

## Martin Luther King Day Celebration

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I was 16 years old, a junior in high school, when Martin Luther King died on a balcony in Memphis. The year was 1968, the year that my nearly all-white high school became 50% black. I didn't understand all that was going on around me, but I knew that a terrible thing had happened, and that a great American was gone.

Four years later I took a class in college that would change the course of my life forever. It was taught by John Stephenson, former President of Berea College. The class was called Social Change, and it was there that I studied the life of Martin Luther King for the first time.

Somehow, during that class, hope was restored to my life, and I found the strength and the purpose to carry on, to make my way in this world. Those were troubled times in America, and troubled times for me too. In the midst of my own personal depression and despair I learned that there was greatness in the human spirit, that there were things worth devoting a life to. Dr. King did not know that his example had profoundly shaped the life of a white boy from Kentucky.

I was uncomfortable being asked to speak at this celebration today, being a white boy and all. White America has not been kind to our brothers and sisters of African descent. But in thinking about what to say to you, I realized that we mostly talk about what Martin Luther King did for his people, for African Americans. But what Martin Luther King lived and died to achieve was very much for white people too, and for all Americans. Because racial strife and hatred and the social and economic injustice that come from them are scars on each of our souls, and scars on the soul of our nation. King's dream was meant for all Americans, and he knew it.

It pains me to say that the dreams of Dr. King for all America are still far from being realized. That today, 30 years after the heroism and hope of the civil rights movement, racial and hate crimes have not disappeared. That we do not live in a society that has succeeded in righting its wrongs. That the soul of our nation remains very much at risk. That today the chances of a young black man graduating from college are less than his chances of dying violently or ending up in prison.

The best thing that a white boy from Kentucky can do, that Berea, Kentucky and Berea College can do, that all of us can do, is continue to dream Dr. King's dream. To speak, to act, and to struggle to make that luminous dream a reality. To create an America we can be proud of, an America where, as Spelman College President Johnetta Cole says, *"we are for difference, for allowing difference, for respecting difference, for celebrating difference, until difference doesn't make any more difference."*

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Berea, Kentucky  
1996  
David Sawyer