

"The Look to the Future"

By Martin Luther King,
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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Horton, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen: it is a great privilege and a distinct honor for me to have the opportunity of being part of the twenty-fifth anniversary observance of the Highlander Folk School. I have long admired the noble purpose and creative work of this institution. For twenty-five years you have stood with dauntless courage and fearless determination. You have given the South some of its most responsible leaders in this great period of transition. And so I am happy to congratulate you today for all of your great work, and hope for you many more years of creative and meaningful work.

I can not begin my talk this morning without pausing to bring you greetings from Montgomery, Alabama; and I bring you special greetings from the 50,000 Negro citizens of Montgomery, who more than a year ago came to see that it is ultimately more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation. I bring you greetings from a people who were willing to substitute tired feet for tired souls and walk the streets of Montgomery until the long ~~night~~ night of enforced segregation in bus transportation had been removed.

I'm certainly happy to be here and to see in this audience Mrs. Rosa Parks ---as we just heard, you would not have had a Montgomery Story without Rosa Parks. I'm also happy to see in the audience my very close and competent associate, Ralph Abernathy, who has worked with me and the Montgomery community all of these months, and I'm sure that I voice the sentiment of Mrs. Parks and Reverend Abernathy and all of the 50,000 Negro citizens of Montgomery when I say to you that we are eternally grateful to each of you for your moral support in our struggle for human dignity and first-class citizenship.

Many of you sent financial contributions. Many of you were with us in spirit, and we realize that as we walked the streets of Montgomery we did not walk alone: that hundreds and thousands of people of goodwill walked with us. And we are grateful to you for that.

I'm also happy to share the speaking responsibilities this morning with Aubrey Williams, one of the noble personalities of our times, and I'm sure we will be eternally grateful to him for the work that he has done in the area of human relations, and for the many things that he has done to make the South a better South and the world a better world.

I have been asked to speak from the subject "The Look to the Future." In order to look to the future it is often necessary to get a clear picture of the past. In order to know where we are going it is often necessary to see from whence we have come.

And so I begin with a survey of past developments in the area of race relations. As we look over the long sweep of race relations in America, we notice that there has been something of an evolutionary growth over the years. There have been at least three distinct periods in the history of race relations in this nation, each representing growth over the former period.

It is interesting to note that in each period, there finally came a decision from the Supreme Court to give the legal and constitutional validity to the dominant thought patterns of that particular period.

The first period in the area of race relations extended from 1619 to 1863. This was the period of slavery. During this period the Negro was an "it" rather than a "he", a thing to be used rather than a person to be respected. He was merely a depersonalized cog in a vast plantation machine.

In 1857, toward the end of this period, there finally came a decision from the Supreme Court to give legal and constitutional validity to the whole system of slavery. This decision, known as the Dred Scott Decision, stated in substance that the Negro is not a citizen of this nation; he is merely property subject to the dictates of his owner.

The second period in the development of race relations in America extended, broadly speaking, from 1863 to 1896. We may refer to this as "the period of segregation." In 1896, through the famous Plessy versus Ferguson Decision, the Supreme Court established the doctrine of "separate but equal" as the law of the land. Through this decision the dominant patterns of this second stage of race relations was given legal and constitutional validity.

Now we must admit that this second period was something of an improvement over the first period of race relations, because it at least freed the Negro from the bondage of physical slavery. It was not the best stage, because segregation is at bottom nothing but slavery covered up with certain niceties of complexity. So the end result of this second period was that the Negro ended up being plunged across the abyss of exploitation, for he experienced the bleakness of nagging injustice.

The third period in the development of race relations in America had its beginning on May 17, 1954. We may refer to this as "the period of complete and constructive integration." The Supreme Court's decision which came to give legal and constitutional validity to the dominant thought patterns of this period, said in substance that the old Plessy Doctrine must go. Separate facilities were inherently unequal, and that to segregate a child on the basis of his race is to deny that child the equal protection of the law.

And so as a result of this decision, we find ourselves standing on the threshold of the third and most constructive period in the development of race relations in the history of our nation. To put it in Biblical terms: "We have broken loose from the Egypt of slavery. We have moved through the wilderness of 'separate but equal', and now we stand on the border of the promised land of integration."

The great moral challenge that confronts each of us at this moment is to work passionately and unrelentingly for the complete realization of the ideals and principles of this third period. We must not rest until segregation and discrimination have been liquidated in every area of our nation's life.

As we stand at the threshold of this third period of race relations, we notice two contradictory forces at work in the South: the forces of defiance and the forces of compliance. On the one hand we notice the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the rise of the White Citizens Councils. On the other hand we notice constructive forces at work seeking to create a new respect for human dignity.

