

The Traveler's Soliloquy

By Dan Le

"In you... I see me" was the final line of my poem, *"The Traveler's Soliloquy."* As I wrote the poem, an *"I Have a Dream"* poster on the wall served as my primary inspiration. Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s eloquent speech spoke about the values of finding unity between differences. In a world of preconceived notions, judgements, and cultural differences, the potential for unity becomes vaguer and less clear. From time to time, however, there comes a moment in our lives when we realize that this potential exists within all of us. My particular moment occurred on April 15, 2012. On this day, I recited *"The Traveler's Soliloquy"* as an ending performance for International Night, an annual event from the International Student Association (ISA) that showcases performances from all over the world. During this particular night, the performances were weaved into a story about a traveler who ventured to different countries. He saw all these diverse places and people; yet, within each person, he also saw a little bit of himself. After his travels, he learned that no matter how different we might be, we are all connected as citizens of humanity. Little did I know at that time, the process of planning for this event and telling the traveler's story would parallel Dr. King's call for unity in his *"I Have a Dream"* speech. Looking back, I now realize that there are three steps in activating the human potential for unity: (1) Having the courage to face differences, (2) uniting these differences in an innovative manner, and ultimately, (3) sharing these stories with others.

The first step is to muster enough courage to face and embrace differences. I applied for an internship to serve the most diverse student organization on campus: the International Student Association (ISA). With more than 90 countries represented, the students from ISA had different cultural backgrounds, values, and ways of thinking. As a shy domestic student, I was both overwhelmed and excited to experience this diversity. At the internship orientation, I met a fellow intern from South Korea. With a rowdy, sociable, and confident persona, he was very different from me. We shared the same office hours, which gave us an opportunity to get to know each other a little better. Through these conversations, I found even *more* differences between us: he was artistic, I was scientific; he was sensitive, I was rational; he was straightforward, I was tactful. Nevertheless, we respected our diverse ways of thinking and were willing to learn from each other. The strength of our friendship derived from the realization that

our differences should not *clash*, but *complement* each other.

Dr. King famously stated, “*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*” These words were quite relevant to my attitude at the beginning of that friendship. I once judged the fellow intern for how different he was from me, but after having the courage to conduct human to human conversations with him, I began to see the content of his character - a character that showed depth and genuine empathy. Hatred often breeds from the fear of differences. This fear produces an “*us*” and “*them*” dichotomy, creates the frightening image of the “*other*,” and ultimately leads to mistrust. Modern history has included a fair share of hatred stories, including the Holocaust during World War II and issues of racial segregation in the Civil Rights Movement. In order to overcome hatred, we must have the *courage*, instead of the *fear*, to face cultural differences and embrace them.

An even more challenging task than facing differences is unifying them. This second step is the most powerful, but strenuous part of moving forward in unity. Innovation is the key ingredient. As the fellow intern and I brainstormed ideas for International Night, where an audience of about 700 people was expected to attend, we thought of a powerful ending piece that could combine our differences in an innovative way. Since he was a musician, and I was a writer, we decided that I should recite “*The Traveler’s Soliloquy*” poem while he played the guitar rendition of Ben E. King’s “*Stand by Me*” in the background. After reciting the poem, various members of ISA would walk on stage one by one, with different signs that read, “*In You, I See... Humanity,*” “*In You, I See... Compassion,*” “*In You, I See... Hope,*” “*In You, I See... Unity,*” and finally, the ending sign would read, “*In You... I See Me.*”

Dr. King wrote, “*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down at the table of brotherhood.*” This ending performance demonstrated that no matter where we came from, no matter how rich or poor, no matter how powerful or weak we might be, we were all citizens of humanity. At the beginning of my involvement in ISA, I thought that uniting such a diverse group of students was a nearly impossible task. However, I was astonished at how a group of international and domestic students could come together to make the seemingly impossible, *possible*. That image still resonates in my memory: A group of students, who came from all parts of the world, stood together on a single stage and held signs that spoke of compassion and the love for humanity.

Indeed, Dr. King's dream that people from all walks could sit together at the table of brotherhood was possible.

As I embarked on the final step, I realized that the hardest steps were actually over. The last step was simply to share our stories with others. After International Night, the fellow intern and I decided to run for the ISA co-director elections. We wanted to unite our differences as partners, and together, lead the most diverse student organization on campus. When we ran our campaign, we always shared the story of "*The Traveler's Soliloquy*," where finding unity in diversity was possible. Accordingly, we wanted to offer a sense of hope for others. Hope echoes in Dr. King's words, "*With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.*" Indeed, the journey towards facing differences and unifying them are difficult, even tumultuous, but the rewards of freedom are greater in the end. As a matter of fact, there were many individuals who died before they ever saw their dreams become a reality. Even so, the most powerful factor was that regardless, they kept fighting for a dream. For instance, medieval cathedral architects died before they saw their finished masterpieces, many women suffrage advocates died before they saw the day that women achieved the right to vote; and of course, Dr. King and many other civil rights activists died before they saw major achievements in racial equality, including the election of President Barack Obama, the first African American elected president of the United States. These individuals died fighting for a dream. Although on a much smaller scale, I was fortunate enough to be alive and see my own little dream become a reality. With such a fortunate circumstance, I knew that I had the responsibility to share my story.

As mentioned before, there are moments in our lives that make us realize how the potential to see unity in diversity actually exists within all of us. I was blessed to see such a moment occur during my time at the University of Oregon. To conclude, I have provided a fragment of this moment with the poem, "*The Traveler's Soliloquy*":

*I have traveled towards the east sun
The Great Wall embraced the earth
Protecting ancient
History
Mastery*

*What a splendid mystery
A little boy appeared
Black hair, almond eyes, golden skin
In him, I saw me*

*I have traveled towards the old world
The Eiffel Tower pierced the blue sky
Giving the city
Brightness
Liveliness
Such timeless chicness
A teenage girl appeared
Blonde hair, blue eyes, fair skin
In her, I saw me*

*I have traveled towards the Latin hemisphere
The rhythm of dance steps resonated this terrain
Creating a fiery
Passion
Fusion
Quite a romantic attraction
A young couple appeared
Brown hair, coffee-tinted eyes, bronze skin
In him and her, I saw me*

*I have traveled towards the motherland
The baking sun rose over the Savanna Desert
Delivering a spiritual
Essence
Presence
Always an unspoken salience
A loving family appeared
Thick hair, dark eyes, black skin
In them, I saw me*

I now travel towards humanity

You appear

In you, I see me

Same two eyes

Same two hands

Same two feet

Same smile

In you... I see me