

On a day when we are gathered to celebrate the life of one of this country's great leaders Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. -- I want to start out sharing a story of my own. It's something that is very important to me personally -- something that's been very important to me for as long as I can remember.

It's my admiration for another great Black American -- Muhammad Ali. I am his biggest fan. He is my hero.

Think about that for a moment to hear what I am really saying to you here this morning -- all of you who are gathered to honor a great Black leader and all he stood for.

My role model for a core part of my life is a man who had heart, and courage, and guts, and the power of 10 men. I hung on his career. I memorized his poetry.

Imagine that a kid from south Minneapolis grows up and speaks about this admiration as he gets elected Governor. And then, one day, a set of boxing gloves arrive in a box to the Transition Office -- from the big man himself!

I started thinking, "Hey, this Governor's job isn't so bad!"

It got a whole lot better last week. I had the chance of a lifetime to visit Muhammad Ali at his home in Michigan.

Martin Luther King had dreams about this. He had dreams that little white children just like me would one day sit next to a Black man in admiration and friendship.

Turn on any media channel and almost any day is some bad story about race relations.

Yet we cannot forget that Dr. King's dream does come true every day in small ways that never make the news. It's about personal relationships that exist among people of different background, different races, different beliefs, and different cultures.

Human Rights Commissioner Janeen Rosas says that the answers are to "Get Close" and "Start Talking."

That's why I was pleased for this invitation to come here today. To get close and start talking.

The General Mills Foundation has been doing that for a long, long time. Thanks to leaders like Dr. Reatha Clark King -- who just happens to be one of the founding members of my advisory group -- you have put your organization close to children and families and communities. I respect that style and the results you have worked hard to get raising student achievement for ALL children.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our work is not done for the children of this city and the rest of Minnesota.

Dr. King preached about the little children. Black and white, brown -- all colors. He saw them sitting together in school, learning, winning, succeeding. He saw them getting along. Getting close. Talking.

We adults need to live that way so that they can live that way.

Government can't solve the conflicts. We can provide the leadership, but ultimately it's the people, one by one, who need to get close and talk.

We need to help parents go into schools and talk with teachers together with their sons and daughters.

We need to help parents and families get close and talk about the important things in life. Talk about their dreams. Talk about their problems. Get close.

We do this by setting an expectation and an example. We do it by taking time to be with our children, care about their friends, encourage many experiences, take them new places, get close to new people.

Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton visited me a few weeks ago. We've known each other since high school. There is a closeness between us because we share a hometown. We're about the same age. We both have a bit on our shoulders. I enjoy seeing her, and she is always welcome in my office as I am in hers.

She shared with me that there are about 80 languages spoken in the Minneapolis Public Schools. This year, somewhere around 5,000 or 6,000 new immigrants will choose Minneapolis as their home city.

They will arrive here, many not speaking English, and need what we all need: a place to live, a job, a chance.

If they know anybody, it may be someone from their Homeland. You know what I just said about the mayor -- she and I share that hometown thing. It's a sense of comfort. We remember the same things.

So these new Americans will arrive and feel closest to people who speak their language, like the same foods, celebrate the same events, believe the same things. It's human. You'd feel exactly the same.

They probably won't be the first to reach out. In fact, they may not ever reach out. It's entirely possible that they will stay in their new community, away from others. Not close. Not talking.

That's the recipe for conflict. And we can't afford it. When government steps in to solve conflicts, all we have are "fixes" that don't seem to fix anything. "Intervention" is a tough word. It means cops or social workers or probation officers or courts or prisons. Government moves to stop the conflict, but doesn't stick around to care whether it ever gets resolved. As Dr. King said, "Morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated."

I, of course, have a slightly different version: "You can't legislate against stupidity," but my, my how the legislature does try!

But what Dr. King was driving at is true.

Government takes away your freedoms to behave.

That's the only tool it knows how to use. It doesn't have one to give people power -- that's down within each of us.

I believe that getting people together makes for solutions. I saw it at the last minute of the negotiations when one of the state unions almost went on strike. People, close together and talking, resolved a conflict that was set to affect 10,000 union members and all the rest of us.

I believe in mediation over litigation for the same reason. Talk as long as necessary in order to keep the lawyers out of it. Get close.

As your Governor, I want to ask you to think hard about how to get 4 1/2 million people AND COUNTING to look around and imagine better ways.

Our grandparents did it. Lt. Governor Mae Schunk did it. She spoke Croatian until she was in school. There, she learned English sitting on her teacher's lap, then went home with her little books, sat on her father's lap, read to him, and taught him English.

Finding common ground in America while respecting freedoms to be different is not new. It's the foundation of public education, and it's our highest priority because of what it did for us, our children, and the little ones who are attending today.

It's time for a groundswell of something bigger than government: love.

I said it on the campaign trail when I was asked about gay rights. I said "Love is bigger than government." It wasn't the black-white answer the interviewer was looking for. But it was the most honest one I could give. Love is bigger than government.

In the issues of race relations, gay rights, religious freedom, and other topics where there is discrimination, we cannot really honor the best intentions of Dr. King unless we pause and consider his request that we simply get close to one another and get along.



I say "simply," but it isn't. It's the most complex of all options. Dr. King would have us personally care about whether that little Somali child can read by 3rd grade. He would have us volunteer to read in the school if she can't. He would have us wait an extra five minutes by the bus stop to make sure she gets on her bus on a cold day. He would have us smile even if we don't know how to say hello in her language.

My dream for Minnesota is to awaken this willingness to step in and regulate our own personal behavior so that government can quit trying expensive solutions and coming up short.

My dream is called The Big Plan. It's not poetic like Dr. King's speeches. It's doesn't rhyme like Muhammad Ali's poems. But it's what I dream for Minnesota -- and "Living Human Rights and Respect" is right there listed with "The Best Public Education System" and my "Moving Minnesota" transportation plan.

Over the coming months, this initiative will take shape around the state. There are 60 human rights councils, and the state Department of Human Rights has a goal to get close and talk with all of them. Then, from there, to get close and talk with lots of Minnesotans during the three remaining years of my first term.

No, it's not definite yet. No, there aren't any programs attached to it. This is not a day for announcements of sweeping new promises.

But I leave you with this sincere belief that one person can make a difference. Muhammad Ali made it in mine. Dr. King made it in all of us. And you are welcome to join us as we work together to do the same.

Thank you for having me here today.