In order to get a clearer picture of the situation, we may look at each of these forces separately, the past three years, and witness the birth in the South of the U.S. Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Almost dead for more than two decades, the Klan has staged a new revival. This organization is determined to preserve segregation at any cost. Its methods are crude and primitive.

Unlike the Klan of 20 years ago, this new Klan does not list among its members the so-called "respectable" people. It draws its members from the undereducated and underprivileged groups. They see in the Negro's rising status a political and economic threat. And although the Klan will never regain the power that it once possessed, we must not take it lightly. For all the surface of all of its action is the ugly theme of unleashed, unchallenged racial and religious bigotry that has always implied further violence.

Then there are the White Citizens Councils. Since they operate on a higher political and economic level than the Klan, a halo of respectability hovers over them. But like the Klan, they are determined to preserve segregation and thereby defy the segregation rulings of the Supreme Court. They base their defense on legal maneuvers of interposition and nullification. Unfortunately for those who disagree with the Councils, their methods do not stop with legal tactics. Their methods range from threats and intimidation to economic reprisals against Negro men and women. These methods also extend to white persons who will dare to take a stand for justice. They demand absolute conformity from whites and abject submission from Negroes.

The effects of the Councils' activities are not difficult to determine. First, they have brought many white moderates to the point that they do not feel free to discuss the issues involved in desegregation for fear of what they will be labeled, and channels of communication between whites and Negroes are now closed. Certainly this is tragic: men hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they can't communicate with each other; they can't communicate with each other because they are separated from each other.

Another effect of the Citizens Councils is that of opening the way for violence. It is true that they often piously argue that they abhor violence, but by defiance of the law, their unethical methods, and their vitriolic public pronouncements actually create the atmosphere for violence. The White Citizens Councils along with the Ku Klux Klan must be held responsible for all of the terror, mob rule and brutal murders that have encompassed the South for the last several months.

There is another side to the South that counterbalances the Klan and the Councils. It is the work of hundreds of persons in the white South, who realize that they cannot cut themselves off from the rest of the nation. They are working in numerous, unpublicized ways to implement the rulings of the Supreme Court and make the ideal of brotherhood a reality.

Desegregation, too is appearing in hundreds of minute ways, and even in a few spectacular ways in all of the border states. It is visible on hundreds of college campuses in the South; it is gradually becoming visible in public schools of the South. Separate waiting rooms and rest rooms are about gone from the airlines, trains and busses. Negroes are gradually being elected to public offices in cities of the Deep South, and many ministerial associations are integrating. While the reactionary guardians of the status quo are busy crying "Never!", the system of segregation is crumbling all around.

Now what of the future? First, let us admit that the reactionary forces of the white South present certain barriers to integration that will make the transition much more difficult. They will seek to delay integration as long as possible by a variety of legal tactics.

We must also face the fact that these delays are not merely the rear-guard action of professional bigots. Many of the Southerners who oppose ~~integration~~ integration believe with utter devoutness that what they do is best for themselves, their families and their nation. This quality of sincerity makes the job of desegregation infinitely more difficult. But in spite of all this, the opponents of desegregation are fighting a losing battle. The Old South is gone, never to return again.

Many of the problems that we are confronting in the South today grow out of the futile attempt of the white South to perpetuate a system of human values that came into being under a feudalistic plantation system which cannot survive in a day of democratic equalitarianism. Yes, the Old South is a lost cause. We must gain consolation in the fact that there are constructive forces that will defeat in time all the barriers of opposition:

First, if the South is to survive economically, it must inevitably industrialize. We see signs of this vigorous industrialization with the concomitant organization throughout every Southern state. Day after day the South is receiving new multi-million dollar industries. With this growth of industry the folkways of white supremacy will necessarily pass away. Moreover, Southerners are learning to be good businessmen, and as such realize that bigotry is costly and bad for business.

This growth of industry will increase the purchasing power of the Negro, and this augmented purchasing power will be reflected in more adequate housing, improved medical care, and greater educational opportunities. Each of these exemplifies further weakening of segregation.

It must also be stressed that as industry grows in the South, organized labor will become more influential in this section. Organized labor has proved to be one of the most powerful forces in removing the blight of segregation and discrimination from our nation. Labor leaders wisely realize that the forces that are anti-Negro are usually anti-labor, and vice versa. And so organized labor is one of the Negro's strongest allies in the struggle for freedom.

In spite of screams of "Over my dead body will any change come," one must not minimize the impact upon the South of Federal court actions. Federal Court decrees have altered transportation patterns, educational mores, use of golf courses, and a myriad of other matters. These major social changes have accumulative force conditioning other segments of life.

The South, next, reveals increasing sensitivity to the force of world opinion. Few indeed are the Southerners who relish having their status lumped in the same category with the Union of South Africa as a final refuge of segregation. It is not pleasant, either, to be shown how Southern intransigence fortifies Communist appeals to Asian and African peoples. Here is ~~the~~ further crippling away at old patterns.

