



# PRICHARD COMMITTEE FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

STUDY • INFORM • ENGAGE

Address to the

## **23<sup>rd</sup> Annual UNITY Breakfast: “Make It Your Lifestyle”**

The Education Foundation of the Alpha Beta Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Fraternity, Inc.

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### **Reflections on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as an Educator**

by Brigitte Blom Ramsey, Executive Director  
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Good morning to each of you and thank you to the Alpha Beta Lambda Fraternity for inviting me here to speak to you today. I am deeply humbled and touched by the opportunity to reflect publicly on Dr. Martin Luther King as an educator. I pray my words today will do even small justice to a man, a moral leader, who looms large in our collective conscience.

In preparation, I asked myself, what do I have to offer – a white woman of German-Irish-Cherokee heritage, parents both raised in northern Kentucky and in Catholic families. What do I have to offer? My one claim to connection, to understanding, is that I was raised in a diverse neighborhood – a working-class, white, African-American and Jewish community.

I’ll be forever grateful to my parents for that experience in my formative years. It taught me something about unity in action. It taught me that we unite, not in our sameness, but in the richness of our differences.

What I have to offer today is a commitment to a union that celebrates our uniqueness and the myriad gifts, talents and experiences we each bring to the table; a table set in communion – where all are welcome and all share in conversation.

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I’d like to ask you to work with me for a moment – and close your eyes. Bring into the fore of your vision that iconic picture of Dr. King at the Lincoln Memorial looking out toward the Washington Monument, over masses of people gathered to hear his address. From deep in his breast arose the words we know so well, “*I have a dream...*”.

In that moment, Dr. King shared his dream and simultaneously called upon each of us, from every walk of life – those there in the moment and generations yet to come – to share his vision, to take hold of his aspirations and dream with him. So that if any one of

us is lost in the midst of the quest, there are many others to help carry the dream forward, to feed it, to nurture it, to allow it to grow – and realize its promise.

In that same speech, Dr. King, evoked *“the fierce urgency of Now”* and cautioned us against, *“engaging in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.”*

That evocation is the heart and soul of education.

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Just a year after Dr. King’s 1963 speech, Kentucky’s own Governor “Ned” Breathitt addressed a crowd with words written by the Prichard Committee’s founding father, Ed Prichard:

*“...Ours is the vision and ours the growing reality of a great society in which the accidents of race and color, parentage and poverty, location and geography, will not be allowed to dim the light of human hope and to cripple the possibilities of human growth...”*

It would be 20 years later that we would fully recognize the failings of our state in education, leaving our citizens woefully lacking on a path to a larger life, and commit to doing something about it.

And, while we’ve made significant progress for all students across Kentucky, progress of which to be very proud, it’s not enough. Thirty-three years later, we must renew the call to *“not submit to gradualism”* - but, to continue, with urgency and a quickened pace, to further increase achievement for all students and close achievement gaps that have persisted for far too long.

Dr. King said, *“Education must enable [one] to become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of his [or her] life.”*

And, yet, we are still leaving too many students behind, not fully prepared with the knowledge and skills necessary for success. Too many do not have access to high-quality experiences that lift them to a level playing field in the all important early years of brain development. Too many face adverse and traumatic environments in their homes and communities that make it difficult to focus on studies or their futures. Too many students do not go on for training or further education after high school and many who do, dropout of postsecondary experiences within the first year – unable to afford them, find their niche, or realize success. These young people are disproportionately from low-income families, many are English language learners, they have learning differences, or they are children of color. They are left disempowered and immobilized, with hopes for brighter futures – fleeting.

We must not allow this inequity to persist. We must hold fast to the dream of ensuring education excellence for each student – and it is not just the business of our school system, it’s Everybody’s Business.

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As a moral educator of the masses, Dr. King taught us his philosophy. The "*triple evils*" he saw in the world of "*POVERTY, RACISM, and MILITARISM*" are all interconnected challenges. Working on one helps eradicate them all. Working together, each in our area and connected to others, puts us on the path to "*beloved community where all share in the wealth of our earth*".

The steps to achieve love-based social change: study, inform and engage others, commit personally to a cause, act directly with respect, and always seek reconciliation when a bond with another is lost or seemingly unattainable.

Education is fundamental to this quest – and to Dr. King, true education could never be satisfied with knowledge alone. In his words: "*Intelligence plus character--that is the goal of true education.*"

And, so, in our communities and our homes, we must hold ourselves accountable to continue our learning and to have high expectations for the education of "our children" – Kentucky's children. Expectations for an education that: provides foundational knowledge necessary for a bright future, recognizes each learner's gifts and talents and helps them realize their unique potential, and spurs them to lift others as they climb.

We must work together, modeling *unity in action* that dismantles the barriers of poverty, prejudice, and violence.

Each of us must find our place in Dr. King's prescription and do our part - however big or small - to courageously build bridges to a *beloved community* where we see each other, and our young people, as God sees us - wonderful creatures, flawed - yes, but full of promise.

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