**Martin Luther Dr. King Jr. Had a Dream**

**August 28th, 2024 Fond du Lac Wisconsin**

**By Assembly Representative Jerry O’Connor**

Bishop Heywood, thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts here today. For those who do not know, eight years ago Bishop and his wife provided music along with Ed Gilgenbach at my marriage to Luanne. We both had lost our spouses and this was a special day and we are so thankful that this trio shared their talents during this very healing event. Thank you again.

Today we celebrate a unique and important day in American History. This is the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Had A Dream” speech which he gave on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28th, 1963. It was reported that more than 200,000 people were there that day.

I was 10 years old back then and over time I have been captivated by key phrases set forth in Dr. King’s speech and this has stayed with me over the years. Today I will share what impressed me the most from that speech 61 years ago.

In my early years I grew up in rural Wisconsin. In the 1950’s and 1960’s we only had a handful of non-whites living in our communities. Although blacks in inner cities could only guess at what my life was like growing up, the same was true for me when I tried to envision their world. Heck, I didn’t even understand what it was like for anyone to grow up in large city.

I grew up watching TV where gifted black athletes played for the Milwaukee Braves and the Green Bay Packers. I admired their abilities, contributions and determination as they broke down barriers, I wasn’t able to fully apprehend back then. This was the beginning of a great awakening in this country. Like many families we were introduced to amazing African American men and women through our TV’s to include impressive speakers, like Dr. King, brilliant minds, talented actors, entertainers, jazz and blues singers. What is not remembered well is how much the American public enjoyed inviting these new talents into their homes. This was new!

All of this was valuable as the nation became more connected and we came to see our fellow man in a new light. This unfolding became the foundation for a national discussion about the lack of civil rights for our black brothers and sisters. We learned more about people from different backgrounds at a much faster pace than was previously possible. This transformation became part of the fabric that gave Dr. King the important platform he holds in the American landscape.

I have observed the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: A man whose “I had a dream” speech reflected the principles of the Founder Fathers in identifying the inalienable rights of all human beings. Dr. King preached peaceful protest, hard work, and strong individual character as a means to social success.

When I read the writings of any great man or woman, I want to know what drives and motivates that person in their most inner being. I want to know more about their heart. Why did they use the words they used? Why is the subject important to them? What did they desire to be the fulfillment or outcome of their message? In like manner I wanted to know more about the man of Dr. Martin Luther King.

Throughout the “I Have a Dream” and his many other messages, Dr. King’s Judeo/Christian faith plays a significant role. The teachings of the Bible shaped his worldview, the value he placed on all human beings and the approach he took to bringing about change. He did not call for a violence that drives people apart. He was able to use the tenets of Christianity to challenge and persuade people of all races to relate to one another as being equal in the eyes of God. He knew the meaning that every man and woman stands on level ground before the foot of the cross.

It was through this biblical foundation that Dr. King found millions of followers in every corner of the country where his message was heard. Without this common Christian foundation, that was shared by the majority of the nation in 1963, the people of America would not have understood the dream of Dr. King. But because they did, the hearts of millions of Americans began to recognize the sins too often found in the treatment of their fellow man. Change was coming.

What were the things Dr. King dreamed of in this iconic speech? The I Have a Dream portion of his speech was not part of his written notes. I believe he was inspired by God to add this language at the last minute because this is the message America needed to hear.

After laying bare the brutal facts of racism in America, [Dr. King](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/i-have-a-dream-speech/characters/dr-martin-luther-king-jr) offered up the dream of an America in which people of all races and faiths could live together in harmony and mutual respect.

He began this portion of his speech with:

“Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream:

* It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. 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."*
* I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners *will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*
* I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, *will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.*
* I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation *where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character*.
* I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; *one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers*.
* I have a dream today. *I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.*

Even though Dr. King had known despair over the course of his life, he’s still able to dream of a future where black and white children hold hands, where the South transforms from a racist inferno into a peaceful oasis, and where his children will be judged by their character instead of their race. Why is he able to dream so bold a dream? Why?

