A Meditation on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail"

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Good evening. Thanks, Provost Bowen, for your introduction. Please stand and join me in singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the Black National Anthem.

I am thankful to have this opportunity to share with you this evening. I am also thankful for the many colleagues and students with whom I am able to interact on a daily basis. Your support, warmth, and challenge are what inspire me to be a better person continually.

Thank you to President Troha, who is on a plane heading west to the NCAA meetings in Indy, and who takes time with me to support the planning of these and other EDI events. Thank you to members of SLT and the Board of Trustees—some of whom are joining us via zoom this evening—for your support. Thank you to the members of the Bias Response Team and EDI council for their challenge and support. Last but not least, thank you to my student workers, campus development interns, and Juniata Assistant, who keep the momentum going and make the magic happen—Liv Simmons, Brandie Ray, Jean Barrera, Jada Murray, Citlalli Lopez and HJ Zemanski.

Special thanks to each of you here in the audience, and thanks to those of you who are attending via zoom, which includes my mom from Ohio and my husband, Larry, and daughter, Carey.

Before I begin, I would like to share a little history on the song we just sang together. "Lift Every Voice and Sing" was a song created in collaboration between two brothers, John Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson. James, a poet, wrote the stanzas of the poem in 1900, which was set to music shortly thereafter by John. James, a lawyer, diplomat, and professor was the first African American leader of the NAACP at the turn of the century. John Rosamond was a prolific pianist who studied at the New England Conservatory (unheard of at that time), who set his brother's words to music using a combination of classical music structure with the harmonies of African American choral music of the time. The song, first performed by 500 school children in Jacksonville, Florida, became an unofficial song of the movement for African Americans and the NAACP from its inception in 1900. In 1919, the NAACP proclaimed it the Negro National Anthem, a full 12 years before The Star-Spangled Banner was adopted as the National Anthem for the US under President Hoover.

As with the National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" is often sung at the start of a major event in the African American community. It is customary to stand while it is sung in the same manner that we stand for the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner." I will say, however, this song is not left up to artistic interpretation in the same way that "The Star-Spangled Banner" often is by Fergie, Chaka Khan, Rosanne Barr, and others. If you have not seen these versions, you will have a blast on YouTube finding them.

Now to what I am here to share through the lens of "A Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Dr. King's letter, written April 13, 1963, starts with these words: "While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities 'unwise and untimely.' Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all of the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. However, since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

"I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of 'outsiders coming in.' I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every Southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliate organizations all across the South, one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Whenever necessary and possible, we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago our local affiliate here in Birmingham invited us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promises. So I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here. I am here because I have basic organizational ties here.

"Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Greco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid."

After arriving on August 16th, it has been a full steam ahead process to think about my journey and my plan for progressing the work of EDI on Juniata's campus. The journey has not always been the smoothest. There have been days where it seemed like the work would not make a difference to anyone

until I sit down with students or colleagues and learn that in some small or large way, the work is speaking for itself.

Taking time to pause this week to remember the life and work of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is an important milestone in the work of equity, diversity, and inclusion. The very message of Dr. King's life is to hear and understand that there is a need for equity among all Americans. To realize that we all deserve an opportunity to have the basics—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

For most of my life I have heard many of the key quotes from this letter, especially around MLK Day, some of which you will hear in a moment. It was not until around 2011 that I became familiar with the entire letter. Every fall for the last 10 years, I taught a first-year experience course called "Becoming a Scholar." In this course, we helped first year students as they navigated their transitions from high school into college. In doing so, we read essays and book excerpts to help each of us to discover who we are as individuals but also what our place in the world means for others. We read excerpts from Parker Palmer, bell hooks, Ken Bain and Sheryl Sandberg. For many of the early years of teaching this course, Dr. King's Letter was included, until about 3 years ago. During a revision of the course, this reading was removed. What troubled me the most was thinking about how important this letter was and still is, and how we have become afraid to tackle challenging subjects (the reason why the reading was removed). I asked the revision committee to reconsider, promising that I would help others teaching the course think about ways to engage with this text.

I will be honest with you, I could stand here and read this letter from start to finish while properly citing the source, ensuring that the words are not falsely attributed to me and that could honestly be enough. There is so much here that is so relevant to our world at this time. However, I will not do that in hopes that you have already or may take the time to read this letter on your own.

Here is a little back story for those who may not be familiar as to how Dr. King ended up in police custody that April day in 1963. After discovering a number of challenges happening in Birmingham, such as broken promises to remove discriminatory signage in stores and a contentious mayoral election, he took to Birmingham to march and call for an Eastertime boycott of local merchants. He was arrested for staging the march and protest without a permit. At the time, eight white moderate members of the clergy wrote to The Birmingham News, criticizing the march and protest. Here are their words:

"We, the undersigned clergymen, are among those who, in January, issued 'an Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense,' in dealing with racial problems in Alabama. We expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts but urged that decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed.

"Since that time there has been some evidence of increased forbearance and a willingness to face facts. Responsible citizens have undertaken to work on various problems which caused racial friction and unrest. In Birmingham, recent public events have given indication that we all have opportunity for a new constructive and realistic approach to racial problems.

