



Video Transcript

2022 RSJI Summit & MLK Unity Day: Michelle Storms, ACLU-WA

[Image Description: ACLU-WA Executive Director Michele Storms sits in an office, facing the camera. Her braided black hair is styled into a bun on the top of her head. She wears glasses and a black shirt decorated with dandelion-like flowers. Michele's office in the background has a feather, papers, printer, and window looking out at other tall buildings.]

"We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action." Friends, these words by Martin Luther King Jr resonate every day. There's great suffering and injustice in our world and we must commit to how we will change our city, state, country, and world for it to be more just and equitable. In honor of Martin Luther King Unity Day, and in honor of every beloved human on the planet, our charge is no less than to work for inclusion and belonging and care.

The truth is, we do not live in a just and equitable society at any level. The beloved community Martin Luther King spoke of is not a reality on a grand scale. And I offer that we must truly understand our history so we can choose and commit in the present moment to the future we will work to create together.

So here are a few basic concepts I will talk with you about today. First of all, our country's origins, which include racism and exclusion, impact every system under which we live. And as a country based on the rule of law, justice for all governed by a constitution in reality, justice has not been for all. So we cannot have racial equity and social justice until we square our country's origins and the failure of our legal system to live up to stated ideals with the realities of injustice and inequity faced by far too many people whose identities have been made marginalized.

So we'll talk about the work ahead in service of equity and justice, a work that we all have to do together as the people. And we'll talk about how we are able to survive as we do that and maintain some hope. So, as a race and social justice initiative inside the city and to all the people listening here today, I imagine you're in a continual process of examining and re-examining institutional systems and the forms of racism and exclusion that show up in our workplaces and interpersonal relationships. The ways that othering and exclusion show up in services across the board, in our courts, where justice is too often denied and in our social





services systems, which are meant to help and heal, but which often stigmatize, minimize and reinforce trauma.

We are together examining issues of racism, gender justice, immigrant rights, youth rights, disability rights, and in particularly looking at where systems are failing and not living up to our stated ideals. So what is required if we really want to see the transformation we so desire, the true belongingness that we're currently still too far away from? I do not have all the answers. I am a seeker along with you for a better future. We are in times of deep division and trauma and not only must we press forward toward a future in which each of us in our myriad identities belongs, we have to do so together somehow. Now majority systems, whether they are wealth, corporate, white, and other forms of supremacy, will do all they can to maintain that supremacy and power, including the work to divide those of us seeking to overcome such forms of supremacy. This is something we must fight against with every fiber of our being.

So let's start with the basics, our country's origin and what that means for us now. As a lawyer and advocate, working in civil legal aid and in civil rights and civil liberties for three decades, as well as living in my identity as a cis Black woman, I've witnessed and experienced that living in the United States, we are swimming in poisonous waters of racism, patriarchy, ableist systems. Sadly, our society was built on exclusion. Our founding institutions themselves were built on multiple original sins, including the genocide of Indigenous peoples and the stealing of their lands and culture, the enforced chattel slavery of Black people brought forcibly from the continent of Africa and trafficked throughout the Americas, the inferiorizing of women and of men without money, land, or suitably masculine traits.

And of course these original sins were quickly followed by additional isms. For example, Orientalism, that is the othering and exoticizing of non-white, non-Christian peoples largely from Asia and the Middle East. Then there's ableism and other isms and phobias, immigrant policies, which have excluded people who are non-European, non-white, non-Christian. And in our current day with a special exclusionary focus on our neighbors south of the border, and those who practice Islam. We have criminal legal system policies, which from policing, to sentencing, to mass incarceration, single out Black and Brown peoples. We have healthcare systems that cater to the needs of majority culture, but ignore the needs, of those who do not fit the mold.

This is what we're living in. Now the evidence is writ large throughout our history. These exclusions were not accidental, they were intentional. I wish it weren't true and it's hard to grapple with, but it's present in legislative records, in newspaper articles, in firsthand accounts of so many people from the narratives of enslaved peoples to the first time to count of Indigenous peoples, migrant farm workers stories, immigrant stories, court cases, the stories





our grandparents and great-grandparents and aunts and uncles have told us. Take a look at the Who We Are Project, which chronicles the historical record of intentionally built, enforced and ingrained racism and exclusion in this country. In fact, the film "Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America," opened in theaters over the weekend.

