By Dr. John Roush, President, Centre College

First, let me thank you for inviting me to be a part of today’s event. It has been my privilege to be involved with, listen to, or speak at what I would estimate to be several dozen of these celebrations in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. I never tire of thinking and learning about this remarkable man – a leader of immense proportions in the life of our great nation. I am honored to be here with you.

I also want to thank you for allowing me to bring my class to today’s event. As some of you know, I teach in Centre College’s CentreTerm, and this year I have 22 students who are taking my course, “Rainmaking: The Study of and Preparation for Leadership.” We are in our second full week of the course, and I judged it was important for them to be a part of today’s event and, in doing so, to learn more about this leader. I must tell you that I am extremely proud of these students – what they stand for right now and the citizen-leaders they will become as they finish at Centre and move into their lives of work and service. Dr. King believed deeply in the youth of our nation – so do I. And, I want to assure you that the young people who have accompanied me today are men and women in whom we should take pride. They give us reason to be optimistic about tomorrow. They and others like them across the globe are the new sunlight for a world that knows too much darkness.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a very real part and a very important part of my own growing up. In 1964, when he was firing the imaginations of the American people – people of all colors – I was 14 and old enough to know what was going on. At the time of his assassination in spring, 1968, I was a senior in high school and keenly aware of what this man had accomplished, and what he would not have the opportunity to accomplish, and the great loss that our nation experienced because of his untimely death. He helped to shape my thinking with his words, his actions, his life. It was his destiny to touch the hearts of his fellow Americans, and I was one of the millions moved by him.

But today’s event should not be about the history of this great American or the impact he might have had in my life or yours. Instead, I want to focus on what we know about Martin Luther King, Jr. and, in particular, three aspects of his person that I judge were the core of his strength and much of the reason why Dr. King was able to have such an immense impact in our lives and the life our nation.

Finally, as I begin, I mention that I will be reading several quotes from King in the body of my remarks. And, while some speakers attempt to “speak like and sound like” Dr. King, I choose not to do so. I am not sure that I have heard it done well by others, and I know that I cannot do this well.

So, first, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a person of immense faith. People of different faiths, and those of no faith, want to claim Dr. King as a great American, a great orator, a primary leader of the Civil Rights Movement, and a man who valued justice above all
else. This is all true, of course, and if King was here with us today, he would be pleased, immensely so, that people of different faiths and people of no faith look to him for inspiration, for wisdom, for justice. For this was a man who said, “We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.” He reminded us that “The good neighbor looks beyond the external accidents and discerns those inner qualities that make all men human and, therefore, brothers.”

But let’s be clear, my friends, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a person consumed by and devoted to his Christian faith. Yes, he was always committed to matters of inclusion and believed with all his heart in the brotherhood of men and women, but he was – at the beginning of and end of the day – a person of immense Christian faith. This was true of him as a little boy, as a young man trained to be a theologian at some of this country’s finest institutions, and in his adult life as a pastor and leader of the Civil Rights Movement in these United States. From the Birmingham Jail he wrote, “The church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.” He was, plain and simply, a believer in the power of personal faith, in the power of the church, and in the power of the community of believers.

I mention this as one of the key elements of his person because, over time, I think a great many people want to define Martin Luther King, Jr. only as a great thinker, a great speaker, a great leader, a great teacher, but not necessarily a man of deep Christian commitments – a man who believed he was about his Father’s business in seeking to bring justice to this nation – a man who, like the Savior he worshipped, was prepared to give his life to the cause of freedom, the cause of justice, the cause of liberty.

It has been nearly 40 years since Dr. King left us, and I believe it is critical that we remember, and affirm, and draw strength from understanding that he was a man of deep faith. He was not a perfect man, but he chose to live a life centered on faith. He did not draw his inspiration for being an agent of change from some humanistic inclinations. No, King sought to be a servant of his God; to be a person worthy of being remembered as a follower of the Son.

Second, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a leader of immense proportions. This is, as many of you know, a field of study that is important to me. I speak about the phenomenon of leadership. I write about it. I teach it, and believe that a person can, in fact, study and, thus, be prepared for leadership.

My class members can tell you about the qualities of person that define good leaders who are engaged in their companies, their institutions, their causes for the long pull. Martin Luther King, Jr. was such a leader. His “leadership fingerprint” was admired, misunderstood, feared. The impact of his leadership in our nation has become clearer over these many years – it’s often this way.

