

Martin Luther King, Jr. Annual Rally
Mark Dorosin, Speaker
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Chapel Hill, North Carolina

It is a great honor to be here and to speak with on this, the original Moral Monday.

I know that like me, many of you here have been part of the NAACP Moral Monday demonstrations, and that many of you have even gone to jail for the simple act of asserting your constitutional rights to speak out. For that I want us all to thank you. Please stand and be recognized for your heroic efforts.

When I first began to study Dr. King and the history of the civil rights movement, I remember thinking that the most amazing thing about the struggle was that it was led by ordinary people, working men and women, and high school and college students, and that was its power. But having been a civil rights lawyer now for 20 years, I realize that I was wrong. The folks who are willing to stand up in the struggle, to raise their voices against oppression, to call out injustice and to demand fairness and equality the face of resistance and retribution, are extraordinary people, and we are fortunate to have so many of them here in our community.

And remember, everyone has the power to be part of this extraordinary group. And if you believe in justice, than you have the responsibility to stand up. As Dr. King said, “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

So for those of you who have been out there in Raleigh bearing witness and speaking truth to power, keep it up. And if any of you haven’t been, then as the song goes, “people get ready.” You can start in two weeks, on February 8th, at the HKonJ Moral March. The NAACP wants to see 50,000 people out there, and I want to see all of you there with me. Because we have a message for the legislature and to the governor, and this is it: Your segregationist, war on the poor, election rigging, anti-family, misogynistic and corrupt public policies are unjust, unacceptable and unconscionable. And we will stand together against them.

And let me be clear about that last part, because it is the key to it all---we will stand together. Let me hear you say it--- We will stand together.

I can’t emphasize this strongly enough. The history of the civil rights struggle in our country has been about breaking down those barriers that keep us apart, that create models of “us” and “them” and that thrive on stereotypes and suspicion of the “other.” And make no mistake, those barriers have been willfully and deliberately erected –for generations—by those oppressors whose power depends on dividing the human community and invidiously excluding some groups from realizing the rights, privileges and opportunities that are the primary good we share as a society.

And once they set up that exclusion, how do they maintain it? How do they rationalize the immoral decision to deny to some persons the right to fully participate in our community? By insisting that those excluded are somehow inferior or unworthy, and that they don't deserve or aren't entitled to be included. That is the lie of the "other," and it depends on keeping us separate, in our schools, in our neighborhoods, and in organizing like this. And it's why we must stand together.

The other integral piece in the propaganda of exclusion is the false idea of scarcity—that the benefits of our human community are limited, and that sharing the pie with more people that means we each get a smaller slice. That idea—that fear—that rights and equality are somehow in scarce supply and that the expanding them for some means taking them away from others, is the antithesis of our basic democratic principles. And we will not be fooled or frightened into allowing others to use these tactics to divide us.

We must nevertheless be realistic. These are difficult times and there are significant challenges ahead. While we know that we have made progress combatting the most overt forms of discrimination, we also know that the more intractable inequities of institutionalized racism continue to thrive. And that kind of discrimination, because it can be so easily concealed, is self-perpetuating. Elected officials are able to hide behind purportedly benign policy-making that allows them to ignore the real and predictable discriminatory impacts of their actions. At the same time, our courts eviscerate the laws designed to protect civil rights or invert them to deliberately undo historic civil rights gains.

But what Dr. King showed us so powerfully, and what the Moral Monday movement reminds us, it that we begin to fight back by standing together against the politics of injustice. In doing so, we pull back the curtain and expose the legacy of exclusion and the lies and propaganda used to prop it up. And we are going to do it by going on the offensive. As Thurgood Marshall once said, speaking of the struggle against segregation, "If this problem is going to be solved, it will only be solved by hitting back at them every time we can in every way we can."

We will no longer allow public officials to hide their discriminatory policies, but force them to own what they do. When they say neighborhood schools and parental choice, we will demand they answer for the resegregation and the school-to-prison pipeline. When they say voter fraud, we will force them to defend disenfranchisement and voter suppression. When they talk about fiscal responsibility, we will show them the hundreds of thousands whose unemployment benefits were cut or who were denied the chance for basic healthcare. And when they talk about a colorblind society, we will talk about a whitewash of history.

