



**Office of the Mayor
City of Los Angeles**

ANTONIO R. VILLARAIGOSA

“A Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”
Remarks of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa
Los Angeles Dream Dinner
February 28, 2006

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a distinct honor to be here, to have the privilege of playing a small part in the movement to create a permanent memorial on the National Mall recognizing perhaps the greatest American who ever lived.

I want to thank all the sponsors and organizers here tonight. I want to thank everyone who's been a part of this campaign.

With this memorial, Dr. King will assume his rightful position in the physical center of our national life.

He'll take his providential place in the company of our nation's greatest leaders.

He'll be where he belongs, in clear sight of the general who led us to independence and in earshot the president who told us that we have nothing to fear but fear itself.

And he'll be situated in a direct visual line. A line connecting Lincoln's throne to Jefferson's temple. A line tracing the Declaration's promise about the inalienable rights of man to the Emancipation Proclamation that gave that Declaration its first meaningful expression in our history.

And in a true stroke of architectural genius, the monument will attain the higher vantage point you gain at a lower perspective.

It won't be elevated on a pedestal. It'll be built at ground level.

It won't be etched in marble. It will be hewn from rock.

A fitting tribute to a man who would have rather been remembered than revered.

Remembered not as a god in our pantheon of secular heroes. Remembered simply as a man of God.

There, at ground level, with no marble ceiling intervening overhead, we'll be able to look up and remember the truth Dr. King spoke when he told us that "only when it's dark enough, can you see the stars."

Looking up, we will see that while King may have led a social and political movement for change, what he really talked about was spreading a "gospel of freedom."

We'll remember that his belief in non-violence sprung from a deep spiritual source.

That when he asked his followers the question, "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" he was really asking them whether they would put their faith in the power of love.

That when he spoke of non-violent direct action as a process of "self-purification," he was really challenging us all to be more like Christ.

And we will understand the metaphysical truth he wrote about in "Strength to Love" when he said that "darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."

And there, at the edge of the Tidal Basin looking back at Jefferson and ahead to Lincoln, I hope we will also remember King's teaching that racism is a sin. As he asked us in a famous letter from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, isn't segregation "an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness?"

Friends, with King in his natural place on the Mall, surrounded in the fellowship of presidents, it will be clear for all to see, that while we may have won our freedom at Lexington and Concord, while we may have preserved the union at Gettysburg, we redeemed our souls in Birmingham and Montgomery and Albany, Georgia. On the National Mall on a hot August day in 1963 and in Memphis, Tennessee in April 1968.

There, in that last great, prophetic speech, delivered just hours before he died, King explained his decision to go to Memphis and to be a part of the garbage workers' strike in the simple parable of the Good Samaritan.

In the story of an Israelite who'd been robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the winding road from Jerusalem to Jericho who found his salvation not in the compassion of the pious, who were too afraid to stop, but in the humanity of a stranger, who was willing to offer his hand.

Friends, particularly at this moment in our history, with so much sound and fury abounding around the role of religion and values in our political discourse, we need to remember this man.

We need to remember this man who wasn't afraid to offer his hand.

We need to remember this man who still offers us a spiritual alternative to the hollow theology that judges the sinner without the gift of God's grace.

We need to remember this man who reminded us about a set of values based on tolerance. On turning the other cheek. On loving your neighbor as yourself. A faith that cherishes the soul of every human being and whose central tenet is the miraculous and transformative power of love.

Ladies and gentlemen, we need to remember this man.

We need to build this monument.

The campaign is three and a half million dollars short.

Take it on yourself. Ask your friends and colleagues. Double what you've done.

Let's all dedicate ourselves to building this dream.

Thank you all.