Now, notwithstanding or perhaps because of the evidence right in front of us in states across the country, including here in Washington state, legislatures are either proposing or have actually outlawed the teaching of critical race theory or any form of racial reckoning. Failing to teach the perspectives of all people, their experiences, and the truthful record of our history is a disservice to all of us. And it prevents us from living actually into our ideal as a just and fair country. So whether that's continuing a false narrative of the so-called Thanksgiving holiday, thus denying the truth of the harms done to Indigenous peoples or denying the truth of separate, but deeply unequal educational systems in the South, which harmed generations of Black people, or even confronting the racism inherent in voting rights restrictions right here in the 21st century, which harmed countless people of color across the country. Knowing the truth allows us to heal, to rectify and to be in genuine community with each other.

So let's talk about the law 'cause I'm a lawyer, about the rule of law, justice for all, about the constitution and our rights. So to begin with historically, those who wrote the constitution were complicit in this genocide of Indigenous peoples and many of them also held other humans, Black people in bondage in the system of slavery. Thus, the constitutional ideal of all men were created equal was fully limited to the idea of white men who owned property. Now, needless to say, this original concept excluded everyone else. And we continue to grapple with the ways in which this original exclusion shows up in law and impacts all of our lives.

So here comes the brief portion of this talk that is your mini law school lecture. The Constitution created our judicial system with the United States Supreme Court as the highest court in the land. And that court itself has upheld racism and exclusion in many cases. And I'm gonna touch on just a few of those, I guess the unfortunately not so greatest hits of racism and exclusion by our high court. And then I'll explain why, because there's a lot of ways that this is embedded in our law.

So, we'll start with Dred v. Scott in 1857, which many of you may have heard of. In that case the court held that the US Constitution was not meant to include American citizenship for Black people, regardless of whether they were enslaved or free. And so that meant the rights and privileges of the Constitution conferred upon American citizens would not apply to Black people. In Plessy versus Ferguson in 1896, that was a holding that racial segregation laws did not violate the Constitution as long as the facilities for each race were equal in quality. That was a doctrine that came to be known as separate but equal doctrine.



But despite the technical legal analysis of the court, realistically, what that meant for Black people in America, was in fast disparities in every possible need or accommodation. It meant school buildings that were broken down, classes without adequate books, hospitals that did not have the equipment or supplies to keep people healthy.

There was *Buck v. Bell* in 1927. In that case, the US Supreme Court upheld the forced sterilization of those with intellectual disabilities, for the protection and health of the state. Finding that doing so did not violate the due process provision of the 14th amendment. And this meant that some people with disabilities could continue to be sterilized against their wishes. And this case still stands.

Korematsu versus the United States in 1944, the court upheld the forcible detention of Japanese Americans in concentration camps during World War II, allowing the stated needs of the military to justify racism by law. Getting closer to home, both in location and in date, *Oliphant versus the Suquamish Indian Tribe* in 1978, issued the devastating ruling that Indian tribal courts, do not have inherent criminal jurisdiction to try and punish non-Indians and hence may not assume such jurisdiction unless specifically authorized by Congress. With tribes unable to prosecute non-Natives on tribal lands, such a ruling laid the groundwork for among other things, the hideous phenomenon of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit individuals.

There was also *US versus Montana* in 1981, in which the Crow Tribe of Montana, sought to assert its sovereign authority to prohibit hunting and fishing on their tribal lands, by non-tribal members and the court overruled stating that the federal government could reclaim that right, despite treaties granting tribal rights in the past.

Moving really very much closer into the present day, *Shelby County versus Holder* in 2013. And this relates to voting rights and voting, as you know, is a cornerstone of our democracy. That was a landmark decision of the Supreme Court regarding the constitutionality of provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. There was section five that required certain states and local governments to obtain federal preclearance before implementing any changes to their voting laws or practices. And then another section which contained the coverage formula that determined which jurisdictions would be subject to that pre-clearance based on their histories of discrimination in voting. Those sections of the act, which were overturned, had been hard fought and hard won in order to address historical exclusion of Black people from voting.

