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Keynote Address: University of Dayton's Martin Luther King Jr. Luncheon

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Julius A. Amin, professor of history and Africana studies at the University of Dayton, offered the following keynote address at the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. luncheon Jan. 19, 2016, at the University of Dayton.

Good morning. I am honored to be here today.

First, my thanks go to the organizers of this event. It is a tribute that this celebration has taken place annually for almost two decades.

Second, we have on our campus a monument in honor of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. If you haven't seen it, I encourage you to check it out. This monument is as a result of the efforts of Professor Roger Crum who conceived the idea, lobbied the administration for it, and it became a reality. I thank him for that.

Third, in the book, *African Immersion*, the author is critical of college administrators' approach to racism on college campuses writing: "Given that college campuses were representative of society's value system, racism was an endemic problem there. Few, if any, college administrators successfully came up with a formula to solve the race problem. While some university presidents were proactive, others waited to deal with consequences. Others avoided the subject and acted as if the word racism would burn their lips if they used it in speeches. Often when a race crisis occurred, a committee was hurriedly put together to investigate the problem. A report normally followed the investigation, and once the crisis subsided the report was shelved and forgotten." If I have to submit a revised version, this section may change somewhat. Within the last few years UD's administration has increasingly taken a proactive approach, admitting that there is the problem of racism on campus, calling for change, and moving swiftly to address concerns. I want to thank the administration for this change and new directions.

Fourth, I want to extend my thanks to Rev. Brother Ray Fitz, former president of the University of Dayton, for an initiative he devised and implemented many years ago. At a meeting with black faculty, Brother Ray noted that as an engineer there were many problems he could open his briefcase, dust off an old formula and use it to solve them, but it was different with discrimination—there was no such formula in his brief case. He agreed that more had to be done to improve race relations noting that it would be difficult to achieve the desired outcome without a *critical mass* on campus. As an initial step, he approved funds to hire additional black faculty. It was a bold and courageous move, and a lesson to those who argued for caution. Brother Ray was confronted with a problem he neither created nor sought and he acted. As a historian, I cannot help but draw analogies when I speak. Though different, this analogy has similar implications—I am going to use an analogy from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration—At the end of the New Deal, African-Americans showed appreciation for Roosevelt in several ways. They named children, streets, schools, and markers in his honor. African-Americans overwhelmingly shifted the black vote from the Republican Party to Roosevelt's Democratic Party. They did so not because Roosevelt solved the race problem, far from it. They did so because Roosevelt, for all the politicking, made strides. They did so because he was the first president to admit that lynching was "murder." They did so because Roosevelt's actions acknowledged the responsibility of the federal government to address the problem of discrimination. Roosevelt brought into his administration people who were sensitive to the plight of blacks and other minorities. African-Americans appreciated that Roosevelt used his authority to appoint judges who helped to replace a *Dred Scott* and *Plessy vs Ferguson* judicial philosophy

with one of *Brown vs. Board of Education* and *Miranda vs Arizona*. People in his administration asked different questions, changed the conversation, and introduced new ideas to address the race problem. African-Americans, wrote the historian Harvard Sitkoff, did not ask for perfection, they appreciated Roosevelt's efforts, the changing tone, and the creation of an atmosphere which helped to establish a foundation of the modern civil rights movement. African-Americans recognized and thanked him for what he did. His successors built on that momentum. I use this analogy for a reason. Brother Ray acknowledged that there was a race problem on campus, and used the authority of his office to begin to affect change. I use this analogy because Brother Ray's action recognized that UD's top administration had an obligation to ensure the creation of a more inclusive University of Dayton campus for all its members. I use the analogy to show that Blacks are aware of the complexities of the race problem, do not ask for perfection, and appreciate genuine efforts to end discrimination on campus. In a world in which means and ends must sometimes be assessed independently, we appreciated Brother Ray's actions. They provided hope, a way forward, something to hold on, and a message that leadership will pursue change once the will is there.

