By Dr. E. J. Josey,
Professor Emeritus,
School of Information Sciences,
University of Pittsburgh
& Past President,
American Library Association (ALA)

ALA Celebration of the Dr. King Holiday
Marriott River Center Hotel
San Antonio, Texas
January 17, 2000

Introduction

I am delighted to have this opportunity to join you on this very important occasion. When Satia Marshall Orange telephoned and invited me to be the speaker for this occasion, I had just returned home from the hospital after having had a fourth knee replacement. The only reason that she could talk me into it was the goal of the program to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

All of us owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Marva L. DeLoach. When Marva was president of the ALA Black Caucus she became concerned because we were meeting at Midwinter and there was nothing done to celebrate the life and accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She crafted a resolution and the Black Caucus endorsed it. At that time she was a member of the ALA Council. She took the resolution to Council and the Council passed the resolution--I believe--unanimously. I don't know where Marva is sitting at this particular time. Marva will you stand and let us all salute you please? Thank you.

Segregation: The American Apartheid

I am very pleased that we are celebrating equity of access. It is one of the key five action areas of the American Library Association.

What kind of world did Martin Luther King, Jr. grow up in? Let us take a few moments and look back in time. When the 20th century opened in 1900, African Americans in our country had been American citizens for just 34 years. The emancipation of Blacks had led to a racist backlash in many areas of the nation. Jim Crow, the Black Codes, and other devious forces led to widespread lynchings, social isolation, complete segregation, and political and economic disfranchisement of the black community.

My friends, legalized racism and segregation were the order of the day in the south as well as in the north. African American men, especially, were being charged and tried for various crimes ranging from murder to rape, which they had not committed. Many of these men landed behind bars without the benefit of any legal representation.

Although Brown vs. the Board of Education Supreme Court Decision in 1954 outlawed segregation, for all intents and purposes, however, segregation continued. In 1957 segregationists supported the active opposition of Governor Orval Faubus to the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. It was not until President Eisenhower sent federal troops in response to the governor's defiance of a court order, did African American children gain admission to the school. The weeks and months of intimidation and harassment of the children on the part of the white students and their parents suggested how bitter and harsh their resistance could be.

The resistance was not only in the south, but also in other areas of the country as well. In states such as Michigan and Boston, Black people had problems attempting to integrate schools. There were no public accommodations for African Americans. On streetcars and buses there were signs that directed the colored passengers to sit in the rear. Public buildings, banks, municipal buildings, and theatres were also segregated. Public schools were endured with a legally dual school system for African Americans and whites even after the Brown vs. the Board of Education decision. Hotels excluded African Americans from rooms and food services. Department stores were restricted to whites only; blacks were not allowed to try on clothes in those stores. This was the real American apartheid.

African Americans became increasingly impatient with the intransigence of the opponents of civil rights. They became bolder and more aggressive and began to press for their rights with relentless vigor. Their action in boycotting the Montgomery buses set an example that was followed in other southern communities.

Dr King had seen and known first-hand the tyranny of a racists society. In his book Stride Towards Freedom, he wrote about his childhood memories of southern racism. This is what he wrote:

I remembered a trip to a downtown shoe store with father when I was still small. We had sat down in the first empty seats at the front of the store. A young white clerk came up and murmured politely, "I'll be happy to wait on you if you will just move to those seats in the rear." My father answered, "There is nothing wrong with these seats. We are quite comfortable here." "Sorry," said the clerk, "but you will have to move."

"We will either buy shoes sitting here," my father retorted, "or we won't buy shoes at all." Where upon he took me by the hand and walked out of the store. This was the first time I had ever seen my father so angry. I still remember walking down the street beside him as he muttered, "I don't care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it."

It is obvious my colleagues, that Dr. King's commitment to equity of access and his commitment to human liberation stem from his membership in the community of the oppressed African American community. Early in his life, as a child he had experienced the denial of equity of access.

After Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger, Dr. King was asked to serve as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, a collective effort by several community groups to organize a boycott of Montgomery's buses. Where was the NAACP? Alabama had outlawed the NAACP. King's

impassioned speeches against segregation and for equal rights mobilized support for the boycott and kept morale high.

Although Dr. King was harassed and thrown in jail, though his home was bombed, and though it took 381 days to bring the boycott to a successful conclusion, Dr. King was persistent and kept the faith and helped others to do the same. Finally, in April 1956 the United States Supreme Court handed down its historic ruling that Alabama's bus segregation laws were unconstitutional and must be abandoned!

It is ironic ladies and gentleman that a man who accomplished so much is best known as a dreamer. Martin Luther King was a doer, a builder, and a hero. He not only inspired this nation--he impelled it toward true democracy and equity of access to all of our institutions, including our libraries.

The New Civil Rights Revolution

On February 1, 1960, six years after the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown vs. Education desegregation decision, which outlawed segregation, four students from the historically black institution of Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro, North Carolina, entered a Woolworth store. They made several purchases, and then sat down at the lunch counter and ordered coffee. They were refused service because they were Black. But these young people continued to sit at the counter until the store closed. This was the beginning of the sit-in movement, which was a new civil rights revolution that spread rapidly throughout the south and to numerous places in the north.

