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Address at the Public Memorial for Coretta Scott King



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It's a big one to balance -- for a lot of reasons. First I have to say praise God Almighty that we have been bestowed with such a woman as Coretta Scott King; that, for me, my family, my five younger sisters -- that our hearts are heavy, but the memory brings on a chuckle and a smile and a caress of warmth because of the role she played in our individual lives, after we lost our own mother.

Now, on the sixth day of Creation, we all know that God created Man in His image. But even God knew His work was not done, until he created Woman -- bless His heart. How many of you here know that no matter how mighty the man in your midst is, that he could not do it without the caress, the wink, the unconditional love, the pat on the back, the sustenance, the maintenance, of the woman in his life?

As I sat there, I looked around and realized how full the room is -- probably the viewing audience, and those who cannot touch this room, or cable television, or read a newspaper -- for whom Coretta mattered. Yes, indeed, Martin Luther King, Jr. But Coretta Scott King gave people a backbone and a poise. If you didn't have any of your own, you could mimic it at least. You knew what grace looked like. You knew what poise looked like. And in her it came in brown, which we didn't always get to see forecast before us. We got to see it in wonderment and beauty, just that film. You know, was she never not cute? I mean just lovely, just lovely.

The nostalgia that I see around with silvering members of the civil rights movement, marchers, spokespersons, having hit it hard and recovered and sustained. Let me acknowledge one who has not been: We've had the grace of meeting Mrs. Oliver Tambo.¹



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We know Dr. Height. We've heard from the illustrious Dr. Angelou. Mothers of the movement, sustainers of the movement. But one of the mothers who had to live with the same similar thing as my mother and Mrs. King was Mrs. Merle Evers.² These are women who, when no one was looking, they had to maintain, sustain, and they had each other.

I want to thank the King family for asking me to speak on behalf of my family. You know decades ago one would not think that there was any likeness between Malcolm X Shabazz and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. So our families aren't united because of something we've done today. It was united because those men started it then, unbenounced to many. Have you ever seen the picture of the two of them embraced and with a grin this wide?

They knew what they stood for. No matter how different, the message was the same. It was to make sure that we as a people in the United States on this globe were inherent beneficiaries of what God had bestowed to all of us at birth. However the means, there are arteries plentiful to meet that heart.

A few decades later in the 70's, through the introduction of a journalist and photographer in *Ebony* Magazine, I got to meet the eldest daughter. People were surprised that by then we had not already been an integral part of each other's lives. But I want to say, in our respective households, we were sibling families, if I'm clear; all the while, in this together, wondering what was going on in the threshold of the other house, feeling one another.

So, there was a little apprehension. ("Hope she likes me.") She thought the same. Stood in front of a planned, posed photographer, whom we both grew up knowing, Moneta Sleet. That was the easy part. We hummed and tapped our foot. And he said, "loosen up a little." You know, "break a little bread."

Then we just started to realize certain things. Not only were we the oldest daughters of our respective families, but our birthdays were a day apart. Could that be fate? We knew we had commonalities. We knew our parents did. Realized that makes us both Scorpio. Uh, oh. Then Moneta Sleet took a picture with tonsils and wide tongues, wide mouths, and that was how the friendship and kinship began with Yolanda King and myself.

Shortly thereafter, we founded a national touring company called "Nucleus," which brought us together on a regular basis. Started with four shows of presentations and it went up to 16 cities a year. And for 14 years we were on the road meeting people who weren't ready. They didn't think it could be. They even thought that they could pull one against the other by winking. You know the Malcolmites give you the whatever and the Kingites would....But you wanted to say, "No." We're in this together. That's why were standing together, both of us respectively products of our households, no doubt. We look like our household parents. She had that "ya'll" and that easiness of the South, which I just loved. Tee-hee. And mine was quick, northern, and West Indian. Product of my house.



