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“Giving Life to Declaration of Intent: A Call to Citizenship”
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I would like to share with you a poem for which I unfortunately do not have attribution:

**One song can spark a moment
One flower can wake a dream
One tree can start a forest
One bird can herald spring
One smile begins a friendship
One handclasp lifts a soul
One star can guide a ship
One thought can frame a goal
One vote can change a nation
One sunbeam lights a room
One candle wipes out darkness
One laugh will conquer gloom
One step must start each journey
One word must start each prayer
One hope will raise our spirits
One touch can show you care
One voice can speak with wisdom
One heart can know what's true
One life can make a difference
One person just like you.**

Giving Life to the Declaration of Intent

I would like to talk today about how our country has from its beginning struggled to achieve the ideals upon which it was founded and which were so eloquently set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.

When Thomas Jefferson, on behalf of the Founding Fathers declared: *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...* He wasn't exactly telling the truth, or at least the truth he was telling was not self-evident. Poor people and women could not vote, blacks and Native Americans were non citizens. Even if not slaves, blacks were counted as 3/5th of a person. So the vast majority of the population could not participate in this noble experiment in democracy. Jefferson was on the surface just talking about rich white men. At the heart of his statement, however, was a set of ideas and ideals that over time could liberate the world. Dr. Martin Luther King called it a Declaration of Intent. What the Founding Fathers said and did were two different things, but in the intent of both can be found the foundations of universal liberty.

By way of illustration I would like to tell you a bit about myself. I was born in Chicago at the very beginning of the end of apartheid in America. In fact, my birthday was the very day that Jackie Robinson signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers and became the first black baseball player to integrate the major leagues. This was a particularly big deal because it signaled the beginning of the end of segregation, and the beginning of the liberation movements that expanded participation in civil society for blacks, women and all people whose opportunity to contribute had been constrained and limited by some aspect of their physical being. What came to be called the civil rights movement percolated just under the surface of American society until Rosa Parks' refusal to move from her seat on the bus galvanized all the disparate forces of resistance to segregation that already existed. Those forces had opened doors through which I was able to pass, but that had not been open to my mother or her mother. I was able to get a quality education in the public schools in Chicago because the Supreme Court ruled against segregation in Brown vs. the Board of Education. My family provided me with a home and a backyard and a neighborhood in which I could freely ride my bicycle because the court had decided the case of Hansberry vs. Lee, that outlawed residential segregation. I went to college with scholarships and grants, and got a degree without a whole lot of debt because of community consensus that education was a way to preserve society, create opportunity, and cure the stigma of segregation. I went on to Law School at the University of Chicago because a climate of inclusion encouraged the leadership there to admit more than one black or one woman.

All these things had been made possible because a climate of public opinion had been created that favored the end of segregation. The promise of equality was reflected poorly by the reality of America and the American people demanded change. One of my heroes, the late Congressman Barbara Jordan said in those days " *What the American people want is simple. They want an America as good as its promise.*" (Harvard, 1977) When I joined the United States' Attorney's office in 1973, a female District Attorney was a rarity: a black one was an anomaly. I had a chance to try cases of national importance in the areas of health care, housing, and environmental protection. It was there, I think, that my passion for public policy was ignited. After four years, I left to start a family, and spent a little time as a homemaker. I got involved in a neighborhood environmental issue: we were fighting City Hall in an effort to save the Bobolinks in Jackson Park. (Bobolinks are known as ricebirds, and are rarely found in a park in Chicago!) Well, the birds lost out to the golf driving range, but my-co-protestors encouraged me to stand for Illinois House of Representatives. That was the beginning of my political career. Actually, it was not the people who asked me to run that jumpstarted my campaign for public office, but the people who told me I shouldn't run. A group came to see me after the word had gotten out about my possible candidacy for office and warned me not to do it. I remember vividly a man telling me: " *You can't win. The blacks won't vote for you because you are not part of the Chicago Machine. The whites won't vote for you because you are black. And nobody will vote for you because you are a woman.*" That did it! I had actually not been inclined to get into the rough and tumble of electoral politics until that moment. His threat actually produced the opposite result, and I shortly thereafter declared my candidacy for office. In 1977, I was elected to the Illinois General Assembly. I received the largest number of votes in a crowded.