Fifth, during the fall semester, the editorial staff of the *Flyers News* approved and published several articles on the use and misuse of the word "Ghetto" to describe the student neighborhood. Those articles did more than just address the rights and wrongs of that word. They served as a window to engage the campus community in conversations on race. The history of racism has been and remains divisive, destructive, and often put people either on the offensive or defensive and as a result many shy away from the topic. It is naïve not to expect a certain level of intensity in a race discussion. And to move beyond the discomfort, that conversation must take place. I commend the editorial staff of the *Flyer News* for not backing down. The articles produced a new awareness of the contours of race relations in the public space, and generated ideas on how to begin to change the narrative.

Racism violates basic human rights, and given its deep roots in American political, economic, and social landscape, its solution requires unprecedented action.

Almost five decades ago in a speech at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, a country notorious for its own Jim Crow system known as Apartheid, Robert Kennedy stated that racism was "profoundly repugnant to theory and practice of our [American] constitution," and must be eliminated for the "single and fundamental reason that it is the right thing to do."

Beginning with President Harry Truman each American president argued that domestic racial problems complicated the nation's ability to execute a more effective foreign policy especially towards developing nations. Editorials from those countries frequently use continuous racial upheavals to question America's moral leadership in the world. How, in the face of repeated racial problems, can the nation promote democratic principles overseas, they ask?

Recent problems ranging from Ferguson to New York, to Cleveland, to South Carolina, to Chicago, and yes, to Beavercreek have been painful. Yet in a twisted sought of way, history could hardly have devised a more opportune moment for action, and now is the time. If we let this moment expire, then an opportunity would have been missed.

Some in the audience are probably wondering whether or not they are in the right place. —you came to hear about King and so far his name has barely been mentioned.

You are in the right place. King ranked among the greatest human rights activists of modern times. He was blunt, dissatisfied, and impatient with injustice.

Today we are gathered here to celebrate King's life and work. Today, we remind ourselves that this celebration is not an annual ritual but a reminder of a call to action. We celebrate the life of an ordinary man who rose to do extraordinary things. We celebrate the life of one who challenged us to search for a deeper meaning in life and to stand up for something. "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter," he noted. We celebrate the life of one who taught us humility. Rather than focus on his university degrees, Nobel Peace Prize, and other awards he earned he preferred to be remembered as someone who "fed the hungry," "clothe the naked," and "visited the sick."

King reminded us that we belong to one human family, one human race. Discrimination is inconsistent with what it means to be human. Being human means upholding the dignity of human beings irrespective of color, gender, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or national origin (*I may add accent*). Increasingly, our campus attracts students, faculty, and staff from all corners of the globe. It is therefore urgent for us to take seriously the message in King's "Beloved Community." We must rededicate ourselves to make our campus welcoming for all, and speak up against the common pain inflicted on so many by so few. When a member of our community hurts, we all hurt. When racial epitaphs are scrawled on walls of African-American students' houses, our community hurts. When the sign of Black Lives Matters is vandalized, our community is vandalized. When an international student is caricatured, our community is caricatured. When graduating students still cannot speak about UD as "our institution" we are saddened. When students' descriptions of UD experience are fed on a diet of negatives, we are disappointed. We are all imprisoned by bigotry, racism, and hatred. UD's mission, the Catholic Marianist Education Philosophy calls on us to be our brother and sister's keeper.

King rejected the type of apathy which has become routine among many of us. We are told that "all it takes for evil to succeed is for good men [and women] to do nothing." We prefer to avoid conflict and discomfort rather than correct colleagues, friends, and family members who perpetuate bigotry and other demeaning acts. We can and must do better.

King never shied away. He ranks among the top revolutionaries in modern times. It took a revolutionary to desegregate buses in the Jim Crow South. Less than a year after bus desegregation in Montgomery, King went to Ghana for that nation's Independence Day festivities. It was King's first time in Africa and he liked what he saw. The year was 1957 and Ghana had just gained independence from England. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, used peaceful resistance to end British colonial rule in his country. King observed, "Both segregation in America and colonialism in Africa were based on the same thing—white supremacy and contempt for life." King was elated at the celebration stating Ghanaian independence was a "triumph of good over bad," comparing it to a "new Jerusalem descending from God... a new heaven and new earth." When Nkrumah announced that Ghana was free from British colonialism, King became emotional noting: "I stood there thinking about so many things. Before I knew it, I started weeping. . . . I knew about all the struggles, and all the agony that these people had gone through for this moment." The Ghanaian experience confirmed that non-violence was an effective strategy. King returned to the US reassured, determined and more focused.

