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Archival Project: Taylor University's Martin Luther King Jr. Commemoration Day

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“We believe Dr. King’s life and deeds are a symbol for the entire world, and that he was a leader for all Americans. Taylor should honor him for the causes he advocated as well as his essential Christian approach. We should honor him not because he was perfect, but that he was a man of vision. We believe the U.S. was morally asleep until awakened by Dr. King” (Mucher et al., 1992). There is no doubt that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a very influential person whose lasting impact is still relevant today. The members of the 1992 Student Senate at Taylor University thought likewise. This student-led group felt that the accomplishments and impact of Dr. King were important and worthy of being recognized on their college campus. In this paper, I will provide a biographical sketch of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration at Taylor University, as well as an analysis of the impact that the decision to honor this day had on the institution. Finally, I will discuss the importance of this celebration and the lasting impact it has had on the university as well as implications for higher education as a whole.

Background

During the 1991-1992 school year at Taylor University, students on the Student Senate came up the idea to observe Martin Luther King Jr. Day at Taylor University. This idea was conceived with much thought and consideration by this group of students, in hopes of creating a time for commemoration of the ideals that Dr. King held. “The students envisioned the setting aside of the day – the national holiday named in his honor – for the study of reconciliation, social justice, and the continuing legacy of the person and work of Dr. King” (N/A, 1998). During the spring semester of 1992, the students put together a plan and proposal to bring to Taylor’s faculty and administration, as well as the student body, in hopes of receiving approval. The Student Senate was sure to communicate in their proposal that this celebration would not be seen

as a “day off” from school, but rather a commemorative and educational day of common learning for remembrance, reflection, commitment (N/A, 1998). In the years following this initial proposal, plans would be in the works and conversations would be had to eventually lead to the establishment of this tradition honoring Dr. King on Taylor’s campus. “Our Committee feels strongly that this is an initiative that expresses Taylor’s mission and deserves implementation” (Mucher & Eicher, 1991).

On the Road to Approval

The desire to honor King’s national holiday originated in the Student Senate, but the idea was passed through many groups and individuals on campus in order to be approved. After the idea for the commemoration was thoroughly discussed, it was then passed to a student subcommittee with a multicultural representative to present a detailed report of how the event should take place (Mucher et al., 1992). The vote to continue with the planning of the observance for King was unanimously supported by all members of the Senate. “It is the unanimous opinion of the subcommittee to support the proposal, believing a special King Day would be most beneficial to the entire Taylor community and would far outweigh the negative arguments” (Mucher et al., 1992). The proposal then continued to gain support from the Minority Student Organization, the Student Life Committee, the Vice President for Multicultural Affairs, and the Student Body President. The Student Life Committee wrote a recommendation regarding the proposal, saying that “this report be accepted with stipulation that the specific proposal is seen as one option and the university cabinet is free to alter as appropriate” (SLC, 1992). Finally, the proposal was sent to the Educational Policies Committee and was assigned to a specific subcommittee for Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

Support and Opposition

The subcommittee received a great deal of feedback from students, faculty, and administration alike. Many of the responses were positive and in favor of recognizing Martin Luther King Jr. Day on Taylor's campus. Some responses, however, had negative pushback towards the idea. In the final report sent to the Educational Policies Committee (1992), there were three main categories of support in favor of observing King's day. Many in support said that King was a catalyst as well as a symbol for change in America regarding the Civil Rights Movement. Second, supporters said that having a King Day would open the eyes of the majority students on campus to what it's like for minority students. In addition, there would be an overall appreciation for the heritage of African-American students. Implementation of this celebration would ultimately showcase multicultural leadership as a university. Finally, supporters felt that honoring this holiday would play a positive role in the recruitment and retention of students as well as faculty and staff of color. One professor in favor of the commemoration quoted historian Edmund S. Morgan (1992) stating,

“Dr. King becomes perhaps the most significant American of the twentieth century. Dr. King exemplified an essentially Christian approach to dealing with oppression. We honor him not for being a perfect man, but for being a human being with a vision and the courage to act on that vision.”

