

A Great Nation is a Compassionate Nation

Keynote Speech by Dr. Agustin V. Arbulu

As Prepared for Delivery at the Annual MLK Dinner in Flint, Michigan

January 17, 2019

Good evening. I am deeply honored to stand here today and thank you for the invitation.

As I look around the room this evening, I see a virtual who's who of the people who have toiled in trenches of our politics and neighborhoods to become examples of citizens of a compassionate nation.

First of all, let me thank the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Planning Committee for this incredible event. And, it's the 40<sup>th</sup> Annual! Fantastic work., thank you for your contributions to our community.

Martin Luther King Jr. left us a deep and complex legacy of calling on the better angels of the American promise.

But the dream he so eloquently framed for us during the March on Washington is not fulfilled. Standing in the bright sun and sweltering August heat in 1963, he told us of his dream "that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

That is a mark of a compassionate nation.

A place where our common humanity is embraced, celebrated and honored as opposed to being separated because of religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, color, national origin, race or ethnicity.

As we all know, we have not crossed that bridge from the place where the promissory note of the United States Constitution and Declaration of Independence has been returned from the bank for insufficient funds, as Dr. King said in 1963; to a world where the shackles and scars of racial animus have been reconciled and healed. A nation that fulfills the promise of America's founding that all men are created equal.

Dr. King spoke to this delay as well.

"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," he told us on more than one occasion, borrowing the phrase from abolitionist minister Theodore Parker.

There's a reason that quote resonated in 1855 when Parker first began to frame it and today with its deep connection to the work of Dr. King.

It is a truth that a great nation knows, at its core, and uses to bring compassion and justice to all.

My friends, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it does bend towards justice as sure as I am standing here today.

But as Parker said in his original sermon, we can't make out the curve of this arc, we only know that it is true.

Following the moral universe can be a truly frustrating reality in today's America.

We continue to struggle against the lack of compassion that gave birth to slavery of black people and genocide of the first nations. They have left untreated wounds weeping with the sourness of infection and trauma.

There have been occasional attempts to treat the wounds. Legislative initiatives such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Fair Housing Act of 1968 have been passed; as if that would end racism.

Judicial decisions like *Brown v Board of Education*, the *Loving* decision of 1968 and, yes, the marriage equality ruling in 2015 have come and gone, but they have not ended racism either.

Yet the wounds remain. The festering sludge of infection spreads, feeding resentment, resignation and bitterness. These are not traits of a compassionate nation. They are the traits of a broken people.

And I weep to think the great American experiment and promise could end in flotsam and jetsam of white supremacy and hatred.

America's promise can be fulfilled. Each of us sitting here today are taking the next step in the universe's arc.

Whether this is your first step, or your ten thousandth, or your millionth step towards inclusion and acceptance, we're still walking. We're still marching. We're still here.

We are, as Governor Whitmer committed during her campaign and inaugural address, building bridges together; rather than walls.

In April of 1967, Dr. King told an enthralled audience in New York City of his reasoning for opposing the American war in Vietnam. But it was, and is, so much more than a political speech opposing war by a peacemaker.

It was a call for a new and kinder world.

“This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing -- embracing and unconditional love for all mankind,” he said.

Love is not a “weak” thing, he told his audience, but a powerful one. The one which all religions of the world have come to know is at the core of compassion.

Flint was one of the key industrial centers of the Allied war effort to defeat the Nazi's.

Flint's contribution helped win the war in Europe and beyond – and put an end to a dark chapter of history.

And I am here today to tell you Flint stands poised to lead our great nation in a powerful battle that can, and will, change the city, the state, the nation and the world. And it begins with you.

OK, Augie, I hear you asking me, but how in the hell are we going to do all that when many still believe our drinking water remains unsafe and our health and that of our children will be endangered for decades to come?

That's a good question. Thanks for asking.

Look. Flint has been through hell and back in the last several years. You shouldn't have had to bear it, but you did with righteousness and an unbending commitment to having your voices heard.

But the tragedy that befell this community did not start with the appointment of an Emergency Manager.

Its roots are deeper and more insidious, tracing back over a century of racialized laws and practices that to this very day subtly and unconsciously influence the decisions made.

These are systems that were designed to serve the master. Even if it is no longer intentional the outcomes that we see whether that be employment, education, housing, wealth, or health paint a clear picture.

If you are person of color, and let me be even more specific -- if you are black -- you are at the bottom. We have to change this, we must change this.

That was the finding of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission three years ago.

Systemic racism and implicit bias as much as lead and smug civil servants, elected and appointed, were the ingredients of the crisis. The lead and the smugness of some civil servants is being addressed.

You have the chance to call us all to take a step forward: you can lead us to develop a system of decision making that directly undermines the implicit bias of centuries of white supremacy and systemic racism that reproduces itself.

You have the fierce urgency of now behind you, as Dr. King often said. We have heard your cries of anguish and we stand with you in standing up to and speaking out against a broken system.

We will be by your side as, together, we navigate and divine new approaches to democracy which calls us to not just simple equality, but to equity and compassion for all people.

And it is this brave new journey to becoming better people individually. Better neighbors in our neighborhoods.

More powerful allies in the halls of power and justice and ultimately in bending the American trajectory back on track to fulfilling its promise to us all:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

But here’s the part the Founders’ likely didn’t fully imagine would apply to the systemic deconstruction of the white supremacy of the American Dream, but it is no less than a directive straight from them:

“That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

And you did precisely that this past November in the election of a new governor, new AG and new secretary of state. But it does not stop there. Now, you are called to hold all of us in government accountable.

You, the people, are altering the government to cease destructive actions against our unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Each of you are going to lance the boil of the festering infection of racism and white supremacy, curing the ailment by cleansing the wound and reframing our interactions together through the relentless power of equity, justice and compassion.

That my friends, is the promise of America we are called on today to work towards. To renew our grand contract. To become the great nation of compassion we have been striving to be since the Declaration of Independence was written.

Look out always from your moral center, the home of all you know to be true and universal, and keep pushing, pushing forward. Hold strong.

This is a long journey measured at times by inches, two steps forward and one step back. And other times feeling like it is one step forward and two steps back.

BUT Look back to the truths taught us by Dr. King and all the others who dared speak up and speak out when it mattered the most.

Do not retreat, never retreat, speak up when there is injustice. As Dr. King wrote in his letter from Birmingham Jail over 55 years ago (on April 16, 1963):

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Together, we can take our community, and every community in this state and this country a few more miles down that road towards racial justice and prosperity for all.

Thank you and onward to a more compassionate and just society for all of us.