But this also extends to other racial groups. The removal of these protections has led to some of the many restrictions on voting rights laws that we are seeing right now, all across the country and I'll say a little bit more about that shortly. Just a couple more here quickly.

So, Trump versus Hawaii in 2018, was litigation against the former president's executive order restricting travel into the United States by people from several nations or by refugees without certain travel documents. Now, the nations that were a part of this, were almost entirely nations with primarily Muslim residents. Now, several other states and groups challenged the president's proclamation and two executive orders arguing that the proclamation and the predecessor orders were motivated, by anti-Muslim animus. The court upheld the travel ban, which was a devastating ruling for equity and justice.

The last case I'll mention was just in 2020, *Pereida versus Wilkinson* in which the court held that a man who was born and raised in Mexico, but came to the United States illegally in 1995, would bear the burden under immigration law to prove his eligibility, to have his deportation canceled. That court opinion will make it very difficult for many undocumented immigrants who've lived a substantial portion of their life in the United States to challenge deportation orders, especially impactful for those who are poor and don't have access to counsel.

There are many other ways that courts and lawmakers have ensured the presence of racism and exclusion. So I share those cases with you, which are sadly only the tip of the iceberg, to help us all understand the pervasiveness of the racism we must confront today. It's literally embedded in our societal systems and in our laws and in our court rulings. Now here are just a couple other areas of law past or present affirming exclusion and oppression.

Let's start with redlining. Redlining in the United States was the systematic denial of various services to residents of specific often racially associated neighborhoods or communities either explicitly or through the selective raising of prices. It's an unethical practice that puts services, financial and otherwise, out of reach for residents of certain areas based on race or ethnicity. The system has been upheld by laws and policies in the US over generations. And while some such laws have been undone, the impact across generations for Blacks and Asians and other people of color endures through the lack of wealth accumulation and access to the neighborhoods people want to live in, access to education, employment, healthcare, and other vital needs.

Drug laws are another area of law that has been racialized over time. Now, this history is decades old, you could start in 1909 when Congress made opium smoking a federal offense by enacting the Anti-Opium Act. But it reinforced Chinese racism by carving out an exception for drinking and injecting tinctures of opiates, that was the popular method that white people used to inject opium, whereas Chinese immigrants typically were smoking opium. Cocaine regulations were also triggered by racial prejudice as cocaine use was associated with Blacks, just as opium use was associated with the Chinese people. Cannabis prohibition also had racist underpinnings this time it was Mexican people and it's why it's known as marijuana. Congress

has enacted a spate of comprehensive anti-drug laws with strict penalties, and it's a primary driver of mass incarceration in the United States. These stiff penalties for drug possession and most penalties were enacted following the racialization and thus associated criminality based on racial identity.

We have higher arrest and incarceration rates for communities of color that are not reflective of an increased prevalence of drug use, but rather of law enforcement focus on urban areas, lower income communities and communities of color. Disparities in arrest and incarceration are seen for both drug possession law violation, as well as low level sales. Those selling small amounts of drugs to support their own drug use may go to jail for decades. And this unequal enforcement, ignores the universality of drug dependency as well as the universal appeal of drugs themselves.

Immigration laws, which I've referenced a little bit before are also a clear barometer of who a society identifies as belonging and worthy to become one of us. Historically and presently, immigration laws in the United States have excluded people who are not white. The Naturalization Act of 1790 allowed any alien who is a free white person to be naturalized. The 14th amendment as established in 1868, excluded most Indigenous peoples. The Chinese Exclusion Act excluded Chinese people. And when a man from India claimed he was eligible for citizenship because he was Caucasian, as classified scientifically, which the court had already appealed, the US court in *US v. Thind* in 1923, clarify that when they said Caucasian, they were referring to skin color. The immigration system which today, so clearly excludes people from Latinx and African heritages and countries has a long history of discrimination and exclusion, this isn't new.

