What Are You Doing For Others?

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Thank you, Mayor Riley, for that generous introduction.

Martin Luther King believed that the most urgent question facing an individual was “what are you doing for others?”

Even from afar, I’ve known that Mayor Riley’s career has been dedicated to doing things for others. He has worked tirelessly to better his beloved hometown.

Community leaders that I interact with in Jacksonville, Atlanta, Columbus, Macon, Albany, Augusta, and Savannah sing his praises. They tell me he shares his ideas, his experiences, his hard-earned lessons with other community leaders. The Mayor’s Institute on City Design, which he founded two decades ago to connect mayors with urban designers, has graduated more than 700 mayors and 500 urban designers. Joe Riley may well be America’s most-influential mayor.

Mayor Riley, I’m proud to be on your team!

In preparing for this talk, I couldn’t help but recall where I was and what I was doing when Martin Luther King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech.

I was 17 and living in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

Lewisburg had a population of about 10,000 and was -- and is-- the type of town where Norman Rockwell could have stopped at any street corner and painted a cover for the Saturday Evening Post. Like Charleston, the town is of another century. It’s a town that’s busy, but not too busy; a town with tree-lined streets illuminated by distinctive three-globe streetlights; a town where the Susquehanna River flows gently along its eastern boundary on its way to Chesapeake Bay; and a town that is home to the hilly, wooded campus of Bucknell University.

Because my grandfather had been the head of Bucknell’s School of Music for the first half of the twentieth century and my father was a statistics professor there, Bucknell was a large part of my life. I spent countless hours on campus: sled riding down the steep hill in front of Old Main; selling candy in the stands at football games; cheering for Bucknell basketball teams against Penn State, Temple, and St. Joe in Davis Gym; learning to play golf at Bucknell Golf Club.

Living near campus, and having a father whose focus was always his students, I grew up in a home buzzing with college students. Night after night, we sat around the kitchen table as my father counseled his students about their futures. I listened to their ideas, their questions, their arguments, their dreams.

And a lot of what they discussed centered on the civil rights movement.
To me, Lewisburg and my home seemed light years away from Birmingham, Alabama. The Jim Crow South that Dr. King was protesting seemed like a different universe. The images I saw on television, the newspaper stories I read, conveyed a South in turmoil, a place of lynchings, of beatings, of riots, of sit-in protests, of marches, of freedom riders. That was not my America, and I didn’t fully understand what all the fuss was about.

But I learned over time that racism was not just a product of the South. It was everywhere, in every corner of the country. Dr. King challenged America to do what was right, decent, and civil. His words of freedom and tolerance eventually reached Lewisburg and our kitchen table. His challenge was at first ignored by most, including me – but gradually it began to make sense. And today it is common sense.

His call for a society where people are judged by their character, not their color, transcended political lines. He envisioned the America promised in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. He eloquently made the case that the time to realize that promise was not tomorrow, or the next day, or the next election, but it was now.

And his call to get it done “now” took on a new sense of urgency in the infamous year of 1968.

For me, it was the year I graduated from college and moved out into the world. For the nation, the year was dominated by Vietnam and the assassinations of Martin Luther King on April 4th and Bobby Kennedy on June 6th.

Those of us who were alive then will never forget the tenseness, the fear, the uncertainty that engulfed just about everyone. The country was boiling over with rage, both from those who advocated change and from those who staunchly opposed it.

It was in that tense setting that I ventured from the safety of my hometown and went searching for a career.

I started in Washington, D.C. as a management analyst for the U.S. Army Security Agency. Only a few weeks before I got there, Washington was ablaze from riots set off by Dr. King’s murder. Buildings still smoldered, neighborhoods were burned out, and what was once a proud African-American business community at 14th and U Streets was now just rubble. There was no way to ignore the sights, sounds, and smells of unrest. Between the civil unrest and the Vietnam protests, America seemed to be coming apart at the seams.

After a year in DC working for the Army in a position that wasn’t a particularly good fit for me, I interviewed with New Jersey Bell for a job in Newark. As many of you may recall, Newark had endured a devastating race riot in 1967. Two years had not done much to heal the city’s physical and emotional wounds.
Although I ended up taking a job with Bell Telephone Laboratories in suburban Whippany, New Jersey, I returned to Newark 24 years later as the dean of the business school at Rutgers University. My main office was in downtown Newark. The scars of those race riots were still evident. The fear of those times had driven many businesses to the suburbs, leaving a large section of Newark looking like a patchwork of empty buildings and empty lots. Newark was making a comeback in the early nineties, but the shadow of the turbulent sixties still loomed over the city.

