

February 15, 2007

Dear Professor Sherley,

Enough. From outside your Department and School, I do not know the details of your history or your tenure case at MIT. I hope that your achievements here were notable, and that inasmuch as possible they were facilitated through the support of your colleagues. I hope that your treatment here was fair overall, and to the extent that it was not, I hope that racism was not the cause. My own acquaintance with some of the individuals about whom you've written does not suggest to me that they are so uniformly, blatantly, and relentlessly dishonest or outright evil as you indicate. But however unfairly you may have been treated, and however racist the motivations of our colleagues, any comparison between you and the victims of water hoses, dogs, and billy-clubs is sickening. Your statement that you have been subjected to actions that are not just present-day parallels to, but actually "nothing short of," water hoses, dogs, and billy-clubs of the civil rights era completely undermines the many other assertions that you would have us believe. And it disgracefully diminishes the real suffering that was caused by those actions through its attempt to elevate your own suffering to similar stature. An MIT Associate Professor, typing away on his computer and broadcasting electronic messages from the comfort of his office or home, his only physical suffering self-inflicted, simply cannot be compared to a civil rights marcher being set upon by water hoses, dogs and billy-clubs.

The impact of the civil rights movement was magnified by looking outward and showing the world that the suffering of one race was the suffering of all humanity. In this way it demonstrated that its message was universal and timeless. This inspires our remembrance of it and its leaders, which is not hypocrisy despite our many failings. In contrast, to schedule a deliberately conflicting forum "on the cost of unfairness in higher education" invites us to spend the morning looking inward, examining a topic of narrow importance in our particular place and time. You have inadvertently illustrated the self-absorption of which we are famously accused by those outside academia. Your overstated comparison and your hunger strike illustrate it far more compellingly.

I am not one of the organizers of the MLK breakfast and I don't know what is on the agenda, but I respectfully suggest attending. Perhaps it will promote a broader perspective on the victims of water hoses, dogs, and billy clubs, on how much better off all of us of every race are through their suffering and enormous achievements, and on constructive engagement with the challenges that remain.

I'm sorry that I cannot sign off with the confidence that you express in the truth of your writings. Short of that I hope you'll accept that I write

Sincerely - Keith Nelson