Voting rights, I said I'd come back to that, and this is an extremely important area because again, voting is so central to our democratic process. Voting rights was fought for so hard in the '60s during the civil rights movement at a time when many Black people in particular, were denied the ability to fully participate in democracy through voting. The devastating impact of the Shelby case that I mentioned earlier, has started a serious rollback of rights for people who should be able to freely access the vote. Now following the 2016 election, the fight for voting rights remains as critical as ever. Politicians across the country, continue to engage in voter suppression, efforts that include additional obstacles to registration, cutbacks on early voting or hours of voting and strict voter identification requirements, some of which frankly make no sense.

Right now, the ACLU across the country is litigating voter suppression and minority vote dilution cases in more than a dozen states, coast to coast in every region due to this epidemic of legislatures enacting laws, restricting the rights of people to vote, making it harder for people who work long hours or work in rural areas or who don't have certain types of identification. In

a democracy, it should be easy to make your voice heard, but in the US, efforts to restrict or dilute the votes, particularly of minority and low-income populations, is a part not just of our historical fabric, it's also a part of our current experience.

The last area of law I wanna touch on before I move on is that of reproductive rights. The current effort to overturn Roe versus Wade and limit a pregnant person's access to abortion is progeny of the systems of racism, exclusion, and patriarchy, I've been addressing. This is squarely an issue of racial and social justice. When laws limit access to reproductive healthcare, people with means can and will continue to get care and access, whether they have to travel to a different state or travel to a different country. People without means, who are too often people of color, people living with disabilities, living without access to transportation and good health care, will suffer the most. Poverty will predict, who can access contraceptives and abortion. Laws like those in Texas and Mississippi and laws which will surely be enacted in many states if Roe is overturned, will lead to the inability of many, to decide and control, whether, when and how, to give birth safely. This is a crisis for those who can bear children, for children, for those who care about them.

So in short, when I say that all of our systems have worked to enforce, create and uphold racism and exclusion, I really mean all systems. In this country, women had to fight for the right to vote, Black people had to fight for the right to vote, Indigenous peoples had to fight for the right to be citizens and have the right to vote and so on. And while some of these wrongs have been corrected, the bottom line is, within our own country's laws and cultural history are saturated with exclusion and discrimination. So when a country colonized and declared founded by white men with means all others had been marginalized and made vulnerable, even under the law, these disparities, which flow from the legacy of the racism, patriarchy, ableism on which this country was founded.

The purpose of acknowledging this, is to help us all move forward. So when you're thinking, why does it feel like oppression is so pervasive across all systems?

It's because it is. And while it's depressing to say it, to hear it and to acknowledge it, this understanding is a precursor to our freedom. I don't share these truths, so that some portion of the population will be saddled by guilt or feel called out, but to have all members of our population join a movement for inclusion, the writing of inequities and justice that truly is for all.

Our laws and courts are central to the oppression and bondage of many and all of us regardless of identity, must continually work for and demand change. The current conversation about HB 40 and the creation of a reparations exploration, is an example of a strong way to start this work. What does it mean to repair and how do we get started?

So we face this reality. We're not going to get to racial equity and social justice until we square our country's origins and the failure of our legal system to live up to stated ideals with the realities of the injustice and inequity faced by too many people whose identities have been made marginalized. We are living in yet another moment where we must wrestle with stark inequities that continue to lead to suffering and indignity for too many people of too many identities. We're still in this global pandemic of COVID-19 and it continues to ravage our communities with the latest Omicron variant wreaking havoc in alarming numbers. Those hardest hit once again, have been Indigenous peoples, migrant farm workers, Black people, people living in poverty, people living outside, just takes any new crisis and our cracks show up that the legacy of our beginnings lives on and disadvantage to too many communities. We may have technically outlawed separate but equal, but equality remains elusive for many.

So we're in crisis, we're in multiple crises. Hundreds of thousands of people living outside, people living without access to food and healthcare, people living in fear of deportation, people living incarcerated inside cages under inhumane conditions and completely outside regard for what social science tells us will rehabilitate any person or heal any community harmed by crime. The legacy of exclusion and othering lives on and too many incidents of police violence against Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, and of those struggling with mental health issues, all without accountability. The verdict and the George Floyd case was a rare showing of accountability. At the same time, the situation of that murder was so brutal as to be undeniable.

