

Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, we reflect on the lessons of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during a conversation with civil rights leader James Varner.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you for joining us for Tim Talk. I'm Tim Dentry, President and CEO of Northern Light Health. This week, we celebrate the life and lessons of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As we continue our journey of racial, social, and medical justice, it's appropriate for us to reflect on the life of Dr. King. Joining me to offer his valuable insights is a longtime civil rights leader and activist from right here in Maine, Mr. James Varner. Thank you for joining me here today, Mr. Varner.

James Varner:

I want to thank you for having me at this very important time in our history, in celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday and some of the lessons that he has shared with us.

Tim Dentry:

Absolutely. So thankful that you're here. You have a distinguished resume in promoting human rights, racial justice, and medical justice. You served on the Maine Human Rights Commission, co-founded the Bangor, Maine chapter of the NAACP, are the president of the Maine Human Rights Coalition, served on the Eastern Maine Health System Board of Directors, and have been working with Northern Light Health since 1994.

Tim Dentry:

I understand you also attended the 1963 march in Washington, DC, where Dr. King delivered his I Have a Dream speech. What about that particular message? My goodness, 1963. There you are in that crowd, and there's Dr. King, there's all the people, and the feeling of that crowd. So what about that message? First of all, what feeling has stayed with you since then? And second- [crosstalk 00:01:54].

James Varner:

Okay, you know-

Tim Dentry:

Yeah, go ahead.

James Varner:

Tim, before I answer that, I want to take us to a special place. I want you to close your eyes, and the listening audience, I want you to do the same thing. Close your eyes and take your right hand and grab your left hand and pretend that it's my hand. And I'm a man of color. Or better still, Dr. Martin Luther King's hand. Now, can you feel his color? Can you answer me? Can you feel the color of Dr. King?

Tim Dentry:

Absolutely not.

James Varner:

You cannot. Keep feeling that hand. Does that hand feel like your hand? Does it? Answer me.

Tim Dentry:

Does that hand that's grabbing my left hand? Does it feel like my own hand?

James Varner:

Yeah, does it feel like the hand of a loved one?

Tim Dentry:

Yes.

James Varner:

Okay. You are holding the hand of a human being. We are defined as mammals. A further classification is homo sapiens, and that, my friends ... You out there in the listening audience, and you, too, Tim, means that we are human beings. And Dr. King was a human being, and his life matters. And that's what the Black Lives Matter movement is all about, and he was about that.

James Varner:

And his speech on that day in 1963 is one of the most powerful speeches, they say, that was ever given. And he talked about the crime that this nation has committed, the crime of slavery. More than 300 years. And he came to collect that debt, and he talked about, in that speech, the pain and suffering that Black people are undergoing. And he talked about, "We come here to Washington, DC on this day to collect an unpaid debt of 300 years of slavery. And we are asking for fair treatment. We should not be denied the opportunity to live where we want to live, in different communities. We are suffering in so many ways."

James Varner:

And he laid out a path for us to be able to live together and treat each other the way you want to be treated, and the government had the responsibility to see that Black people have the right to vote, and we are denied that opportunity. That was a very powerful and moving speech, and it has laid out a roadmap for us to follow, and it was all about the Black Lives Movement, which we have today.

Tim Dentry:

I was just speaking with another gentleman on one of these podcasts, and this is a gentleman who did so much in his life to help others. He was a physician, a surgeon, and did so much to help with access and with understanding of a clinical condition: how we can all work together to make that a better state. And there were so many parts of that discussion that I really enjoyed, but one is: He boiled it all down to love.

James Varner:

Hey, Amen, brother.

Tim Dentry:

It's all about love. So first of all, you just said how you resonate with that. I heard you say that yeah, it all boils down in you, as well, that it's all about love. When you think of that moment in time, Dr. King, that was part of his message. A big part of his message was love. And then all the things that everyone is trying to have a more peaceful life right now, in this moment in time. So I don't know. Connect those dots for me. What does that make you think of?

James Varner:

Well, basically, we need to think about white privilege. That's really a major problem, and one of the reasons that we are having so much a mistreatment of African-Americans as human beings. I am thinking about Dr. Martin Luther King, and I want to share something with you that sort of addresses that question, and that I came up with. It's a pledge to undo racism and discrimination in America, and I hope that you can be a part of using this pledge.

James Varner:

And it says, "I pledge first to take a look at my own racist attitudes, behaviors, and thinking, which I may have unconsciously acquired over my lifetime, from the media, home, workplace, and educational system."

James Varner:

"Two, I pledge to share, whenever possible, the 1995 findings of the genetic discovery, through the scientific study of DNA, which proved that all beings originate from the same strain of life, thus making us all related as brothers and sisters who share a common heritage."

James Varner:

"Three, I pledge to treat all human beings, regardless of their origin, as I want to be treated, and as I want my own family and loved ones treated."

James Varner:

"I pledge to stress the beauty and diversity of having a respect for all human beings, regardless of where their homes might be, in school, at my workplace, and socially."

James Varner:

"Five, I pledge, to the best of my ability, to work daily to combat racism where I see it."

James Varner:

"Six, I pledge to help form coalitions, whenever possible, with religious, educational, service, and social organizations, to discuss and work toward the elimination of all traces of personal and institutional racism, discrimination toward others who seem different from myself, with regard to race, color, sex, creed, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, or human or male sexual preferences."

James Varner:

"I pledge, as I am sojourning, to treat the earth and all living creatures with respect and care."

