



Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, Inc.

January 16, 2023



Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders gather before a rally at the Lincoln Memorial on Aug. 28, 1963, in Washington. National Archives/Hulton Archive via Getty Images

Dear Friends of Hallie Q. Brown,

"We have also come to his hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood."

-Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have A Dream" Aug. 28, 1963

Sixty years ago this August, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke these words on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial as part of his [world renowned I Have A Dream speech](#). We focus so often

on other lines of his speech such as "*the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners [being] able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood*"; or "*not [being] judged by the color of [our] skin but by the content of [our] character*"; or most often "*[singing] in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last.*" But I was struck by these lines particularly this year because of where we stand in the achievement of Dr. King's Dream and the embracing of the concept of "the fierce urgency of now."

Dr. King was always so precise with his words, framing where we had come from, calling out the truth of the moment, while laying the groundwork for the future. In this speech, he goes from talking about the [*Emancipation Proclamation*](#), and the commitment it made to African Americans for justice and hope, to the Dream that he envisioned of freedom and fulfillment. But in between these parts, he spoke of the promissory note that America had written to all its people--that ALL Americans would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness--but had defaulted on as far as its citizens of color were concerned (the middle is always the best part). More importantly, he expressed the need to address the situation now, not later; to not wait for things to cool down or eventually change, but rather the critical need for timely action. It was firmly and directly a call to action as well as a call to account to all Americans, but most especially to white Americans and those decision makers in positions of power. "It would be fatal," he said, "for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment."

And yet sixty years later, we are still trying to cash that check that was marked "insufficient funds." We are still crying out for freedom and justice from a system which has given us neither. We are still searching for the sunlit path of racial justice and the solid rock of brotherhood. We are still trying to realize the Dream.

It is hard, so often, to look upon this country with hopeful eyes. While progress has been made, we are still fighting many of the same battles, still dealing with so many of the same struggles, and so often falling victim to the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. A small amount of progress is made and America asks if it's enough. A solitary victory is won, and America asks if we're done now. A few steps are climbed and America asks if we're there yet, not realizing that the emphasis has been placed on the wrong part. The "fierce urgency of now" is about the speed at which to take action, not the speed at which to wrap things up.

More importantly, you cannot derive the solution if you don't actually accept that you have a problem.

This, right here, is where America fails the most. Our country pretends that racial injustice is merely men in white sheets, and not being allowed to live in a neighborhood or drink from the same water fountain, and since we've largely, though not entirely, overcome all of those, America asks the question of how much more of this it's going to have to deal with because it has things to do and places to go...

Ironically enough, that is the same question that the BIPOC community has been asking since well before this speech. But the problem remains. It's not that America doesn't know the problem, it's that America refuses to acknowledge the problem. To admit, openly and completely, that systemic racism is a part of its founding, development and present day.

Racism is not merely a collection of things, it is a way of thinking and acting. It is a process of marginalization and indoctrination that impacts both the oppressor and the oppressed. It is a

system of disenfranchisement that is self-perpetuating, and it is woven so deeply into the fabric of American life and society that when you protest racism, people think you're protesting America...

And in a sense, we are.

All of this goes back to the core pieces of not acknowledging what racism is, and not engaging in the "fierce urgency of now." Racism took root in America in 1492. It dug in deeper in 1619. It was flourishing by 1776. It was indistinguishable from American culture by 1861. African Americans have been enslaved longer in the history of this nation than they have been free. I used to think that racism was a virus that has spread through the host, but that implies a lack of causality and choice. Racism is an addiction; one that some are afflicted by unintentionally, even unknowingly, but that others relish and embrace. Regardless of which, it is destroying America and casually treating it at a gradual pace will never cure the problem. This is why "the fierce urgency of now," because we are always racing to be ahead of it, before someone justifies it, dismisses it, normalizes it, allowing it to take further root.

And so, sixty years later, we still stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. But today, we are better equipped, more informed, and more committed than ever before. The time for casual approaches and gradual changes has past and America is in for a rude awakening if it thinks that any of us will be content to return to the "way things were."

America, it is time for an intervention.

It is time to honestly and openly admit that we have not just a problem, but an addiction to racism. There have been so many opportunities to let it go, to move beyond it, to heal from it, and it is still here. It is still here because a part of America wants it, and a part doesn't know how to give it up.

So, we must be done with half measures and the soft bigotry of complacency. We must stop the sugar coating and false equivalencies and come to terms with our addiction, recognizing the actions of the past and how they have carried forward to the present. We have to stop avoiding the truth because it "might make someone feel bad" and recognize the impact that avoidance has had the lives of BIPOC people. We have to stop ignoring the policies, practices and even laws that have made BIPOC communities by and large resource and wealth deficient; and recognize that this country, its corporations and its institutions were built upon the backs and the suffering and exploitation of Black and brown folks. We have to recognize that there is a significant problem in our justice system and its roots in the persecution and oppression of BIPOC communities. We have to stop gaslighting people of color...

In short, we have to recognize that white supremacy IS a real problem, racism is an addiction and we need a dose of the Narcan of justice to make things right.

And then we must take action. We need to have a full and fair acknowledgment of American Slavery and its impact on our country and its citizens. We must do the same with the colonization of America, the westward expansion, the annexation of land and the import labor in our history. We must recognize that at the core of each of these is white supremacy and the myth of entitlement. We must educate our young people so they understand the mistakes of the past, the addiction, so that they will learn never to repeat them. We must make our country clean and sober and insulate against it ever falling prey to that every again.

We must stop turning away from the dark cycles of our past, or we will never make it to bright phases of our future.

We must do it now.
Fiercely.
Urgently.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JP', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jonathan Palmer
Executive Director

For more information and details on racism and other significant parts of our history, please visit our [Addressing Systemic Racism](#) page on our website.

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