So know this, all the forms of exclusion, whether it's racism or sexism, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, antisemitism, these things harm every single one of us, regardless of whether we have a targeted identity. Every single one of us bears the scars and the trauma generationally and presently of this exclusion. Those in favored "in" groups, spend whole lifetimes, trying to uphold and defend a system and structures that they deeply and innately know are wrong or else struggle from the guilt of complicity. And if you're the "out" group, then you're constantly struggling to overcome generations of hatred, fear, feelings of inferiority, plus the actual lack of wealth, lack of opportunity. This is at the level of our DNA, where as a human race in pain and trauma, and it's past time for healing.

So we talk about the work ahead and what it takes and what we have to do together as the people, because this is work for all of us. To overcome a harmful system rooted in history, that's in every structure that governs our lives. We have to also do the work at many levels. We have to do the at a personal, interpersonal, organizational community, societal, institutional levels.

So let's start with a personal commitment. As I said before, we're all swimming in these poisonous and toxic waters of exclusion and othering. Our educational systems, media, every system ingrains in us early on in life, who's good, who's bad? Who's more likely to be criminal?

What is safety? It's a huge personal act of resistance and liberation to confront our personal biases as honestly as we can, and to do the personal work, to overcome the ingrained racism and exclusion that we all live in and are subject to. And I can say this to you as a person living in the identity of a Black woman, I'm infected with ideas about my own racial identity and my own racial identity group, and I seek daily to overcome it as each person from their own identity has their own work to do on their biases, implicit and explicit and on their learning about other people. Interpersonally, we also have work to do because we live on this planet together, the late and beloved Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together."

I know that I have to understand and accept that you're coming from a different place in your identity and in your evolution as a human committed to a world of deep equity and belonging. I know you might not even be committed to that world, but my humanity is bound up in yours, and as Desmond Tutu said, "We're human together." Likewise, you have your work to understand and accept me, knowing that I'm on a journey and may not have yet come to full understanding. I can tell you I'm committed on this journey of equity and belonging, and I'm also a person who's gonna make mistakes every day despite my best intentions.

From an organizational perspective, we also need a commitment. As I said, part of my premise is we can't overcome deeply flawed structures and systems, unless we recognize the origins of these systems and agree we must dismantle and replace them with something better. To the extent we work in organizations, which we all do at some level, whether that's governmental, nonprofit, for profit, grassroots, community led, even our own family systems, whatever the structure, organizational structure we're operating in, we have to at the organizational level, do this work. Now, if you're a part of an organization that has not been doing deep race equity work as a foundational body of work, and then also looking at other forms of equity and belonging around disability, gender identity, national origin, Indigeneity, and so on, then what are you doing? The time is now, this is the fierce urgency of now.

And luckily there's so many resources to help on this journey. The City's Race and Social Justice Initiative being a powerful one, but there are others. We have to know and understand our past, so we can work toward a future of beloved community. We have to learn the tools of cultural humility and inclusion if we want to get along and build something beautiful together. And then what we learn, we have to put into practice daily. So we live in communities and it's high time to acknowledge the particular importance and urgency of listening to the communities, living in the margins. In a country in which our systems have intentionally de-

centered certain populations primarily based on race, but also on sexual orientation, gender identity, Indigenous status, immigration status, and so on. The most powerful act of repair, will be to place such populations in the center of our policymaking, decision-making and the leadership for building systems that are fair and just.

Right now, our systems are only fair and just for some, as I've already shared. So we've got to recenter the voices that up until now have been left out. And that means if you wanna work for justice, and you're not the member of a community made marginalized or vulnerable by centuries of harmful policies or currently harmful policies, yes, there's work for you to do, but it starts with listening and following the lead of others, who've been left out, support them as they asked to be supported, offer of your resources for their cause, even if this might take a lot of time, but that's how we get to where we need to be.