"However, we are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.

"We agree, rather, with certain local Negro leadership, which has called for honest and open negotiation of racial issues in our area. And we believe this kind of facing of issues can best be accomplished by citizens of our own metropolitan area, white and Negro, meeting with their knowledge and experiences of the local situation. All of us need to face that responsibility and find proper channels for its accomplishment.

"Just as we formerly pointed out that 'hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political tradition,' we also point out that such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham.

"We commend the community as a whole and the local news media and law enforcement officials in particular, on the calm manner in which these demonstrations have been handled. We urge the public to continue to show restraint should the demonstrations continue, and the law enforcement officials to remain calm and continue to protect our city from violence.

"We further strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.

"Signed, Bishop Carpenter, Bishop of Alabama, Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Durick, Rabbi Hilton Grafman, Bishop Paul Hardin, Bishop Holan Harmon, Bishop Coadjutor George Murray, Moderator Edward Ramsage and Pastor Earl Stallings."

Before I move on, I want to acknowledge that descriptors like "Negro" and "Colored" are antiquated terms and should not be used as a descriptor today.

As I reflect on these words, I can almost imagine a similar set of words being uttered in the summer of 2020. I distinctly remember a public call for calm, common sense, and a reduction in

demonstrations in order to maintain a sense of normalcy in a chaotic time. What Dr. King's words say to us in his letter of response are that as long as injustice exists, there can be no sense of normal. We could add our own paraphrases, like, "as long as COVID exists"," as long as police brutality exists," "as long as racism exists," "as long as xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia exists," "as long as religious persecution exists," "as long as the socio-economic divide increases," "as long as gender inequities exist…." There simply cannot be a sense of normal.

This phrase from his letter is often quoted "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." It is the remainder of the paragraph that speaks to the root nature of that statement: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds."

Living in this space of mutuality, we must understand that what impacts you, impacts me. Directly, indirectly, proximal, or peripheral. We are in a network of connectedness that has to be understood and respected. When we see our neighbor (friend, colleague, or even our foe) struggling, we must understand that in some way, it is a part of us. It is also our duty to not only focus on the effects but to also look for the root cause of the issue. This can only be discovered if we do it together.

The true nature of equity, diversity, and inclusion work rests on the ideal that immediate gratification is not the goal. Systemic and wholistic change is. This process takes time. In our world where we reap the benefits of microwavable results, some things just simply have to be processed in a slow cooker. However, there is this dichotomy that makes you realize that in some ways the wait has been forever. Some things need to change and do so quickly. There were many things that Dr. King desired to see to improve during his lifetime, many of which never came to fruition. However, that does not mean that the effort and the desire to move forward is not useful. As a matter of fact, it is necessary. We are all interconnected. As Dr. King is quoted: "Justice too long delayed is justice denied."

There will indeed be moments when justice will inevitably be delayed. That is the reality of our world at the moment. Where justice becomes denied is when it takes too long. We must remember that as we do our work. It may not result immediately, but if we do not do the work, it never will.

As I reflect on where we are as a Juniata community, we like many places in our world are at a crossroads. A place of deciding which path seems like the most feasible to take. Whether it is the path that seems eerily similar to paths we have taken in the past, or a path that take a subtle curve towards a new horizon but involves some minor bumps in the road, or the road that seems the most difficult to traverse but will lead to true lasting change. This path is by no means straight, it is not even paved, but it is the best path. Traversing this path will take time, bravery, pain, frustration, disagreement, and challenge.

This will seem like an awkward Segway, but bear with me; it is going somewhere. Our family loves to take cruises as a means of travel. My husband and I especially love the larger ships that feel like a floating resort. Some of these ships hold upwards of 7500 guests and employees, so they are no small vessels. Imagine that the captain of this vessel is told that this ship has to adjust course immediately with no time to plan for contingencies. Well, if you have seen one of these boats, you know that nothing happens quickly. Some of the fastest maneuvers, I am sure, take hours of planning to do just right. Just simply adjusting the course without planning can cause people to be injured in ways that can be irreparable. The same holds true when deciding to take the road not traveled. These roads have no pavement, have many obstacles in the way, are dangerous, and just outright difficult to manage.

What is often necessary are advanced scouts to check out the lay of the land. Those scouts also need to lead those who have never been that way through the rough terrain, but sometimes the advance scouts just lay the framework. Moses wandered in the wilderness for forty years in an attempt to reach the promised land. Just because he never arrived, it did not mean that his work to lead his people out of Egypt and towards the promised land was in vain. Just because Dr. King did not get to see some of his advanced scouting work make a difference in his lifetime does not mean that his work was for naught. We may not see all the changes necessary to make Juniata a place for all in our lifetime as students, faculty, or staff here, but that does not diminish the work that we are doing and needs to be done now. We are laying the framework for continued growth and navigation.

