

**Martin Luther King Speech**  
**Manchester Community College**  
**January 16, 2007**  
**Dr. Elsa M. Nuñez**

Hello. My name is Elsa M. Nuñez and I am the president of Eastern Connecticut State University. Eastern enjoys a longstanding relationship with this institution, and I am delighted that I can help to carry on that tradition.

I want to thank Dr. Daube for inviting me to speak to you today. Not only would this be an honor at any time of year, but I am especially pleased to be able to share some of my thoughts today with you about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I understand that you gather every January to usher in the New Year and the new semester. I am also told that you use this opportunity to reflect on the teachings and the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I applaud you for that.

I realize, therefore, that I am not covering any new territory with you today. I merely hope to use my time with you to reaffirm the values that we all share, and to perhaps rekindle our common faith in the knowledge that doing the right thing is always the right thing to do, and that helping others to share in the American dream should be the focus of our lives.

President Daube's dear friend, David G. Carter was my predecessor at Eastern. As an African-American leader in higher education and in Connecticut, Dr. Carter worked hard to honor the ideals of Dr. Martin Luther King. The values and principles that Dr. King, Jr. stood for have long been part of Eastern's heritage. Not only do we believe in educational access for all people, something that Dr. King advocated throughout his life, we also attempt to instill the principles of justice, freedom, and equality in our students on a daily basis. These ideals were the foundation of Dr. King's work as the leader of the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

Thousands of people around our country took time yesterday to celebrate Dr. King's birthday, remember his dream, and reflect on his legacy. I want to spend my time with you today seeing if I can't illuminate some of the more important messages Dr. King shared with the American people, people of all races, more than 40 years ago. These messages ring as true today as they did then, and they can continue to inspire us.

When you think about Martin Luther King, the first thing most of us remember is his "I Have a Dream" speech of August 28, 1963. That was indeed a powerful speech, one he gave in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. to an audience of more than 200,000 people. It was one of many unforgettable messages he shared with this nation during those turbulent years in the 1960's. I want to quote from that speech for a moment, as much to demonstrate the eloquence of Dr. King as to recall his message.

Referring to the Emancipation Proclamation, he said: **"This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice."**

Elsewhere in this speech, he said: **"When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be**

guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

**"Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."**

**"Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence."**

**"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."**

What are the central messages we hear in this and other speeches and writings of Dr. King?

1. **A Moral certitude.** Dr. King possessed a conviction that not only made him certain of the righteousness of his beliefs but gave him a lifelong faith that kept him moving forward. Dr. King was convinced that his only course of action was to pursue corrective action. He could not imagine living a life of indifference, and wrote that **"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."** Not that we should be ashamed of ourselves if we stay silent — our lives begin to end. In June 1963, in a speech in Detroit, Michigan, he made these choices even more absolute: **"If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live."**

This is a tough standard to meet, but certainly these words gave courage to the thousands of people who joined Dr. King's cause more than 40 years ago. This sense of living one's entire life in the active pursuit of what you know is right, even when such pursuit puts your life at constant risk, might seem antiquated in today's world of relative morality, transitory relationships, and quick fix, megahertz-speed lifestyles. Perhaps in part that is because, when I look across the American landscape, I see no one with the conviction of Dr. King to stand tall and serve as a moral beacon for our nation. Imagine what a stir he would make today if Dr. King was still alive and writing words such as this passage found in his letter from the Birmingham Jail in 1963: **"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."** Dr. King gave these words teeth through his active pursuit of social justice. I will speak more in a moment about the nature of active yet non-violent disobedience, but let me say again, Dr. King's actions and the actions of the people who followed him gave backbone, spirit, and staying power to the moral statements that he used to motivate members of the civil rights movement. Dr. King's righteous certainty, articulated with conviction and the passion of a Southern minister, moved a nation. And the actions of those who took up the cause reinforced the moral foundation behind those actions.

2. **A commitment to nonviolence.** This commitment was something that Dr. King, like Mahatma Gandhi before him, not only practiced, but used as a mantra, a teaching tool, a message that he delivered from the pulpit whenever he had the opportunity. On Christmas Eve in 1967, he said: **"One day we must come to see that peace is not**

**merely a distant goal we seek, but that it is a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.”**

Perhaps this commitment to non-violence was borne out of King’s fundamental spiritual and religious beliefs. Certainly he was strongly influenced by Gandhi’s writings and practices on the issue. To Gandhi, nonviolence was not simply a strategy for influencing public opinion and gaining political objectives, it was a way of life. As he wrote, **“Nonviolence is a power which can be wielded equally by all -- children, young men and women or grown up people -- provided they have a living faith in the God of Love and have therefore equal love for all mankind. When nonviolence is accepted as the law of life it must pervade the whole being and not be applied to isolated acts.”** Dr. King adopted this principle, that non-violence had to become a way of life, an overriding condition to guide’s one’s actions.