King understood that leadership was about telling the truth, even when in doing so – like reminding our nation that it had not fulfilled its promise of life, liberty and justice for all
put him and his family in peril. He understood that truth telling was about personal
courage – a willingness to say those things he believed to be true, no matter how
unpopular his view might be.

King epitomized what it was to be a servant leader. He spoke of this often. He knew that
the leader must be prepared to put others above self. I would argue that men and women
of faith have an edge in understanding the value of this servant leadership, but being a
person of faith does not guarantee this quality. Dr. King was one who chose to work with
others, not spend his time talking about how folks worked for him. Martin Luther King,
Jr. never forgot that leaders need followers, and the leader who serves strives to be the
kind of leader he or she would want to follow.

King knew that he could not accomplish his goals for the Civil Rights Movement by
himself. He knew it was important to give authority to others. And, while he recognized
he was the primary face of the movement, he knew that others in the organization –
names that can be called off and, appropriately, grace the pages of our history books –
had to be given authority, challenged to provide leadership alongside the one they would
call Martin. This quality of leadership is really about trust and wisdom and believing in
the worth of one's fellow workers - the other leaders in the organization. Dr. King
understood that good leaders develop a capacity for, and come to understand the wisdom
of, handing off.

King was a leader of vision – one who articulated his dream for America with clarity and
passion. Again and again, he emboldened people of all races and faith traditions to
remember that we must not, “. . . wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today, my
friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a
dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day
this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to
be self-evident: that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red
hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be
able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the
state of Mississippi, a state, sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat
of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. 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. I have a dream today.”

And, he understood what it was to act on his dream, to develop a set of strategies that
would move this America, his America, in the direction of that dream. “This will be the
day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, “My country, 'tis
of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the
pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.” And if America is to be a
great nation, this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of
New Hampshire! Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York! Let
freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from
the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of
California! But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain, Georgia! Let
freedom ring from Lookout Mountain, Tennessee! Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill of Mississippi! From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

Oh, how King shared a vision of and taught us how to dream of a country that he would never experience.

Third, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a person of immense courage. Courage is a common theme in many of my speeches and some of the articles I write. It is a part of the human experience that inspires me. It is sometimes hard to define, but you know when you see it.

King was always about the business of preparing himself and others for courageous living. There is no personal quality I find more compelling. People of courage live their lives with a sense of freedom because they are determined to do the right thing, no matter what the cost. Dr. King was such a man.

Personal courage for me is not the “run into the burning building to save a child” type of thing or the front-page news variety for doing something heroic. I am talking about the every-day, it's-a-part-of-my-life courage that manifests itself in the way you treat other people. It takes courage to include those who may not agree with you or treat you right. And you must be brave if you are going to make good decisions about how you will conduct your personal and professional life. Dr. King was such a man.

When I think of courage, I think of people, not acts of bravery or valor. I am reminded of great men and women leaders of worldwide fame like Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Helen Keller, Mother Theresa. I am reminded of King. He was such a man.

I am also reminded of folks unknown to you and whose names will never grace the pages of our history books. These were the men and women who were my teachers, my coaches, my parents, my wife, and my friends who taught me firsthand what courageous living was all about. Each of you has encountered such people. Make some of these folks your models for everyday courage. Dr. King was influenced and inspired by such people.

I promise you that, within the hour, some of us will be faced with the choice of doing the right thing. The challenge to do the right thing will happen right outside these doors. It will be your choice, my choice, and we must summon the immense courage to do the right thing. We would do well on this day and on other days to remind ourselves of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His life of courage inspired me as a young man. It inspires me still.
On the day before his life would be taken, he called forth the courage to talk of life and death and courage. In what has become some of his most remembered words, he tells us,

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: born in Atlanta, Georgia on January 15, 1929, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, leader of America’s civil rights movement and inspiration to others across the globe who seek justice and freedom, and lost to us Americans and the citizens of this world on the 4th of April, 1968 at the tender age of 39. There are countless words that I might have chosen to describe this great American, but I am content to speak of him as a man of faith, a man of remarkable leadership, a man of courage.

We are bound together, my friends – men and women; black, white, red, and yellow; rich and poor; young and old; Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this before and better than the rest of us. He knew it would take faith, leadership and courage to bind us together. King showed us how to do these things. And, on this day – his birthday, we are bound together and, rightly, invited by him and the God he worshipped to recommit ourselves to lead lives of faith, lives of leadership, lives of courage. And, they all said, “Amen!” Thank you.