It was King's revolutionary spirit which captivated over 250,000 people on the march on Washington. At the Lincoln Memorial, he warned of the "fierce urgency of now:" "Now is the

time to make real the promises of democracy; now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice; now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood; now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children." He informed society that "wait" often meant "never," and was not an appropriate response to discrimination.

The following year in a speech at the University of Dayton Fieldhouse—King raised the stakes. "Segregation...is evil...sinful...and...immoral," he thundered, adding: "It is necessary ...to say to you not only have we come a long, long way, but we have a long, long way to go." He called for a "massive" economic package to assist the poor.

Increasingly, King saw segregation and poverty as two sides of the same coin. It was unacceptable to have millions living in abject poverty in the richest country on earth, he noted. "There are few things more thoroughly sinful than economic injustice," he told an audience. He summoned everyone to reject what he referred to as "the triple interlocking evils of racism, exploitation, and militarism." A year before King was assassinated he stated that most Americans were "unconscious racists," and advocated a "human rights revolution" which focused on an anti-racism crusade. He called for a "restructuring of the very architecture of American society." He repeatedly spoke of the "underprivileged," "the hungry," the marginalized and the excluded. King's work forced society to ask deeper questions about freedom, social justice, poverty, white privilege, and racial arrogance. King's overall message was consistent with UD's mission to learn, lead, and serve. He was an apostle for social justice.

At this point, I feel compelled to inform you that much is beginning to happen on the University of Dayton campus. While it is difficult to foreshorten the historical record, we must be courageous enough to admit that a change is taking place. Major university documents contain strong pro-diversity and inclusion statements. The Common Academic Program (CAP), which is UD's general education program, mandates that students learn about diversity and social justice.

Recent actions and events on campus show renewed seriousness in creating a more inclusive community. Safe spaces are increasingly provided for students to either worship or engage in conversations and other activities. Both the Center for International Programs and the Office of Multicultural Affairs have been at the forefront of these initiatives.

Following the shooting of Michael Brown, there was the Ferguson teach-In, support of Black Lives Matter protests, and the organization of the Interdisciplinary Collaborative on Race Relations and Advocacy which creates a forum to discuss race-related issues. Next week from the 26-28, we will be hosting on campus a symposium on race titled: "Critical Examination of our times: The State of Race on the University of Dayton Campus." The symposium examines the history of race on the UD campus with hopes of understanding the present, and suggesting future directions on race relations. I invite you to go onto the Africana Studies site at: <http://go.udayton.edu/Africana> to register. It is free and open to the public.

King's call for action was infectious. He succeeded, in part, because he built broad coalitions. He worked with people across race, class, gender, and religious lines. It has been almost five decades since King was assassinated, and over a hundred years since WEB Du Bois predicted that the problem of the 20th century was one of the color line, and also postulated the "double consciousness" theory, yet racism remains deeply entrenched in the global community. History may be a burden, but it is empowering in that it serves as a rear-view mirror to help us shape

future directions. King's life and work challenges us to complete America's unfinished democracy by ending discrimination on our campus, our community, our nation, our world. We must act rather than wait. We must move beyond hashtags, superficialities, and sparkling language to real solutions. We must stop the excuses, engage in bold experiments, and convert promises into concrete action. Each one can make a difference if they try. We have the capability to turn the tide, and as King stated: "now is the time." It will be a befitting legacy in honor of King, and numerous others including Fannie Lou Hamer, James Chaney, Malcolm X, William Lloyd Garrison, Elijah Lovejoy, Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, A Philip Randolph, Rosa Parks, Charles Hamilton Houston, and yes, W.S McIntosh who sacrificed so much to make America stand tall on its almost 250 years old founding creed which reads: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Let us turn it into reality for all.

Thank you very much listening.