I went on to become an Assistant Majority Leader in the legislature, and then an executive office holder in Cook County government. Thereafter, in 1992, the people of Illinois elected me to the United States Senate, making me the only African American in the Senate, and one of two to serve in the entire 20th Century. I served as Senator for 6 years, and in that time became the first female member of the Finance Committee. After serving in the Senate, the President, Bill Clinton, chose me to represent the United States as Ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa. I was Ambassador to Paradise as a diplomat for almost 2 years.

I am telling you all this about myself because in my story is proof positive of the progress America has made toward fulfillment of the Declaration of Intent about which Dr. King spoke. I have been fortunate to be a beneficiary of the efforts of a lot of everyday people who moved our country in the direction of its highest ideals. Their contributions reached for the core values from which this country was created. They left a legacy of a more inclusive society that came closer than ever before in reaching the goal of equality and liberty promised by the Constitution. We look back now and call them patriots for what they did to transform America. It has been remarked that we now have the first generation of black Americans that can be placed squarely in the middle class, and the first generation of enough millionaires and billionaires, of CEO's and civic leaders, as to actually form a distinct group. This development is the fruit of the efforts of many patriots to change the direction our country had taken just a generation before. Those people may or may not be known to you personally. Indeed, they may not show up in the scholarly journals and histories of America, but I can assure you that without these many individuals and sometimes unnoticed contributions of people of good will to make this country what it SHOULD and COULD be, there would be no way that we could be here in this place, in this way, at this time.

If you examine the history, at the turn of the 19th century America took a turn for the worse in race relations. Free people of color had at least some degree of social liberty and opportunity in pre- Civil War America. Following the Civil War, a variety of factors, including economic downturns, anger from the vanquished south, competition among immigrant groups, the ending of the Victorian age, all came together to create an atmosphere of racial hostility in America that was more brutal, violent and insidious in some ways than even the ante bellum age had been. In the backlash against blacks that followed Reconstruction, the rights guaranteed by the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments were hypothetical only. Any black seeking to exercise the right to vote risked death, any white seeking to help him was just as vulnerable. One of my former colleagues in the Senate told a bad joke about those days:

A black man went to vote in the days when some states used what they called "literacy tests" to prohibit voting by people they didn't want to participate. The registrar of voting handed the man a Chinese language newspaper and demanded that he read it before they would give him permission to vote. The black man took the paper, looked at it one way, turned it upside down and looked at it again, turned it sideways and looked at it again, folded it neatly and handed it back to the registrar. "Boy, what that newspaper say?" "I know what it says, Sir" "You do? Asked the

incredulous registrar": yes sir, it says Ain't no black man going to vote in South Carolina THIS day".

Before the backlash of Jim Crow, blacks had been skilled craftsmen in South Carolina, and property owners and elected officials as well. Indeed, of the four blacks who have served in the United States Senate, two of them had been elected by reconstruction legislatures in Mississippi. When the voices of hate overcame the voices of humanity, race became the wedge in America that it remained until the triumphs of the civil rights movement. The Civil Rights laws of the 1960's were written to restate what the Constitution had promised. Up until the 1960'S we could not have sat in a room together, black and white, side-by-side. In some places it was illegal to do so, in others simply a matter of custom, but segregation, also known as Jim Crow, was so much a part of the social fabric of this country that the right of association that every citizen was supposed to have guaranteed in the Constitution did not exist. Blacks and whites sat separately in the churches, in the movies, in rooms like this, on the buses. Indeed, the South African system of apartheid was in many ways modeled on our American system of Jim Crow, not the other way around.

The people who worked to end Jim Crow, black and white alike, made this nation begin to live up to its promise of freedom so that we could be here together today. Those who gave life to the intent of the Declaration of Independence made the reality we are experiencing right now possible. They transformed our society one person at a time, one opinion at a time, one conversation at a time. They shaped public opinion in ways that made civil society more of reflection of what Abraham Lincoln called the "*Higher Angels of our Nature*". They created a climate of opinion that made our country begin to live up to its highest ideals, and in so doing, they began to erase the stain of hypocrisy that accompanied what has been called America's original sin. The prohibition on voting ended with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights act, but those laws would never have come to be if it had not been for the climate of opinion created by people of good will. They wanted to make our Country live up to its ideals, and as a result, people today of all races and colors have an equal opportunity to participate in the government of our country.

