

Remarks at the start of the annual MLK Celebration Week, by Maggie Ruopp

Welcome to the first event of our annual celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his legacy. The Peace Walk is an opportunity for us to walk together in solidarity with King's message of hope and progress and I appreciate the opportunity to participate with all of you today. This event, and the others that will follow on Thursday, are made possible by the hard work of individuals, in this case the members of the MLK Steering Committee: Jennifer Dobbs, Katie Estella, Heaven Rivera, Jenni Sacor, Erin Sanborn, Monique Stennis, Jillian Strong, Peter Tupou, Kady Wood, and Kim Womack—a kind and thoughtful group with whom it is a joy to collaborate—, as well as the offices who tirelessly support our needs and ideas: Media Services, Event Services, and Facilities. I particularly want to thank Monique Stennis and Peter Tupou, who remind me every day what it means to care deeply about doing what's right even when it's hard—it's an honor and pleasure to your colleague.

I want to talk briefly (and let's hope my definition of brief matches yours) about the theme of this year's MLK Celebration—the time is always right to do what's right. For me, the easiest way to try and grapple with what this theme means, especially in our current moment, is to put it into context, which as Monique knows this is my favorite way to understand things. Dr. King said our theme phrase, this famous “the time is right” line more than once actually. It was a part of a speech called “The Other America,” which he delivered on several different occasions, but the most famous version he gave was at Stanford University in 1967. The speech covers a number of poignant talking points and I recommend listening to or reading the whole thing when you have a chance. King talks about the need for fair and accessible housing and the Open

Housing Bill awaiting a congressional vote that he hopes will pass swiftly, though the bill it eventually became, the Civil Rights Act of 1968, wouldn't pass until after his assassination. He speaks out against the Vietnam War and the millions of dollars the federal government was diverting away from fighting against poverty in order to pay for the war, a spending trend that would continue until the war finally ended in 1975. He addresses the continued struggles of black Americans, railing against the bootstrap myth perpetuated by white Americans who don't see how individual hardship is tied to systemic oppression. King urges his Stanford audience to understand that the struggle facing black Americans and the Civil Rights Movement as a whole is harder now that the focus has turned to what he describes as "genuine equality"—especially when so many white Americans who were willing to march against extremist behavior don't show up to do the work of changing racist laws, policies, and practices that have been accepted and normalized by the white citizens they benefit. Genuine equality, Dr. King seems to be saying, requires connection to and love for all humankind.

In this speech, King also talks about time. He calls time "neutral" and says it can be used either constructively or destructively. He debunks the belief that the very flow of time will miraculously cure all evils, stating that the truth is hard working individuals are how progress is achieved. I think the fact that the most famous version of this speech was delivered by King on a college campus is important. Speaking at colleges was a regular occurrence for King, who gave at least eleven of his more notable speeches at colleges to audiences full of students much like the ones we have here. In the speech he gave at Stanford, Dr. King spoke about people of goodwill, saying he saw them every day in the student generation who cherished democratic

principles and as well as justice over principle. Students were a manifestation of King's prevailing hope—a hope that was active and engaged, curious and striving.

So, given all that context—the speech around the quote, the world the speech was written for, the place the speech was delivered—I think the question we should reflect on this week is one King suggests himself: how can we help time not become an ally of the forces of social stagnation? How can we use time to construct a new future that reflects genuine progress? As is true of many universities, we can tend to have a focus on preparing our students for the person they'll become once there are out there in the real world and the accomplishments they'll have later. But I want to say to the students here that your time at this institution—with all the challenges, triumphs, banalities, sadness, anger, and joy that fill it—that your experience here is very real. This university exists in the real world, it is defined by its context and its actions. It is a living, changing thing of which you are briefly a part. It is true that the way academia structures time can work against students—four years is so short when you consider all that has to be done to succeed. But don't think you have to wait for opportunities after you've left here to do what's right, to show up for a cause, to support the voices of others, to make your voice heard through all the channels available to you. In 1968, shortly after Dr. King's assassination and just over a year after he delivered his “The Other America” speech there, Stanford held a symposium on White Racism in America, for which the panel consisted entirely of white men. Stanford's BSU and community members supporting them walked onto the symposium stage and took back the mic. They listed demands and made sure they were heard. The impact of that moment is still foundational to Stanford's progress. Those students and their community moved time forward

from right where they were; they didn't wait, expecting it to bend alone. We can all do this too—
together we can help time be a tool for good.