

# EARLHAM

Office of the President

January 19, 2009

On this Monday, still in the first week of second semester, it is Martin Luther King Day here at Earlham and across these United States — and even further, for memories of this extraordinary man speak to many beyond American shores.

At Earlham we celebrate Dr. King's birthday as "a day on, not a day off." Classes are meeting, but many are focusing on what he taught and the causes he pursued with courage and dignity. He would have turned 80 this week had his life not been cut short.

Our observance of Martin Luther King Day began yesterday in College Meeting for Worship, with Kevin Miles, associate professor of philosophy, speaking about "The Exemplary Courage of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." He urged us to see King not as a heroic, solitary figure, but rather as someone who, in working with others, weighed what he could do and should do, and, in leadership, challenged us all to give ourselves fully to aspirations of freedom, equality and peace. Kevin urged us to remember that King knew depression and fear, and yet courageously persevered.

Much of our celebration of Martin Luther King Day we carry through in partnership with our neighbors in Richmond, Indiana. This morning, several of us joined about 200 others at a community breakfast remembering Dr. King's life. This evening in Goddard Auditorium, many of our neighbors will join us in the Earlham community in hearing Aaron McGruder, social critic and cartoonist (*The Boondocks*) talk about "Negrology: The State of Black America."

Tomorrow (that is, tomorrow as I write this) Barack Hussein Obama will be sworn in as the 44th President of the United States. Most of us, I expect, will feel a connection between King's life and this new beginning. Who among us, a year or two ago, could have wholeheartedly believed that the son of a man born in Kenya and a mother born in Kansas could be elected President of the United States? And yet this has come to pass. The prospect of tomorrow brightens today's observance of King's life and not-yet-fulfilled dreams.

This inauguration day follows a long, sometimes wearying, sometimes exhilarating campaign. What I will most remember about this past fall semester at Earlham is the energy, attention and rekindled optimism of our students through the Presidential election season. Who might be elected President seemed to matter much more to our students, whatever their political orientation, than it has in decades.

We showed each of the Presidential and Vice Presidential debates in Loose Lecture Hall to standing-room-only crowds, and followed these with discussions led by members of the Politics Department. I will especially remember lengthy consideration one evening of what the candidates said they would do in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The discussion involved both students from the U.S. and students from those two countries and their neighbors. That evening I knew we were talking in the most serious and respectful way about difficult matters of extraordinary importance.

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The evening of the election, members of the Earlham community crowded into the Orchard and Comstock rooms in Runyan Center to watch election returns. A serious silence came over those assembled as Senator McCain delivered his concession speech, and then a more buoyant and expectant silence settled through the room as Senator Obama delivered his remarks. Tomorrow we will gather again in Orchard and Comstock to hear President Obama's Inauguration Speech.

Barack Obama comes to the Presidency in a time of tumult, with war, terror, economic distress and climate change all claiming his attention. Martin Luther King, too, lived in a time of tumult, and yet had the courage to pursue an extraordinary dream. At College Meeting for Worship yesterday, a student read excerpts from "The World House," an essay of King's based on the address he gave when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. King knew we were passing through a period of rapid scientific and technical change, but he also knew that we were in the midst of a "world-wide freedom revolution," not just in the United States but around the world. "All too many men fail to remain awake through great periods of social change," King said.

That is our mission at Earlham, I found myself thinking: to help our students be as fully awake as they can be; and beyond this, our mission is to help our awakened students prepare for their callings in service to worthy ideals. There is still much work to be done that all may live in dignity.

Martin Luther King Day is also an Admissions Preview Day at Earlham. Each year on this day we welcome dozens of students who are considering Earlham for college. As we remind ourselves of the great purposes of a courageous life, it is fitting we invite others to join us, to consider adding their talents and energies and potentials to ours. At Earlham, each is asked to contribute to the understanding of all.

And so on this Martin Luther King Day, I find myself remembering these words of Lincoln's at another difficult moment: "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us."

So let us be dedicated. On Wednesday we will start the second week of second semester. Martin Luther King Day will be behind us for another year. The Inauguration of an American President will be behind us for another four. And yet we will all have work to do, not just in remaining fully awake, but also in finding the courage to do all that we can to make this the best of all possible worlds for ourselves, for our brothers and sisters, and for our neighbors in the World House.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Doug Bennett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Douglas C. Bennett