The proposal for honoring MLK Jr. Day on Taylor's campus also received some pushback from staff, faculty, and students. Some opposers said that Taylor does not honor other holidays associated with specific individuals, and they did not believe King should be recognized any more than presidents or labor leaders (Mucher et al., 1992). Others said that the topic of Civil Rights is not as much of a focus or as important as it was twenty years ago, and that it could make students tiresome of the subject throughout the day. In addition, some opposers

thought that it would be inappropriate to set aside a day to honor King, as he was thought to have been a womanizer and involved in some alleged sexual indiscretions. In this way, these opposers didn't see it fit or honoring to God to have a day of celebration in any way connected to King's sins, and they did not think it would set a good example for the Taylor community. Many professors were also against the idea of having an entire day set aside for this celebration. King's Day would take place during interterm, which already a short time frame for students to complete their one-month courses as it is, and they didn't see it to be a wise decision to take a whole day off from classes and studying. Finally, some opposers to the observance of King's Day said that mandating a specific political or ideological discussion may be frightening to students. Some viewed his political affiliations as well as his methods of civil disobedience as questionable.

In response to the opposition, the Senate felt that dismissing the idea to celebrate this day simply because it would be inconsistent with Taylor's past traditions would not be a sound reason to disregard their proposal (Mucher et al., 1992). They felt that the wide-ranging and important topics discussed in the proposal should be looked at with more consideration, even in light of what Taylor celebrations have looked like in the past. In addition, the students wanted to reiterate that the occasion would not only serve to highlight King's contributions to social justice and minority groups, but also what he accomplished serving as a man of God. The Senate members did not wish to shy away from issues surrounding King as a human being, but rather to "serve as a backdrop in an attempt to integrate the pervasive historical and social issues of civil rights with Taylor's emphasis on Christian faith" (Mucher et al., 1992).

Approved

After much thought by all of the committees, faculty and staff members, and students involved, the MLK Jr. commemoration day was moved to approval. “Upon careful consideration of the information presented to the subcommittee, I recommend that the Educational Policies Committee proceed with the Senate’s proposal to recognize the Martin Luther King national holiday with a day of academic emphasis on civil rights/multicultural issues” (Mucher, 1992). Overall, the parties involved in the decision-making process came to the conclusion that the benefits of recognizing this day on Taylor’s campus would far outweigh the costs. Many people believed that there was a lack of general knowledge and awareness of the Civil Rights Era, and that issues regarding this topic needed to be addressed with students, faculty, staff, and administration alike.

Although King was viewed as one of the foremost Christian thinkers and men of action in history, the MLK Jr. subcommittee reassured faculty and administration that this observance would not be a day specifically about Dr. King as a person, but rather a day to focus on civil rights and multicultural awareness and education for the students of Taylor University (Faculty, 1992). In addition, the members of the subcommittee wanted to be sure to honor those who had concerns with the implementation of this commemoration day. TSO Senator Stephen Mucher (1992) stated, “I further recommend that we respect the ideas submitted in opposition to this proposal and utilize this input to improve the content of any final decision.” Overall, the general support of honoring MLK Jr. Day at Taylor was received with praise. One faculty member stated that Taylor:

“...could not afford to reject the opportunity to use MLK’s birthday to demonstrate that its leadership and student body recognize and appreciate both the heritage and contributions of the movement and the cultural heritage of our African-American

brothers and sisters. The good that will be achieved for the good of the entire Taylor University family will far outweigh any ill effects that are associated with the loss of one day spent strictly within the subject matter of our scheduled courses” (Mucher et al., 1992).

What the Day Entails

The Martin Luther King Jr. Day at Taylor takes place on the third Monday of every January during interterm. This day is open for all of campus and the surrounding community to come together and celebrate. The Student Senate who created this day of commemoration as well as faculty have urged students not to view this occasion as a day off, but rather a day of remembrance, reflection, and common learning. The day consists of a prayer breakfast, a special chapel with a guest speaker, interdisciplinary seminars, panels, film showings, discussion groups, concerts, and other various activities put on by different departments. Students on and off campus are encouraged to participate in the day’s events. Professors are even encouraged to make participating in the day a part of their interterm curriculum to increase participation even more.

The activities throughout the day deal with a variety of topics, and also create an atmosphere for all viewpoints to be expressed and discussed. “Surely these issues touch the lives of every member of the Taylor community. Political and economic justice, and racial, religious, and gender equality are topics which could easily be discussed in every discipline” (Mucher et al., 1992). Over the years the themes for King’s Day have centered around reconciliation, social justice, diversity, civil rights, embracing culture and heritage, and continuing the legacy of MLK Jr. as a person, and specifically for the work he did and the change he implemented.