In order for us to begin the work, it is important to understand just what the work is. When I arrived on campus, one of my personal goals was to learn Juniata's campus in a way that helps to drive what EDI means for us here, now. Simply put, what does equity mean for us, what does diversity look like, and how do we embrace inclusion? For Juniata today—equity means ensuring that all receive the same thing; for students—acquisition of a quality collegiate education; for faculty and staff—access to a safe and supportive working environment. However, our work is not to just get our students to cross the finish line of graduation and post baccalaureate success but to ensure that their race can be supported through identification and eradication of as many obstacles as possible. This will also mean that we have to examine what we do and say daily to ensure that we are not creating the obstacle.

Diversity embraces the varying races, ethnicities, gender identities, socio-economic statuses, religious beliefs, and sexual orientations that make us who we are. However, diversity goes beyond the acknowledgement of the presence of these varying perspectives. It lives in understanding and appreciating how there are similarities within our diversity, and it makes us who we are individually and collectively. What diversity must do is to not only put a spotlight on our similarities and differences but celebrate them as well. Learn from them, support the amplification of those distinct viewpoints. ALL of them.

Inclusion here at Juniata is the measure we must strive towards in making it standard operating procedure for ALL to have a place on our campus and in our community. A place that is respected, understood, supported, and appreciated. It is the goal line that we must strive towards in order to make true equity and diversity a part of our very fabric. African American author and poet bell hooks, who we lost recently, said these words: "Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world."

Where we miss the mark in this work can be seen in the example of the clergymen writing to the Birmingham newspaper. We often believe that we are well-intentioned when calling out what we see as wrong from a perspective of pointing the finger. It often resides in a place of bringing attention to a small group without thinking about what it truly means for us as a collective. It feels impressive to identify the problems but not do the work to identify the root cause. I have used this analogy many times since I've arrived. I arrived on a campus where people were hemorrhaging. I had to find the balance between being the emergency room doctor to address the immediate triage needs and spending time as the internist or diagnostician who wants to take time to research and investigate the root cause. In the true work of EDI, it is imperative that both exist. However, it takes an army of people to do it.

I ask that we consider whether we are a part of the ER team, the diagnostic team, or are we sitting in the parking lot identifying that there are so many people in the hospital with a bit of disdain. Have we decided to roll up our sleeves and pitch in? I am sure you are asking, "Well how do I do that?" I am so glad you asked. You can become an advocate for EDI, not only at Juniata but also in your local communities. Consider your personal strengths and see how they can personally advance the mission of equity or diversity or inclusion. Be comfortable speaking out as a group advocate to address change needed. Join EDI council, serve as an advisor and/or supporter for a cultural affinity student organization, plan conversations, presentations around topics of equity, diversity, or inclusion. Take students, friends, or colleagues with you to opportunities for engaged dialogue around difficult topics. It requires being brave and bold but also collaborative and supportive.

While I would love to believe that I can make the change necessary for all alone, I know that I cannot. I will need help just as you will when embracing this work. Dr. King knew that the support of his wife, friends, and colleagues are what helped him to reach those who needed him the most. Imagine how the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the March on Washington would have looked if he had to do the work alone. We need each other.

I want to acknowledge some key African American figures who we have lost most recently who paved the way for many of us, no matter who we are. Bishop Desmond Tutu, bell hooks, Sidney Poitier and Andre Leon Tally.

One thing that I find fascinating is the ability to hear the words of these key figures shared largely after their death. For many of these words, I wish that I could have embraced them and sooner. I would like to share some of these words with you as I close.

Bishop Desmond Tutu, archbishop of the Anglican Church in South Africa, shared these words: "To treat anyone less than human, less than a brother or sister, no matter what they have done, is to contravene the very laws of our humanity. . . . If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of the mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

Acclaimed author and the first Black actor (and Bahamian) to win an Oscar Sidney Poitier, shared these words: "We're all imperfect, and life is simply a perpetual, unending struggle against those imperfections."

Dr. King's letter ends with these words: "I wish you had commended the Negro demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer, and their amazing discipline in the midst of the most inhuman provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, courageously and with a majestic sense of purpose facing jeering and hostile mobs and the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman of Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride the segregated buses, and responded to one who inquired about her tiredness with ungrammatical profundity, 'My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.' They will be young high school and college students, young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience's sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage.

"Never before have I written a letter this long -- or should I say a book? I'm afraid that it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?"

In my closing, I would like to take artistic license and share with you a small portion of my letter to Juniata Community, in a version closely related to MLK's letter:

"Greetings Juniata Community. You may ask why I'm here. I am here because I was called to be here. To do the very difficult work of equity, diversity and inclusion. To help our community to be the place where equity mindedness doesn't just mean achieving the same thing but also eliminating barriers

that prevent all of reaching that milestone. To help us celebrate the similarities and differences that we bring to this place and while doing so appreciating and respecting each person's individual place in this space, at this moment.

"Never before have I written a speech this long. Maybe too long for your patience. But what my calling tells me to do is to take the time to respond to the call for my work, in this place and in this time. I call on each of you to join me on this journey. It may not be easy and we collectively may not always get it right but we will definitely get it wrong if we don't try."

Blessings and peace to you all! Thank you for your time!

Signed,

Dr. Crystal Sellers Battle, Dean of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Juniata College.