An interesting counterpoint to this position was that of Nelson Mandela, who has acknowledged that his own belief system was not based on a religious or spiritual foundation, but rather on the pragmatic usefulness of nonviolence. While he initially practiced nonviolent actions in the hopes they would be successful for the ANC, he eventually abandoned them, frustrated by their inability to effect change. It was only during his imprisonment that he began to reaffirm his commitment to nonviolence: **“We have got to learn to live together, to transcend prejudices, to resolve our differences amicably, to respect one another and together reach toward co-operation and attainable common goals. Those are some of the things that I learned in prison.”**

Today, where 747s have become weapons, where children kill each other over shoes, and where computers have allowed film directors to graphically create the unthinkable on our movie screens, the notion of gaining victory through non-violence may seem quaint. “Non-violent action” sounds like an oxymoron. Yet many of us remember the decade of the ‘60s, when boycotting lettuce, grapes, and other vegetables helped change labor practices for migrant workers; when sit-ins, strikes, protest marches, and other non-violent actions advanced the cause of civil rights; and when America’s college-aged youth marched, burnt draft cards, and otherwise protested until the War in Vietnam lost all political viability.

Perhaps times have changed. One of Eastern’s communication professors, Jaime Gomez, recently premiered his new film documentary, “Up and Out of Poverty.” The film focuses on Ron Casanova, national organizer for the National Union for the Homeless. In the film, Casanova notes that today, the spirit and energy of the protests of former years seem to be missing. **“The rallies, the protests, the demonstrations—you don’t see much of that anymore.”**

I am not asking all of you to leave this auditorium today to go out and demonstrate against the war in Iraq or some other current issue facing this country. But I am saying that in another era, non-violent yet active social acts of dissent and disobedience were highly effective in changing public policy. If nothing else, I believe we need to encourage our students to be informed citizens, and we need to supporting them by

acknowledging their compassion and encouraging their active engagement in the problems facing our society.

3. **A belief in unity.** Whether the group you belong to is a family, a team, a village, a community college faculty and staff, or a nation, Dr. King helped us to realize that a group of people, armed with a shared vision and a strategy founded on peaceful activism, can move mountains.
4. **A realization of the power of education.** I think it is significant that three of the most influential men of the past 100 years, all of whom preached and practiced a creed of non-violence, were all university-educated. I again refer to Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Each realized that education was a tool for bringing people together, rather than a tool for the privileged to wield power over those less fortunate. As Dr. King noted in a speech at Morehouse College in 1948, **“The purpose of education is to enable a man to become more efficient. It should teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction.”** Certainly, Dr. King practiced what he preached: he graduated from high school at age 15, graduated from Morehouse in 1948, and eventually received his doctorate at Boston University.

The Indian writer, Radhika Rao, writing in May 2004, noted several interesting parallels in the lives of Gandhi, Mandela, and Dr. King: . . . **“loving families, compassionate and strong female influences, strong family pride, privilege, and an educated background . . .”**

The Dalai Lama is another similar example. He holds what is the equivalent of a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy. While in exile, he has created a charter for a democratic Tibet that outlines principles of freedom of speech, belief, assembly, and political franchise. While not university educated, the migrant worker activist Cesar Chavez, was an avid reader, learning about Gandhi and others who preached non-violence while in his 20s in the late 1940s. He was later to say, “The love for justice that is in us is not only the best part of our being, but it is also the most true to our nature.”

5. **The understanding that justice, equality, and societal rights and privileges in the United States, despite the protections of the Constitution, only come from struggle.** In Dr. King’s case, as I have just discussed, that struggle had to be non-violent in order to have any credibility before God. In his letter from the Birmingham Jail, he wrote: **“Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”** Today, as educators, we should be using the struggles of the civil rights movement, of the women’s movement, of every major social movement and cause in history as examples of how educated, socially responsible people can and should make social change occur.

These are messages that never lose their power or their clarity. They inspire me as much today as when I was a high school and college student in the 1960s. I hope they inspire you as well. I encourage you, if you haven’t already done so, to find ways this week or in any week of the year to shine your light on Dr. King’s message. Share it with

your students. Help them to understand how fundamental Dr. King's message of active, yet non-violent civil disobedience has been to our nation, how his dream remains unrealized to its fullest extent, and how only through continued vigilance and noble action will we continue to make progress on the world's common problems.

One thing we can do on college campuses is support students as they learn to develop the tools of peace, the social skills essential for people to resolve issues peacefully. At Eastern, as is the case at UConn and many other college and university campuses across the country, we have a Peace and Human Rights student group. It is supported by a minor in Peace and Human minor as well as library and other resources. Students have opportunities to develop tolerance, mutual respect and empathetic skills. They also read about philosophies of nonviolence and the successful application of nonviolent strategies, and learn how to apply those nonviolent behaviors, not only in social settings, but in their personal lives. It seems to me that such programs help ensure that the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as Mohatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and others, remain living legacies.

Find ways to give your students opportunities to exercise their social responsibilities and their citizenship skills. Today's college students are tomorrow's leaders. They can never stop caring. They can never stop the struggle for justice and equality. And they can do it with dignity. These are lessons Dr. King and others have taught us. Let these lessons inspire us today. Let us share them with our students. Let us continue to fulfill Dr. King's dream.

**Thank you for having me today. It has been my distinct pleasure.**