Illinois has less than a 15% black population, and yet the people of that state chose me to occupy a seat in the U.S. Senate that had once been held by a Senator who legislated in favor of the expansion of slavery. This is not to say that the progress toward the ideal of equality has been complete or even sufficient. We still have a long way to go to heal the pain and the racial breach that slavery, and the Jim Crow experience caused. And if any cynic tells you that black people should get over it because other people have suffered in other parts of the world, point out that only in America did a holocaust take place at the hands of the Good Guys. There is no Stalin or Hitler or Cseucheshu to blame for the dehumanization of black people in America. That is why I think that the current debate about reparations provides us an opportunity to explore ways to heal the wound caused by racism, in much the same way as the South African Truth and Reconciliation effort has done.

Black people are not the majority of the population in America, unlike South Africa, and so consensus must be created among the dominant white population in favor of approaches and solutions to resolve the lingering effects of our democracy's contradictory past.

The discussion about reparations provides an opportunity for us all to achieve modern solutions to a divide that has plagued the American people since the beginning. Reparations should be seen as a chance to bring us together as Americans, not as a wedge that serves to alienate and obscure a point of common cause. We must all reject the anger and cynicism that would reduce the conversation about reparations to a shouting match about a paycheck or 40 acres and a Lexus.

The President's recent political intervention in the University of Michigan's affirmative action case is a point of reference for the concept of reparations. I think it showed the depth of cynicism to use the day of Dr. King's birthday to issue a broadside against the well-meaning effort of the University to integrate its campus and provide all its students with the benefits of diversity. By blasting "quotas" our President intended to divide, not bring Americans together. Michigan does not employ quotas, and President Bush knew that. No one is for quotas, but every American is for fairness. What the University and all Americans have struggled with is how to "fix" that flaw in our national character that racism has caused and continues to feed upon, while at the same time preserving our commitment to individual opportunity and fairness. College admission is these days not just about an education, it is about opportunity and about having a chance to make a living and join the middle class. Is it not FAIR to promote college admissions in this generation for people whose parents would have been forced into separate and unequal schools, or whose grandparents might have been beaten-or worse- for simply trying to read? Some would call it affirmative action, some call it reparations, but either case it represents an effort to move our nation in the direction of the ideal of liberty and opportunity for all.

The other side of this equation, that is, what happens to the white students for whom that extra boost is not available, is also answered, I think, by reference to our national character. The America we inherited was the land of opportunity. Our generation has an obligation to keep it that way. Should not the debate focus on how we can provide quality education for everyone who wants it? If opportunity is our birthright, and a college education the key to it, shouldn't we come together as a people to assure that everyone, black and white, rich and poor, Protestant, Catholic, Jew or Muslim, every person who wants to earn a degree has an equal chance to get one? Let us lift our sights beyond base competition for scarce opportunity and come together as one people to provide a quality education for all Americans, not the flashpoint of an argument about race. Our government spends more money testing weapons of mass destruction than it contributes to higher education. We can, and must, do better. Race is not the only "ism" that can divide. Gender is also a point of reference in regards to our national character. When Jefferson said, "*all men created equal*," did he just mean boys? Or was the term generic for "people?" The Constitution had to be amended to make it clear that women had a right to participate in this great experiment in democracy, too. Again, the history of the struggle for women's suffrage illustrates the pain and patience of women who were willing to force change by forging consensus. From the time that Abigail Adams had asked her husband John, one of the most important founding fathers "What about the ladies?" the notion that

gender disenfranchised half the population stood out as yet another discordant note in an otherwise magnificent symphony. Today, as we deplore the condition and status of women in Afghanistan, we should remind ourselves that it took nearly 150 years before the promise of the Constitution became a reality for those Americans who were female. The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, giving women the right to vote, was ratified August 18, 1920. The fight to secure suffrage for women was waged for many of the same reasons and by many of the same people as had fought for the emancipation of African Americans. One of the last speeches given by Fredrick Douglas before his death was in favor of women's suffrage. However, it took the efforts of a lot of everyday people to change the hearts of men so that the laws would change to embrace our Constitution's promise of equality for women. A true story from this era illustrates the point. Tennessee was the last chance the 19th Amendment had for ratification, and there the battle was full blown and convoluted, as divisions among the women clouded the debate. The notion that women who were BLACK, too, might get the vote under the amendment was enough to inspire opposition by both men AND women. Some women who might have gone along with female suffrage drew the line when color was also involved.

