishment and redoubling our efforts to do more to create one nation under God with liberty and justice for all is a wonderful way to say:

Happy Birthday, Martin Luther King, Jr.

George Henderson
January 13, 2010

In 1967, George and Barbara Henderson became the first African-Americans to purchase a home in Norman, essentially ending the City of Norman's status as one of hundreds of "sundown towns" that existed throughout the country at that time. Dr. Henderson and his wife and family moved to Norman when he accepted a faculty position in the University of Oklahoma's Department of Sociology. Dr. Henderson is the author of 28 books and has served as the Dean of OU's College of Liberal Studies. In 1969 he founded the Department of Human Relations where he served as director. Dr. Henderson was the first African-American in the State of Oklahoma to

hold an endowed professorship. His name has become synonymous with efforts to promote diversity and interracial understanding. Barbara Henderson served as the City of Norman's first Chair of the Norman Human Rights Commission when it was established by a vote of the people of Norman in 1971.