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And we traveled around just enabling people to see that you can merge. We could still be exactly who we were and function together, be together, make this thing happen together. I wasn't flattered when one picked Malcolm over Martin. I was protective of who he was through her. And vice versa. You're not doing the men any justice by picking one over the other. You're not doing us any justice by picking one over the other. There are many methods for us to get to this union of who we were.

Our mothers -- beautiful women. And I'd like to say, Mayor Franklin, that maybe my mother can have a honorary seat on that Freedom Choir. When I came home after meeting Yolanda King, my mother sat with bated breath, wondering how it would all go, as if she were a long lost daughter of her own. So as we traveled on the road together we got to swap mothers -- all of us -- as I got to know the King siblings, and feel like their older sibling myself. Very protective I am of each of you in my heart.

They were definitely sisters. My mother, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, and Merely Evers would go away for retreats unannounced to people -- pin curls, Noxzema -- and share that which others could not. And when you saw any of them, grace followed; but not without a Keloid under the attire, not without a continuous rub of Aloe Vera, coconut oil, a little sag. But the commitment to the mission, to loving their husbands, to raising their children, sustained them.

When my mother in 1997 had her accident, the gathering of women surrounded us. I see many of them here. Mrs. King was no doubt a part of that perpetual momentum. When my mother made her "transition," Mrs. King was one of the few who maintained regular phone calls. Now I had always called and exchanged cards and things on significant dates -- not the Monday that celebrated her husband's birthday, but on exactly January 15th, because there's an intimate association. And we would always -- all six of my mother's children -- receive something in the mail every birthday.

This past November I got a package in the mail. Now we all know that she was wheelchair-bound. We knew that she didn't speak, so it meant that our conversations were cut out. But I could send a note. I just didn't expect notes back. It wasn't the burden she needed to bear. So I get a package and I get a card. It was for my birthday. A mother all the while. Do you understand what I'm saying? Certainly a mother of the Movement but intimately, in terms of the dedication. And it's signed, from her, with the hand writing of her daughter, Bernice.

As I continued to travel I sent cards again just so that she can hear from me. Every time I sent a card, I'd get a call from one of the children saying, well more specifically, "Mother wants to hear your voice." And I'd get it, you know, too far to call back immediately. And I'm trying not to put pressure. And then I'd get another call with a tap of the foot and the sound, "I don't know, did you get my message?" And I know it's not just her pounding; it's mother pounding. And my heart -- if you can talk about intuition -- was almost too scared to touch. Because I wasn't ready.



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Yet, no doubt one of the most beautiful things -- as her eldest daughter and I discussed -- when you witness love and being loved the way we have by each our respectable mothers, you almost feel like you don't have the right to ask them to stay a day longer, when they are now in the arms of He who loved her most. For it is not fair to rob someone of that. Because if she was here, we'd still be on the receiving end. But from a chair, and quietly silent, the reflection -- and I know He reached down caressing her, and saying, "I'm here all the while." Sometimes just the human being needs simply that.

I'd like to read a phrase from Khalil Gibran, that I lifted, on death. Now, I, myself, don't use the term "death," but "transition." And he says,

What is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?

Only when you drink from the river of silence, shall you indeed sing.

And when you have reached the mountaintop, only then shall you begin to climb.

And when the earth shall claim your limbs, only then shall you truly dance.

Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.

So as we have all have grown up though this civil rights movement -- some before -- and we know that anthem hymn, *We Shall Overcome*, I'd like to presume to add an update of affirmation, not the some-day, but to-day. Time's up.

We have lost many on that walk, on that journey, who stood steadfast -- steadfast, giving and doing, serving and being, sharing and extending. And I would rather say something like, "We have come over to-day!" "We have achieved today!" Even if you don't have an affirmation that says "Now!" -- because somebody else will rest with your some-day; they'll put you on pause, with some-day -- we have to do it now, by any means necessary.

¹Wife of Oliver Tambo, leader in the African National Congress.

²Former wife of Medgar Evers, an NAACP Mississippi field secretary who was assassinated on 12 June in Jackson, Mississippi while in the middle of a voter registration drive.