

Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunrise Celebration

Midwinter 2017, Atlanta, GA

Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunrise Celebration: Call to Action

By Patricia M.Y. (Patty) Wong

Dr. King's words and Dr. Berry's challenge to us bring us hope and a charge.

This nation, our nation, faces some of the most unexpected and difficult times in our history.

Our world, as we know it, has changed – and it might seem dramatically over night, but the change is not so sudden. The growing intolerance, the words of hate and violence that instills dread and fear, we see and experience this every day. But we cannot allow this behavior to continue. This seeming permission to speak or say anything without regard to fact or feeling or impact cannot be accepted as the new normal.

We must remain vigilant in our Work to focus on our strengths and assets to build a community based on equity, inclusion and diversity. The trauma of the current situation WILL have long-term negative effects on our psyches, our development and our humanness and that of our immediate communities.

In the 1970s as a child I was visiting my aunt and uncle in Fontana, CA. They lived near the railroad tracks and in their backyard was a clearing adjacent to those tracks. One summer afternoon I came across a cross burning in that clearing, surrounded by dozens of onlookers, some of whom were supposedly my family's friends and neighbors. I watched with wonder, with the same kind of childlike discernment of Scout Finch and asked them why? Why share such a demonstration of hatred and disrespect?

More than a decade later, as a young woman I found a second cross burning in my own front yard in San Francisco. I was sharing a home with a group of young gay men who were labeled and targeted and misunderstood by their own neighbors – a community comprised of low-income men and women of color.

And now we see many metaphorical burning crosses, disseminated across our communities through every source of media. Technology has brought us some of the most versatile ways of sharing information, but it has also brought the immediacy of response, based on thoughtless provocation and hostility. We find ourselves in continual shock that so much of what we have built together, through tears and blood and legislation, seems to be disappearing before our very eyes.

We have to change the tide and only together will our Work have impact. Those burning crosses I have experienced have only made me stronger.

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- So, I ask you today to do three things. Focus on the Work, Find Courage and Have Faith.

Focus on the Work, create a plan, and bring someone with you. This work cannot be done alone. Take someone's hand today, someone different from yourself, open the communication and engage in a productive dialogue to further your mutual understanding. Extend yourself to others. Bring that Work wherever you travel, with the children and young people you encounter, with your colleagues and coworkers, with the community in service at your libraries. Don't let those burning crosses deter you from the Work.

Find Courage to create community wherever and whenever you can. That means to build where you feel the wall coming down, to take three steps forward when you are pushed back two, to find your voice to call things out when you see injustice or intolerance or fear, to offer programs and services that further engagement and that create safety for people to call for change. Don't be a bystander in your own neighborhood. Library work is community work. Your community needs you. Find ways to change policies and procedures to increase access, bring together a coalition to reduce homelessness, to promote youth development, to feed both the body and the mind, to engage volunteers to benefit those beyond the library. Be that agent of change. Take a risk.

Have Faith to know that there is good in this world. I know you are tired. I know you are discouraged. We know that we can reach that goal of unity and understanding and peace. We have experienced glimpses of it before – we must move forward to realize that goal again. Fundamentally we rise together with the hundreds of colleagues in this room and tens of thousands across this country and in the world. I call on you in the words of Maya Angelou to remember that in the face of adversity, in the midst of those burning crosses,

“And still I rise.”

ABOUT MLK Sunrise Celebrations

[MLK Sunrise Celebrations](#) at the American Library Association's Midwinter Meetings are sponsored by ALA's [Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services](#), the [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Task Force](#) of the ALA [Social Responsibilities Round Table](#), and the [Black Caucus of the ALA](#).