Also hopeful is the way in which human relation agencies of all types, public and private, are increasing their activities. Their still, small voices go unheard many times, amid the louder shouts of the times, but their influence is felt and growing.

More and more the voice of the Christian church is being heard. For many years we had to face the tragic fact that Sunday morning, when we stood to sing, "In Christ there is no East or West," was the most segregated hour in Christian America. Thank God we are beginning to shake the lethargy from our eyes and move in accord with the rhythmic beat of the music of justice! Churches all over ~~the~~ the country are asking their members to re-examine their consciences and to measure practice against profession. More and more the churches are willing to cry out in terms of deep, impatient faith, "Out of one blood God hath made all the nations of men to dwell upon the face of the earth."

Lastly, the determination of the Negro himself to gain freedom and equality is a most powerful force that will ultimately defeat the barriers of integration. For many years the Negro tacitly accepted segregation. He was the victim of stagnant passivity and deadening complacency. The forces of slavery and segregation caused many Negroes to feel that perhaps they were inferior. But through the forces of history something happened to the Negro: he came to feel that he was somebody. He came to feel that the important thing about a man is not his specificity, but his fundamentum; not the color of his skin nor the texture of his hair, but the texture and quality of his soul.

With this new sense of dignity and new self-respect, a new Negro emerged. So there has been a revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of his nature and destiny, and a concomitant determination to achieve freedom and human dignity, whatever the cost may be.

Fortunately, the Negro has been willing to grapple with a new and powerful approach to his problem in the South, namely non-violence. It is my great hope that as the Negro plunges deeper into the quest for freedom, he will plunge deeper into the philosophy of non-violence. As a race we must struggle passionately and unrelentingly for the goal of justice, but we must be sure that our hands are clean in the struggle. We must never struggle with falsehood, hate, or malice. We must never become bitter; we must never succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle. If this happens, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and our chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.

I realize that this approach will mean suffering and sacrifice. And some will ask, "What if these acts of violence continue and increase as a result of the Negro following this method? What then can be his defense?" His defense is to meet every act of violence toward an individual Negro with the fact that there are thousands of others who will present themselves in his place as potential victims. If the oppressors bomb the home of one Negro for this cause, then this must be met by the fact that they will be required to bomb the homes of hundreds and thousands of Negroes. If they deny bread and milk to Negro children whose parents want them to be free, then they must be required to deny these children every necessity of life, water and air itself.

This dynamic unity, this amazing self-respect, this willingness to suffer and this refusal to hit back will soon cause the oppressor to become ashamed of his own methods. You will leave him glutted with his own barbarity; you will force him to stand before the world and his God splattered with the blood and reeking with the stench of his Negro brother. This, it seems to me, is the only valid answer.

With all these forces working together, I am convinced that we can bring the third period of race relations in America to its full realization in the not-too-distant future. So my answer to the question of our theme is that the future is filled with vast and marvelous possibilities. This is a great time to be alive. Let us not despair.

Let us realize that as we struggle for justice and freedom we have cosmic companionship. The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward

justice. As Carlisle says, "No lie can live forever." As William Cullen Bryant says, "Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again." And as James Russell Lowell says, "Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne; yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown stands God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own."

And so let us go out and work with renewed vigor to make the unfolding work of destiny a reality in our generation. We must not slow up. Let us keep moving.

By certain technical words in the vocabulary, and every academic discipline which tend to become clichés and stereotypes, psychologists have a word which is probably used more frequently than any other word in modern psychology: it is the word "maladjusted." This word is the ringing card of the new child psychology.

Now in a sense all of us must live ~~in~~ the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But there are some things in our social system to which I am proud to be maladjusted, and to which I suggest that you, too, ought to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to the viciousness of mob rule; I never intend to adjust myself to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination; I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities ~~in~~ from the masses to give luxuries to the classes; I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating method of physical violence. I call upon you to be maladjusted.

For you see ~~in~~ it may be that the salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. The challenge to you this morning as I leave you is to be maladjusted, and maladjusted as the Prophet Amos, who in the midst of the injustices of his day, could cry out in terms that echoed across the centuries: "Let judgement run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream"; as maladjusted as Lincoln, who had the vision to see that this nation could not survive half-slave and half-free; as maladjusted as Jefferson, who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery, could cry out in words lifted to cosmic proportions: "All men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights: among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"; yes, as maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth, who dared to dream a dream of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, who looked at men amid the intricate and fascinating military machinery of the Roman Empire, and could say to them, "He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword;" a Jesus who could look at men in their tendencies for tragic hate and say to them, "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you."

The world is in desperate need of such maladjustment. And through such maladjustment we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man, into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.

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