By standing together in this struggle, we will undermine the idea of "other" that has been used for so long to divide us. But it's not enough to come together here today, or on the Halifax Mall in Raleigh. We have to address the harms of exclusion every day and in every aspect of our lives.

In my day job at the Center for Civil Rights, I work with low-wealth and minority neighborhoods across the state that, as a result of the legacy of residential segregation, have been systematically excluded from the larger predominantly white communities that adjoin or surround them.

And by the way we have some here in Orange County too.

And what we know is that those communities suffer a range of impacts of their exclusion— lack of access to public services like water and sewer, the concentrated location of environmentally hazardous land uses, assignment of their children to racially isolated, high poverty schools, substandard housing, and political disempowerment. All of these impacts are the result of public choices, made in the name of all of us, and for which all of us must be accountable. And as long as we allow these decisions to be made in way that perpetuates the legacy of discrimination, we can never transcend the stigma of “other.”

But we have the power—standing together—to turn that around. That’s why we must continue to demand racially and economically diverse schools, and neighborhoods, and workplaces, and public gatherings, and social settings. We must insist that our policy makers consider the impacts of exclusion in every decision that is made in our names. And we must hold ourselves accountable, in all of our actions, to ensure equal treatment of all people in our community. That’s what I think Dr. King meant when he said that we must strive for the “understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill” for all people.

That’s worth repeating “the redemptive goodwill for all people.” For all people. One troubling legacy of the civil rights movement, which sadly persists today, is the idea that the struggle against racism is something that only helps communities of color. We know that nothing could be further from the truth. Policies that divide, that exclude, that subjugate, that isolate, hold all of us back and conspire to prevent us from fully achieving our collective potential. Ironically, it is the arrogant and aggressive extremism of the right that has reminded us of that potential, and what we have at stake. But as Dr. King once said, “the darkest hour is that hour that just appears before the dawn of a new fulfillment.”

I want to close with a few words about the challenges we face right here in Orange County, and our own opportunity for a new fulfillment.

Our county is, in many ways, a political and economic leader in the state. We have the state’s lowest unemployment rate and its highest rated school district. We pride ourselves on our civic engagement and our stated commitment to progressive politics. It is time for us to put that commitment to its most critical test, and to undertake a new civil rights challenge: to develop a comprehensive program to address the challenges facing low wealth children in our community.

Whenever you talk about poverty in Orange County, folks will tell you that the general statistics you read about our community all are wrong, that the numbers are too high, because they include all these college students. And there is some truth to that.

But I want to talk about children in need in our county. And these numbers are not skewed by the presence of college students.

By way of reference, the official federal government measure of poverty level for a family of four is \$23,550.

As of 2012, over 5000 children—over 18% of all children in Orange County were living poverty. That's more than twice the number from 2001. Over the same period, the percentage of children enrolled in Medicaid went from 7.9% to 25.2%.

As you might expect, there are significant differences in child poverty by ethnic group. For white children, the rate is 8.9%, for AA children the rate is 37%, and for Latino children 52%.

We've also seen increases in other measures of child poverty. The percentages of low birthweight babies born in the county and the percentage of uninsured children in low wealth families have both increased. And there has been a substantial decrease in the percentage of children in foster care who were reunited with their families.

The school free and reduced lunch program is another common way to measure children in need. Families with incomes below 185% of poverty (\$43500) are eligible for reduced-price lunches. Families with incomes below 130% of poverty (\$31800) are eligible for free lunches. In the 12-13 school year, Orange County Schools, 42% of the students qualified for FRL, in CH 27%. Of the 17 elementary schools operating in the county last year, more than half had over 40% FRL enrollment. There were approximately 140 homeless children in our schools last year.

The issue of child poverty is not only a political and economic one, is it a moral one. If we don't begin to deal with this issue at the earliest possible point for these children, we will deal with it in our schools, and in our courts, and in our prisons, and on the unemployment lines, and sadly, in our funeral homes. As Frederick Douglass said, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

This is the most pressing challenge to achieving our collective potential. In this community, with the great resources at our disposal, if we fail to fully engage this issue, it will not be because we are unable to, but rather that we choose not to. And I don't believe that's a choice any of us is willing to accept.

So let's continue to stand together—against the destructive policies of the legislature in Raleigh, and against the tragic impacts of child poverty here in Orange County. And let's meet back here in a year, and celebrate our progress on the path towards redemptive goodwill for all.