And as for the institutional work, the work of changing big systems is hard, long haul work. And there is indeed a current backlash against pro equity, anti-racism movement building work. The redoubled efforts to curtail voting rights of people, most notably people of color, immigrant communities, people without money, and the attempts to ensure education is fully whitewashed, in some states, as I said, actually outline things like, the teaching of the 1619 Project and critical race theory. An educator in Tennessee was fired for assigning readings by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

So, we're in a dangerous time. Supremacy wants to stay dominant and will do all in its power to maintain itself. Further, we cannot change overall structures if we're at each other's throats or experiencing self doubt, supremacy wins if we're in-fighting, because if we fight amongst ourselves or play oppression Olympics, the external conditions will not change. The wealthy will stay wealthy, our systems will still cater to those of privilege and favored identities, and we'll have missed our chance to make change. Difficult, though it may be to confront these things, this is a movement moment, and there's an opportunity to transform that which is harmful.

The author of "Emergent Strategy" adrienne maree brown says, and this is a long quote, but bear with me. "Movements tend to become the practice ground for what we are healing towards and co-creating. Movements are responsible for embodying what we are inviting our people into. We need the people within our movements, all socialized into and by unjust systems to be on liberator's paths, not already free, but practicing freedom every day, not already beyond harm, but accountable for doing our individual and internal work to end harm and engage in generative conflict, which includes actively working to gain awareness of the ways in which we can and have harmed each other, where we have significant political differences and where we can end cycles of harm and unprincipled struggles in ourselves in our communities."

Our aspirations are for all people to belong in all spaces. The reality is we don't have it yet. The work we're called upon to do is to make that real. So doing our internal, interpersonal, organizational work, and then the external work, fighting against growth of carceral systems, fighting against government overreach and discrimination, oppression, patriarchy, supremacy. And we have to do it because all those billionaires out there, not paying their taxes, they're not going to, we have to, this is for the people coming together to do for ourselves and for each other. And we should very specifically be thinking also about what are the investments in community that will prevent harms from happening in the first place. That's a cornerstone of transformative justice and it's a concept we should all be learning more about and applying to our work for equity and justice.

Additional cornerstones for us to think about, we must be community led and accountable, our work must be in solidarity with and accountability to those communities most harmed by structural racism and other forms of oppression, who know best what must change, and yet who are often furthest from power to effectuate change. As Bryan Stevenson said, "We must be in proximity with communities in need and follow their lead." I would also say we have to dismantle silos. We've learned about being in this pandemic, witnessing George Floyd's murder, and the dehumanizing and abusive power of the state has shown us the need to dismantle law justice systems silos that operate in ways that amplify harm and it's law justice system silos, healthcare silos, it's all of these things. So, all the social services, the courts, the grassroots organizations, none of these systems operate in a vacuum and we have to treat them all holistically. Even if it's hard to wrap our heads around it.

Let's finally say as a cornerstone that we have to avoid a trap of false dichotomies. We have to build solidarity and collective commitment to simultaneous engagement in pro-equity anti-racism change work with one eye on the long-term creation of durable, transformative change and the other eye on the day to day work of healing harm and suffering in the present moment. It's not either/or it is both/and, so it's not whether we do long haul work or short-term work, it's not whether it's better to do an impact work versus direct service work, it's that we have to do all the things all the time.

And luckily there are many of us who can do different pieces of the work and every bit of the work has value. So we wanna lift up people who are working for equity and justice, whatever role they're playing. And we ought to be able to count ourselves among those people in whatever way it is that each of us can contribute. So, I guess I've said many times that I'm taking on systems changes, large, meaningful and exhausting task. So we have to talk about survival and about hope. Now, just as the flight attendant says, put on your own oxygen mask before you help another, just as Audre Lorde said, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation." The truth is, we can't do the work, if we don't care for ourselves and care for each other.

I know that people who fight for equity and justice, whether they're taking on racism and policing or gentrification or climate change, I know the work takes a toll on the body and the spirit. And I also know that every person who does this work doesn't have the access and resources to just go to the gym and sweat it out or to make sure they're even getting a lot of fresh water and fruits and vegetables. In fact, that's a part of the very problem we have to solve. If you can't access fresh produce in your neighborhood, if you can't take a walk in the fresh air, because the neighborhood isn't safe, that's a problem. So that's a part of the work that all people should have access to what they need to live a healthy and safe life.