Lasting Impact: Then and Now

The establishment of the Martin Luther King Jr. Day at Taylor University was a monumental step for the institution. The students, faculty, staff, and administration involved in the establishment of this celebration recognized the importance of having time set aside for conversations regarding social justice, reconciliation, and equality on their campus, and the implementation of King's Day was a step in the right direction. Members of the Student Senate were passionate about starting challenging conversations that needed to be had on their campus. The Senate said that "it is easier to deal with hard topics by ignoring them rather than confronting them and ourselves. Education, and beyond that inner renewal, must at times go beyond what people are comfortable with, must stretch, and must hurt" (1992).

President Jay Kesler nominated Taylor's yearly observance of MLK Jr. Day for the annual Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities' campus award for racial harmony. Dr. Kesler said the following regarding racial harmony on Taylor's campus:

"We acknowledge that setting aside one day in the year cannot and does not represent the institution's total effort toward seeking to cultivate diversity, exposure, and interchange within our community to challenge our distinctives and uncover our biases. In humility, we realize that we are both learners and teachers in this process, but because of our identification as Christian, we are held to a greater scrutiny than those who make no Christian profession. Because we are a part of a diverse, pluralistic global community, we will continue our emphasis on recruitment and nurturing of minority and international students and the development of a more sensitive and accepting environment within the campus community" (1999).

The celebration of MLK Jr. Day has occurred every year since its official start in 1994. This means that for over twenty years, Taylor has been having important conversations regarding racial harmony and social justice. In the early 90s, Student Body President Michael Hammond said the following: “Due to a large population of international students and children of missionaries, Taylor has a diverse community of backgrounds...Christians should consider men and women of all racial and national backgrounds as equal members of the body of Christ.” In addition, editor Larry Geans spoke on the celebration of diversity in Taylor’s editorial entitled *The Link Between* (1994): “This celebration of diversity is a landmark event for Taylor University. Now, let us be certain that this event truly is a celebration – a celebration of peace. Often, peace is lost and diversity becomes dissention when we maintain our differences as our foundation. On the contrary, we possess many commonalities as a people. No thread ties us tighter than our belief and admiration of our Lord.”

In an ever-developing world, the issues of race and injustice still remain. Taylor has taken steps over the years, including the continuation of King’s Day, in living out their Multicultural Philosophy Statement: “We believe in equality of all people as imbedded in biblical teachings and as an integral part of our Christian commitment...We believe in an environment in which people can live and work cooperatively, valuing the multiple cultures from which they have come without violating institutional values. We believe in multicultural education as an interdisciplinary effort to prepare graduates who understand, appreciate, and work effectively with those who are different from themselves.”

Implications for Higher Education

What do topics of racial harmony and reconciliation look like in modern-day higher education? In light of the recent events of racial injustice in the year 2020, it is clear to see that

these issues of inequality and discrimination are still as relevant now as they ever were. The establishment of a day set aside to celebrate diversity and cultivate an atmosphere of understanding and appreciation is something that Taylor accomplished through their MLK Jr. Day celebration. The positive response and feedback that this event has had on one university's campus could set an example for other universities, even today. "Although there is much talk about diversity, multiculturalism, and racial reconciliation, actual understanding between the races is at an all-time low" (Skinner, 1996). Higher education professionals can learn from institutions that are making strides in prioritizing multiculturalism, diversity, and cultural heritage. Dr. William Pannel facilitated a workshop at the 1998 Taylor MLK Jr. Day celebration. He spoke on taking a different mindset when it comes to race. "We all need to be more radical in our thinking. We need to get kids beyond cultural blackness just like (we need to get) white kids beyond whiteness" (Pannel, 1998). This idea of radical thinking and going beyond skin color is fitting and applicable to issues facing the world and higher education today.

Conclusion

Martin Luther King Jr. had a lasting impact on the issues of social justice and civil rights. Students at Taylor University in 1992 took matters into their own hands to be able to honor Dr. King's legacy and what he stood for on their own campus. These students recognized the need at their university to spark conversations about these important topics; conversations that had been lacking up until that point. In partnership with other student groups, faculty and staff members, and campus administration, they were able to implement a day of celebration to provide a common space of learning, reflection, understanding, and growth. This day of commemoration seeks to build appreciation for minority groups on campus, as well as awareness of different

cultures and heritages. These topics are still so relevant today, not only on Taylor's campus, but for higher education as a whole.

The students behind the establishment of Taylor's MLK Jr. Day worked to bring unity and equality to their campus, and ultimately honor God by doing so. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind's quest for peace and security...love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend" (1929-1968).

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