Martin Luther King wrote that “Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity.” For those of us who lived through the sixties, we saw what hate could do. For those of us who’ve embraced Dr. King’s ideals, we’ve seen the power of tolerance, rationality, and especially love.

Has hate lost and love won out? I wish I could say there was a clear winner; I wish I could say that the conflict was resolved in one final battle, but as we all know, life doesn’t work that way. We have made advances in some areas and we have fallen back in others.

Generally, we have made good progress towards Dr. King’s dream, but it remains a dream, a vision. It’s not a reality yet.

While racial intolerance formalized by law has disappeared, bigotry on a personal level has not. And racism is being increasingly replaced by classism as the disparity between the wealthy and the poor grows.

But there is hope. And I believe education is the key.

It certainly made a difference in Martin Luther King’s life. His education at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University informed his thinking about what a democratic society should be. It helped him to understand the constraints placed on his potential and it gave him the tools to rise above those limitations.

Education does that. It stokes the fires of imagination and hope. It feeds our ambition and raises our expectations.

Higher education can and should play a central role in any community. Institutions of higher-education were designed to be centers of thinking, analysis, debate, and creativity, all things that should benefit the communities in which universities are embedded as much as the students.

One of the reasons I’m so excited to be joining the College of Charleston is its strong public mission. The College has many programs linking it to the community. Professors and students are working in partnership with two downtown schools – Memminger Elementary and Burke High. The College’s South Carolina Accelerated Schools Plus Program works closely with under-performing schools throughout the Lowcountry. Our business students provide free consulting services to small businesses
in the area. Our student body spends literally thousands of hours in the community doing volunteer work.

And there are many other programs that support the community, but the College can, should, and will do more.

Martin Luther King was certainly an heroic figure in the civil rights movement. But he did not stand alone. His words motivated hundreds, then thousands, then millions of people. And it was the millions that eventually changed America forever.

Then as now, we cannot expect someone else, some lone individual, to enact change for us. As in the civil rights movement, we must work together to find solutions to the problems facing our city, our state, and our nation.

Every person in this room is a leader.

You are leaders because you have the power to influence others and develop others – whether at your work, your home, your church, or your school.

I chose to be the leader of the College of Charleston because I saw an opportunity to make a difference, to influence lives, careers, and even the economies of Charleston and South Carolina.

I believe a critically important part of my role as President is to work closely with you to find common goals and discover ways in which we, together, can make a difference in our city and region.

In a Birmingham jail, Dr. King wrote that an “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” He continued, “We are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Dr. King knew that we all have a stake in our community’s challenges and we all have an obligation to find solutions to those challenges.

On the national level, and even on the state level, we seem to have more and more difficulty working together to find solutions.

Michelle Nunn recently wrote a compelling op-ed in the Atlanta Journal Constitution. Michelle is the daughter of former Georgia Senator Sam Nunn. She is CEO and co-founder of Hands-On America, an Atlanta-based non-profit network of volunteer organizations. She wrote, “America has been a great nation when it has called for sacrifice and for the investment of its citizens. Our leaders need not be afraid to ask more of us.” She continued, “We need to be invited into our country's destiny. We hunger to be a part of something larger than ourselves.”
Here at the local level, in Charleston, you are already known for coming together for the greater good. But we can always do more. You can’t have too many partnerships, too many mentorships, or too many caring relationships within a community.

Speaking on behalf of the College, I promise that the College of Charleston will continue to reach out to the community, to study and address local challenges. But the College cannot do it alone. Solutions and successes can only come about if all sides are reaching out. We need your ideas. We need your input. We need your participation.

As Dr. King taught us so well, everyone is part of the problem and everyone is part of the solution.

I say he taught us so well, this lesson of inclusion. But in fact, on this point, school is never out. The significance of inclusion must be taught again and again and again, and be passed from generation to generation to generation. The “dream” is really a journey without end.

Back in the 1960s, Dr. King passed the torch to you and to me. I challenge all of us to pass on the lessons of inclusion. I challenge all of you to ask more or your employees, to ask more of your bosses and leaders, to ask more of your community, to ask more of yourself. This is the only way to move forward; the only way we can make progress toward Dr. King’s dream.

And if we are ever asked Dr. King’s question – “what are you doing for others?” – we can honestly reply, in unison: “everything possible.”