But that being said, self care can look like whatever is possible for you. If it is possible, get fresh air and exercise and eat as much healthy food as you can. But self-care is also the work of honestly facing your emotions and biases and making sure you tend to them. We have a lot of generational, bad habits of denying pain and trauma and responsibility. There's so much research to support mindfulness work and how the very act of taking time to breathe with intention, can help to calm our nervous systems and renew us for the next round of work ahead of us. Breathing is something we can all do, and in fact, we have to do it to stay alive. So as we renew ourselves, we are better able to help renew each other, to build those spaces and places where all can recreate and recreate and be safe while doing it.

By all means, make space for joy and playfulness, we literally cannot live without it. It is every bit as important as the work we do for equity and justice. Joy and radical rest are required for us to be resourced enough, to contribute to the world we aspire to. We need inspiration also, to stay in the journey.

And I sometimes talk with members of our staff at work and ask, what is it that made you decide to do this work, to be at an organization full-time confronting injustice, what motivates and inspires you and keeps you in the cause? It's remembering those things that brought us here, that can sometimes help us to stay the course. I know I have ancestors who overcame great strife and who fought for me to have the life that I have. Everyone has a personal or family story, and it's good to know those stories and draw strength from them.

It's also easy to think sometimes that, the times we're in are more difficult than any other time that ever was. And I cannot qualitatively say if that's true or not, certainly with the pandemic of COVID ever before us, definitely with the concern about the strength and durability of our very democracy in front of us, the issues of racism and other forms of exclusion that we see at heightened levels, it is easy to get overwhelmed, but there have been many movements of the past where people fought seemingly insurmountable odds and triumphed over difficulty.

So the last thing I wanna share with you, is one of those moments in history that gives me strength for this work whenever I think about it. Decades ago in Montgomery Alabama, as in many cities and towns across the Southern United States and around the country, buses were segregated and Black people had to stand or ride at the back of the bus. Just another way in which Blacks and other people of color were made to feel inferior again by operation of law. In December of 1955, shortly after the arrest of Rosa Parks for not rising to give her seat to a white man, the Montgomery Alabama bus boycott began in full force. Now under this boycott, Black Americans agreed they simply would not ride the bus. Approximately 40,000 Black bus riders, the majority of the city's bus riders boycotted the system.

Now doing this involved a huge commitment on the part of these brave people. They had to daily walk miles and miles from their homes to their places of work. And at a time when many worked in factories or as domestic workers in homes, far from where they actually lived, they had to walk rain or shine, adding hours to their already long workdays. Now there were systems of car sharing, but for the most part, people walked. Many of these people were also subjected to anger, violence and attack while on their daily walking commutes.

So the bus boycott, as you know, ended in victory when on June 5th of 1956, a Montgomery federal court ruled that any law requiring racially segregated seating on buses violated the 14th amendment of the Constitution. The city did appeal that to the United States Supreme Court, which upheld the lower court's ruling that the law violated the Constitution. So at last Montgomery's buses were integrated and on December 21st, 1956, the boycott ended. The bus boycott lasted for 381 days. 381 days. 381 days of walking everywhere people needed to go, for more than a year. How many pairs of shoes did people go through? How much did their feet hurt? How miserable was it in the rain and the windy weather? How did they sustain themselves and each other?

They certainly struggled on many days, but they kept their eyes on the prize, the prize of racial equality, and they won the prize, at least with regard to integrated buses. So I can do that too, remembering what is at stake, remembering what the price is of equity and justice. You can do that too, we can do it together. We can remember it as worth putting ourselves out for all of us to be free.

So, since this is Martin Luther King Unity Day, I will close with a final thought from Dr. King, two thoughts. One, "We must come to see that the end we seek, is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with his conscience." And also, "The time is always right to do what is right." Let us do what is right, let us unflinchingly remain in the work for every person to have fairness, justice, freedom. It is urgent and we will with work and solidarity achieve it. Thank you.