I conclude it is because of his faith in the equality of “all God’s children.” As a preacher of the Gospel, he believed that God loves all men equally. Because of his faith in a just God who will ultimately bring peace among all men. Because he believed, as the Bible teaches, that all men are redeemable if they allow their faith in God to guide them.

In many ways this dream has seen much progress. There is not an office or position of influence that cannot be reached by any American, regardless of the color of their skin. We have millions of people in America living in racial harmony. They are examples of how Dr. King’s dream has become a reality.

Am I wrong when I observe that too many of the tactics being used today to try to force racial equality do not measure up to the dreams and ideas of Dr. King? That they take us backwards.

Dr. King believed in peaceful protest, as provided for in the First Amendment to the Constitution. He believed in exercising informed influence and persuasion, based on a higher power and not the secular will of men and women and their ideas of truth.

As we look back at the last dozen years, has violence brought us closer together as brothers and sisters? Has replacing personal achievement with artificial quotas improved the lives of the average black family? Has the government-imposed racial rules changed the hearts of men toward one another? No, No, and No!

Is it not the worst form of depreciation to assume that a black man or woman cannot excel without receiving special treatment? Is it wrong to treat these brothers and sisters as being inferior.

In his day Dr. King was severely criticized by his peers for not using the violence and the hateful divisive rhetoric they used. He looked at how Christ or a Mahatma Ghandi in India used the powerful strength of peaceful, informed persuasion as the more effective tool to achieve lasting change.

Today, I hear people of all races and both sides of the political aisle comment that race relations have gone backwards by 40 years as a result of hateful rhetoric, violence, and an artificial man-made equality that works to force change down their opponent’s throat. This never works!

What works is when a man or a woman surrenders to eternal truth and allows their hearts to be changed toward God and their fellow brothers and sisters. Unless we become captured by this idea, we will learn that all other change is fleeting.

Dr. King believed his children would “one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” To have an institutional policy created that deviates from the character of the individual is a pitiful excuse for progress.

He drove a revolutionary non-violent protest that achieved true change. Dr. King would be disgusted by recent riots spawned by extreme and violent hate groups.

On the practical side, Dr. King was a huge advocate for hard work, and that no matter what the circumstances are, you should always be pursuing your best. It did not matter your occupation, for as he said, “If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry.” Dr. King believed in charity and help for the needy, but he was a clear advocate for personal responsibility and hard work as well.

Dr. King fought social injustice by advocating virtue, nonviolence, hard work, and a recognition of the inalienable rights that pertain to all of us.

Most people don’t know that I spent about twenty years in prison. There I met men and women from all racial backgrounds. Sorry, did I forget to mention that I received round trip tickets for teaching Tuesday night Bible Studies where we would have up to 100 men and for Sunday evening worship services, where we would have 300?

In that setting we talked about what constitutes a person’s worldview. The secular view most people brought to prison left them bankrupt. They couldn’t even decide when to get a cup of coffee. If they wanted to change, they would have to overhaul their belief systems to match those of a Creator God who loved them and wanted the best for every individual.

This change began with getting your heart in the right place with both God and your fellow man, overhauling your worldview with eternal truths, understanding that choices have consequences which no man can outrun; and finally, intentionally choosing a path that results in your being called a wise man and not a fool.

This is the journey of a faith that can change the world. Dr. King insists that it’s faith alone that can propel us to a promised land. “With this faith,” he says, “we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”

The “I Have a Dream Speech” preaches the gospel of freedom, equality, and justice, insists that suffering on behalf of others is powerful and worthwhile, and encourages listeners to keep their faith in the future of their nation, no matter what obstacles they might face. With this tireless faith, Dr. King promises, the dreams of true lasting equality amongst men can be realized.

The best way we can honor Dr. Martin Luther King today is to fully grasp the foundation of his dreams and then work together to make those dreams a reality for all men regardless of the color of their skin. Let us join our hands together today and commit to making Dr. King’s dream a reality right here where we live.