

WTP Seminar on the Civil Rights Movement
Birmingham
March 3, 2006
Opening Remarks

On behalf of the Center for Civic Education, I want to thank you all for giving of your time to be here in Birmingham this weekend. I would like to take this opportunity to introduce Jin Kim and Franklin White, program coordinators from the CCE. Also, a thanks to Jan Cowin and the rest of her staff from the Alabama Center for Law and Civic Education for all their hard work in helping prepare for this weekend. I do want to offer a special personal thanks to Wade Black, from the Alabama Center, who worked with Jin and me in developing the agenda for this weekend. And most importantly, I want to welcome you the educators from Birmingham and the professors from throughout this nation.

In my opinion, the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s is about love. It is about love conquering hate, ignorance, and injustice. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was called an extremist, which at first offended him. Then he realized, like Jesus, he was an extremist for love. After reading *Parting the Waters*, I was reminded how much has changed in the last 40 to 50 years. Then again, when I look around my neighborhood and watch the evening news, I am also reminded how we are not there yet! There still exist qualitative and quantitative differences between various

ethnic groups and races, especially when one looks at educational attainment, poverty levels, and economic opportunities.

One of the great aspects of tonight and this weekend is that in this room there are true American heroes. People who were personally involved in the Civil Rights Movement and continue to struggle for what is “right.” We are here this weekend to learn more about their personal history, the history of the movement, and their and the movement’s place in American history, so that we can teach subsequent generations the truth. We are here this weekend to honor those who were involved in the struggle, those who suffered discrimination and those who gave their lives for “the cause.” We are here for love. Jesus said, “Above all, love each other deeply.” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. knew this, preached this, and combined it with nonviolent action.

I am reminded of the words sung by Ms. Dionne Warwick, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No not just for some, but for everyone.” A few years later John Lennon told us “All you need is love, love is all you need” I think it is worth remembering how powerful love really is. The question I would like to ask is: if “love is the answer,” then why have we as a world, a nation, as a people, and as individuals not attained what we know in our hearts, minds, and souls to be right? It is not because Jesus, Dr. King, Ms. Warwick, or John Lennon got it wrong. I believe it is because many of us have forgotten, misinterpreted, and/or ignored their

words. It is about time we again think about and follow what Dr. King, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, Ms. Dorothy Cotton and other important civil rights leaders and the foot soldiers believed and lived. As simple as it sounds, Love is the answer. I think James Lawson described it best when he said, “Love is the force by which God binds man to Himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.”

I am looking forward to this weekend with you because I believe you are about love. You love your country, you love teaching, and you love your students. I believe we will leave Birmingham on Monday different people, more knowledgeable, more hopeful, and more loving. I don't think we will be able to walk away from this city without wanting to make this nation a better place for all people. The Civil Rights Movement of the 50's and 60's was about enlarging the “We” in We the People. It was and still is about ensuring that government and citizens live up to the ideas and promises contained in the Declaration of Independence, the U. S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. It is about ensuring that the word “All” in “All men are created equal” really means all of us. The personal and professional relationships that you develop this weekend have the potential to create great curriculum ideas and true friendships. Most of all, the

relationships have the potential to create more than mere tolerance of diversity, they can help create a better understanding and acceptance of people living throughout this great nation of ours and the world and to create what is so badly needed, love. Some may think that bringing professors and educators together from different states, different working environments, different cultural backgrounds and asking them to work together for a common goal unmanageable or even extreme, but in the words of Dr. King, “Perhaps the South, the nation, and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.” Let us all take pride in being creative extremists. Thank you for listening and have a great weekend!