In the spring and summer of 1960, young people both white and black, participated in similar peaceful forms of protest against segregation and discrimination. They sat in white libraries, for libraries were segregated at that time. They waded in at white beaches--although the public facilities were segregated. And they slept in the lobbies of white hotels. Many of these young people were arrested for trespassing, disorderly conduct, and for disobeying police officers.

When African American students were criticized for sitting-in, they placed full-page advertisements in several newspapers including the Atlanta Constitution, in which they said, "We do not intend to wait placidly for those rights which are already legal and morally ours to be meted to us one at a time." Soon many lunch counters across the south began to serve Blacks and other facilities including libraries where open.

Impact of King's Efforts on Equity of Access

I have been asked to comment on the impact of Dr. King's effort on equity of access issues in librarianship. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. transformed the world's view of justice, including equity to access. We have to view Dr. King's global point of view of equity of access. He believed that there should be equity of access in every area of American society and in every facet of American life, and of course, libraries were part of the issues that he felt should be addressed.

In 1962, Dr. King journeyed to Savannah, Georgia to speak at a mass rally, which the Savannah Branch of the NAACP sponsored every Sunday afternoon. I was a member of the Executive Board of the Savannah Branch of the NAACP. I along with the other board members had been invited to the home of the Rev. Dr. Curtis Jackson to have dinner with Dr. King. Rev. Jackson had been a Moorhouse classmate of Dr. King. I was seated next to Dr. King at this particular dinner, and was introduced as the director of the library at Savannah State College.

Dr. King had heard about the efforts of the Savannah State students with regards to the sit-in movements. He congratulated me, because I had the dubious distinction of being the only faculty member at the college to publicly support the student sit-in movement. I don't think that I was braver than my colleagues on the faculty were. It may have been that I felt it was my duty, because I was the Georgia State youth advisor for the Georgia State conference of NAACP branches. But whatever it was, I supported the student's sit-in movement in Savannah.

Dr. King asked the question: "When are the students in Savannah planning to go to the libraries?"* I was very pleased that at the students last meeting, they had talked about sit-ins at the public libraries, and I reported this to him. He made a comment that I will never forget. He said, "We want quality schools. We want desegregated schools. But we need our libraries open to all so that the students can prepare themselves for the 21st century." This was back in 1962, and he was a visionary thinking about the year 2000. Yes Dr. King did have an impact on equity of access. Dr. King stood tall for the needs of the disadvantaged and was a powerful advocate of fairness, equality, and equity for all people in our country.

*Our students in Savannah did not have to conduct a sit-in in the Savannah Public Library, because a new mayor was elected to office in Savannah, and he appointed two African Americans (Dr. E. J. Josey and Attorney Eugene Gadsden) to the library board, and the institution was finally integrated.

Dr. King's larger view of equity of access is reflected in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech that he gave in Oslo Norway on December 10, 1964. At the age of 35, Dr. King was the youngest person to receive the Nobel Prize for peace. This is an excerpt from that speech.

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day, mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and blood shed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land. And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.

Today I come to Oslo as a trustee, inspired and with renewed dedication to humanity. I accept this prize on behalf of all men and women who love peace and brotherhood. I say I come as a trustee, for in the depths of my heart, I am aware that this prize is much more than an honor to me personally.

Ladies and gentlemen, when we think about the larger issue of access--from the civil rights movement, including King's emphasis on the poor and the impact of class on individuals' lives--

we recognize the fact that King's last policy program (a Poor Peoples March), was inevitable. When King called for a 'Poor Peoples March,' it was not to be a Black poor people's march. It was to be a rainbow of colors of all races, and there were many races in our country that were poor at that time--just as we have today.

Dr. King called the Poor Peoples March to dramatize the plight of the disadvantaged. He realized that "there are millions of poor people in this country who have very little or even nothing to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with the freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life."

Dr. King had planned to bring "the poor citizens from ten different urban and rural areas together to initiate and lead a sustainable, massive, direct action movement" in Washington, DC, the nation's capital. They were to stay in Washington until the legislative and executive branches took serious and adequate actions on jobs and incomes. Dr. King wanted the "bad check" left over and uncashed from a 1963 march on Washington cashed. He'd hoped that the public would join in supporting a demand for the "right to jobs or income--jobs, income, the demolition of slums, and the rebuilding of the people who lived there with new communities in their places. In fact, he was asking for a new economic deal for all poor people, regardless of color or gender."

As we celebrate equity of access, we must remember, as we leave this place, that Dr. King had a great impact--not only on equity of access issues in librarianship, but in all of our scholarly fields. Dr. King transformed the world's view on justice, including equity of access. Here, it seems to me, that Dr. King's social ethics is a poignant reminder to the nation and to world communities, that (in his words) "justice too long delayed is justice denied." In a society where people of color are penalized and oppressed because of their ethnicity, the norm of justice must be the norm of the social order.

Finally, I wish to express my deepest thanks to OLOS, all of the caucuses of color, and to the three Round Tables of ALA for sponsoring this program.