



Words Matter
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George School's 2020 MLK Day program focused on the theme, "Words Matter." "Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is understood as a remarkable orator, and his words still spark something in people," wrote Marcus Ingram, Director of Inclusion at George School, via email. "[T]he first session of the MLK Day program was designed to engage the degree to which words matter in contemporary society and how, particularly when the pace of many contexts is quick and many are interested in the headline, the blurb, the snapshot, the tweet or the sound byte." As the community spent the morning in Walton auditorium, a student panel described why words (in particular, the use of the n-word) mattered to them. Other students then stood up in the town hall to communicate their own experiences of why words matter. The theme was clear. "Words still matter," Marcus wrote, "and it's important for humans and citizens and educators and students and more to wrestle with why and how."

Twenty-four hours later, I walked into Walton, once again, but this time buried deep in my phone.

As part of its series of activities celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr., George School welcomed Dr. Marc Lamont Hill of Temple University to speak for assembly, and I was interested to see what he had to say. Googling up a storm, I discovered several articles from different sources detailing a controversy in December 2018 surrounding the assembly speaker. They all reported that Hill, a respected activist and CNN correspondent, had been fired by CNN as a result of remarks made in a speech to the United Nations. He spoke to the UN about issues surrounding human rights of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He ended his speech calling to free Palestine, using the phrase: "From the river to the sea."

For Clay Perez Garcia, a Spanish teacher at George School, Hill's words stung deeply. Clay is Jewish, and he has several members of his family and friends who live in Israel. For him, the phrase "hits home" as a reminder of the people he's lost from attacks in Israel. To most members of George School, this looks like an insignificant phrase. The phrase was claimed in the 1960's by the Palestinian Liberation

Organization (PLO) and has been used as a call for the Palestinian cause since. More recently, the words have been co-opted by the terrorist organization Hamas to call for the end of the State of Israel and the extermination of all Jews. Hence, for many Jews, the use of this phrase was a serious matter. Complicating the matter, Hill previously was criticized for his association with Nation of Islam leader Louis Farakhan, who has referred to Jews as “satanic.”

After being fired from CNN, Dr. Hill issued a series of public apologies, including an editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He took full responsibility for his words with the reassurance that he does not advocate for the killing of Jews. This is where the troublesome juxtaposition comes about: words matter, but Dr. Hill’s previous words seemed to not matter. Clay mentioned he wanted to see Dr. Hill’s speech at George School, but the “phrase that he used just kept coming back.”

When Clay initially heard Dr. Marc Lamont Hill was coming for assembly that Friday, he wasn’t bothered. Clay had already known about Dr. Hill’s comments, as they were common knowledge in his community. In fact, he saw Dr. Hill speak at the People of Color Conference (PoCC) soon after the December controversy. It wasn’t until Monday, January 20th, the day George School celebrated Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., that Clay started to feel emotions he hadn’t felt in a while. Evidently, Dr. Hill’s assembly, just a day after the program with the central theme “words matter,” has caused some hurt for Jewish members of the community, myself included. I was not only upset by the theme’s apparent irrelevance, but by the lack of acknowledgment for the theme’s irrelevance in Dr. Hill’s past. He had not taken enough consideration into the historical connotation of the final words in his speech, and it had resulted in both his firing and a public examination of his character. For politically aware members of the Jewish community, his words act as a dog whistle, where we recognize the anti-Semitic connotation of the phrase.

All of this is not to say that I did not enjoy Dr. Hill speaking at George School, or that I think he should not have come. In fact, I very much enjoyed what he said. Dr. Hill is a fantastic speaker, and, as Clay mentioned, free speech is essential to a healthy community. This story is not an attack on Dr. Marc Lamont Hill or on the school’s decision to have him as a speaker. It is simply a different perspective on the assembly that took place on Tuesday, January 21st.

So, where do we go from here? Clay believes that the most important action we can take is education. If the community is educated on who the speaker is and why they’ve been invited, we can better appreciate and engage with their assembly. Take Jill Abramson’s visit, for an example. When Jill Abramson came to speak, an email was sent to all students talking about both her credentials and the controversy surrounding plagiarism in her book, *Merchants of Truth*. During the assembly,

students were able to ask questions about the scandal; Abramson was able to directly speak about what had happened, and the George School community was able to learn about the controversy from her perspective. It was an educational opportunity for the whole audience.

In the case of Dr. Hill, I was saddened that we didn't get that opportunity. Because his past words went unmentioned, we never had the chance to learn about the issue from his perspective. We also never had the chance to discuss what his words meant to us. Words do matter. They always matter. I hope that we, as George School's community, can remain mindful about trivializing the strong meaning of words in the case of Dr. Marc Lamont Hill.