One legislator, Henry Burn, had voted against suffrage, but the night before the crucial vote he received a letter from his mother. It said "Vote for suffrage, and don't keep them in doubt. Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the Rat in ratification! " The next day, Burns' vote was the decisive one that put Tennessee behind the 19th Amendment, and Tennessee's approval passed it for the entire country. When the press questioned him about the surprise switch he responded: "I changed my vote in favor of ratification because a mother's advice is always safest for her boy to follow, and the opportunity was mine to free millions of people from political bondage".

We know about Burn, and about his vote, but we will probably never know who spoke to his mother, what conversations she had, that gave rise to the letter that changed his mind. Every person, every voice, every contribution makes a difference in creating a climate of opinion out of which comes policy and from which laws are made. I like to say that a climate of opinion is just like any other weather system; it depends on the hot air rising from the ground. A climate of opinion shapes conduct as well as perspective, and can change hearts as well as minds. The triumph of the civil rights movement is a testament to the successful transformation of opinion achieved by millions of individuals who wanted to see an America as good as its promise. Those people understood the essential message and vision of our Declaration of Intent and they gave it life. That vision is a universal one, and is still as controversial and unachieved today as it was two hundred years ago. It is a vision grounded in morality and that finds its expression in the notion that in every person is a reflection of God. It lies in the belief that every life has meaning, and that in America; every person has an equal right to the blessings of liberty and the benefits of citizenship. Alexander Hamilton described the core spiritual concept as this: "*The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for, among the old parchments, or musty records. They are written, as with a sunbeam in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself; and can never be erased or obscured by mortal powers.* " This was pretty radical stuff when our fundamental political compacts were written. It takes mortal action,

however, to give life to those sacred rights, and in a democratic system of government, it takes the majority of the population to continually defend and advance them. Our generation's legacy will be found in the extent to which we preserve and invigorate the sacred rights that are at the heart of our government. So long as working families' health care hangs by a paycheck, it is our collective responsibility to devise a better system. So long as the elderly poor have to choose between food and medicine, or heat and clothing, we will have failed all our parents. So long as the purveyors of drugs and despair sow stress and hopelessness among the young, our future as a nation will be at risk. The rungs of the ladder of success are crafted in the classroom; so long as some have access and others do not, we will compromise our nation's greatness. Dr. Martin Luther King once said:

In the days ahead we must not consider it unpatriotic to raise the certain basic questions about our national character. We must begin to ask, "Why are there forty million poor people in a nation overflowing with such unbelievable affluence? Why has our nation placed itself in the position of being God's military agent on earth...? Why have we substituted the arrogant undertaking of policing the whole world for the high task of putting our own house in order?"

He was of course speaking in the time of the Vietnam war, but the answers we embrace to the age old guns vs. butter questions are a reflection of our national character as much as our answer to the question of inclusion or exclusion. Because this is the greatest nation in the world, we bear a responsibility to the world to weigh in on these issues in ways that will do honor to the legacy we inherited as well as that for which we want to be remembered.

Liberty and individual rights are our birthright, but remain alien concepts in much of the rest of the world. In our founding charters may well be the keys to peace and the security and harmony for the world community. When Americans advocate for the blessings of liberty worldwide, we help to meet the challenges of a world at the brink of war. These great challenges are not insurmountable, but must be taken apart and resolved, one person, one issue, one opportunity at a time. Each of us can choose to give life to the vision of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Or we can choose to do nothing. In that choice is the essence of Patriotism. We can act to make those unalienable rights a reality or leave them simply as dreams deferred. Dr. Martin Luther King once said: "*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.*" Making the Declaration of Independence live up to its promise is one of the ways that we can help bend that arc toward justice, and it remains our personal and our patriotic challenge. America's value as a beacon of light and hope to the world lies in its promise of social justice, economic opportunity and the rule of law. Keeping the light of that promise alive for America and indeed for the world falls to each of us, one challenge, one issue, one person at a time. This vision transformed America once. It can do it again. As much to the point, it can be the fulcrum from which Americans can change the world.

Every person makes a difference, for good or for ill. America's real contribution to the world is a vision of individual importance and liberty that is as revolutionary today as it was 200 years ago. It is up to us to make this generation the one that transforms that

vision into a universal reality. And when we work together to do that, we give life to the noblest tradition that makes us all Americans.

Thank you.