James Varner:

And I'm sure that this is something that Dr. King would endorse and something that we can make a part of our lives. And we have a responsibility to endorse fair treatment of African-Americans, just like any other human being. And this thing of birth. Think about it for a moment: We don't have any control over who we are born to be. You could have been born to be me, and I could have been born to be you. Therefore, we deserve to have, I think, all the same treatment. And Dr. King, oh, thank goodness for him. I just feel so sad when I think about his life and what a beautiful individual he was and the fact that he was assassinated because of what he was doing to bring about love.

James Varner:

So let us pick up his cross. Let us continue his work, and let us understand this Black Lives Matter Movement and the reason why it exists. It is not saying that Black people are any better than any other people. It is saying we are the same, as human beings, and we deserve to have the same treatment as other human beings, regardless of the color of their skin. And it is the opposite of what white privilege is doing, which says that you, as a person being white, you deserve some special treatment.

James Varner:

If you are driving in an automobile, you're not stopped because of the color of the skin, but I am stopped because of the color of skin. We just need to be inspired by Dr. King's life and his dream for this country. His dream for this country, where in that speech, he says, "One day, we will sit down at the table of justice, and little Black boys and Black girls and white boys and white girls, will sit down at the table of justice and love one another, to realize that we're all the same and we all should have the right and the privilege that every human being is entitled to, under the Constitution of the United States of America."

James Varner:

So I ask you out there to stop and think about Dr. Martin Luther King's life and his dream for America. I want you to think about the responsibility that you have as a human being, to give life to that dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And really am thankful of this opportunity to be here and to share some thoughts to do those things. So I'm thankful to be here sitting and talking with you, Tim.

Tim Dentry:

Terrific. I really appreciate that, Mr. Varner, and you know what? You handed me a copy, when we met last week, of that pledge, and I really studied that. And as I'm listening to you, I was reflecting on that even more. And there are a couple of things, if I could share with you, things that really struck home with me, drove home with me.

Tim Dentry:

One is I want to take a look at my own attitudes, behavior, and thinking, because it's the micro kinds of things, sometimes, that we all need to make ourselves more aware of. I think there are so many great, well-meaning people in our society, definitely in our organization, and those that I love, and those that I don't know as well, but I'm trying to get to know, as the new CEO of Northern Light Health. But I've just found that the more I take a hard look at my own attitudes and behaviors and taking it down at the micro level. And I love Maya Angelou's famous quote: "It's not what you do that stays with people, not how you act that makes people. It's how you make them feel."

Tim Dentry:

And there are a lot of micro ways in which you can make people feel not so great. And so be really tuned into that, and really reinforce that, because our organization, Northern Light Health here in Maine, we're in the caring business. That's what we do: We provide care. And it's got to be holistic, the whole person, and so you got to be able to make sure that you're connecting in a ways that does relate, as brothers and sisters with a common heritage. That's part of your pledge: Treat people as you want to be treated.

James Varner:

Amen to that, brother.

Tim Dentry:

I mean, whose moms and dads didn't teach all of us, when we were little kids? That was the holy rule, right? Treat others as you expect to be treated.

Tim Dentry:

I want to spend a second, too, on the beauty of diversity, because I think I might have mentioned with you that in more than a decade before I came here to Northern Light Health, about four years ago, I was with two organizations. They were international organizations. They're based here in the US, but I spent two years in Ethiopia, helping to rebuild their hospital infrastructure. And then I spent about nine years doing other international things with Johns Hopkins International, and I lived in the Arab world for six years. So I had that experience for a decade before I came back to America, here to Maine, to be in African culture and be in Arabic culture.

Tim Dentry:

And the joy of learning about other people's cultures and thoughts and that kind of thing. And also, frankly, to be a minority in both of those situations, but embraced as if I was some VIP, which I didn't consider myself to be whatsoever, but they treated me that way. I can remember being invited into homes, for example, in Ethiopia, and this would be a one or two-room kind of thing, with a lot of people that lived there.

Tim Dentry:

And I remember being invited to the dinner, and we'd be talking, having fun. And they would put a plate of food in front of me, and then they'd all sit back. And I was like, "Well, are we all eating together?" Well, no, I was their deeply-respected, invited guest, and the guest has to eat first, and then they eat. And to this minute, I'm blown away, recalling that, because that's love. That's deep respect. Here, I'm the minority, and they're saying, "Here's our food, and we're not going to eat until you're satisfied."

Tim Dentry:

So you know what? And so the beauty of diversity is those are the exact words in your pledge, and that really just drives home with me very, very deeply and very personally.

James Varner:

It's such a good, good, good feeling to be able to love another human being. I know I feel good when I treat someone in a loving way. It warms my heart when I do that. And take the lead from Dr. Martin

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Luther King's life. He would've been 93 years old if he was living today. And give the life to his work and give continued life to him, even though he's died. You can do it. Give a little love, every chance you get.

Tim Dentry:

Mr. Varner, that's a beautiful note to end this podcast on. I really appreciate that. So thank you for listening to this episode of Tim Talk. Mr. Varner, thank you for joining me here to have this meaningful discussion.

James Varner:

Thank you for having me, and I look forward to working with Northern Light Health. It's a pleasure.

Tim Dentry:

And that will wrap up this episode of Tim Talk. Thank you again, Mr. Varner. And thank you to you, our podcast listeners, too. Until next time, I'm Tim Dentry, encouraging you to listen and act to promote our culture of caring, diversity, and inclusion. Thank you.

Announcer:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Tim Talk. If you enjoyed this podcast and would like to hear more, you can find additional podcasts at northernlighthealth.org/podcast. We welcome you to join us next month, when we will have a series of guests to discuss Black History Month.