

Springfield College Commencement Address

Sunday, June 14, 1964

by

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. Olds, members of the faculty, members of the graduating class of this great institution of learning, ladies and gentlemen – I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here this afternoon. I must confess that I felt about this time yesterday afternoon that I wouldn't be here. But I can assure you that this beautiful setting is a big contrast to the St. Johns County Jail of the State of Florida. So I am very happy to be here, and I am deeply honored to have the privilege of being a part of this commencement observance, and I want to express my deep personal appreciation to your distinguished president and to the trustees for extending the invitation. As I am standing here, I certainly feel a deep sense of appreciation for all that this college has meant to the cultural and humanitarian life of our nation and the world. And I am deeply aware of this rich and great tradition. I would like to have you, the members of the graduating class and all assembled here to think with me this afternoon from the subject, “Remaining awake through a great revolution.”

I am sure that most of you have read that interesting little story by Washington Irving entitled, “Rip Van Winkle.” The one thing that we remember about this story probably more than anything else is the fact that Rip Van Winkle slept 20 years. But there is another point in that story that is almost always completely overlooked. It was the sign on the Inn in the little town on the Hudson from which Rip went up into the mountain for his long sleep.

When he went up, the sign had a picture of King George the Third of England. When he came down, it had a picture of George Washington, the first President of the United States. When Rip looked up at the picture of George Washington, he was amazed. He was completely lost. He knew not who he was. This incident suggests to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that he slept 20 years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountains a great revolution was taking place in the world, a revolution that in many points would change the face of the whole world, and Rip knew nothing about it. He was asleep. He slept through a revolution.

One of the great liabilities of history is the fact that all too many people find themselves amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to achieve the new attitudes and the new mental outlook that the new situation demands. All too many people find themselves sleeping through a revolution. It seems to me that there is nothing more tragic than to be in this condition, the condition of sleeping through a revolution. Now, there can be no gain saying the fact that a great social revolution is taking place in our world today. It is sweeping away an old order; it is bringing into being a new order. It is a revolution that is bringing about a structural change in the architecture of the national and international society in which we live. It seems to me that the great challenge facing each of us today is the challenge of remaining awake through this revolution that is taking place in the world. And so I would like to suggest some of the things that we must do in this nation and all over the world in order to remain awake through this social revolution.

First, I would like to suggest that we are challenged more than ever before to achieve a

world perspective. Anyone who seeks to live in isolation or any nation that seeks to live in isolation is sleeping through a revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one, and now we are challenged to make it one in terms of brotherhood, in terms of peace. Now, it is true that the geographical oneness of this age has come into being to a large extent through man's scientific ingenuity. Man through his scientific genius has been able to dwarf distance and place time in chains. And our jet planes have compressed into minutes, distances that once took days and even months. It is possible in our world to take a flight from Tokyo, Japan on a Sunday morning and arrive in Seattle, Washington on the preceding Saturday night, and when your friends meet you at the airport in Seattle and ask when you left Tokyo, you will have to say, "I left tomorrow." This is the kind of world in which we live. Now this is a bit humorous, but I am trying to laugh a basic fact into all of us. Through our scientific and technological genius we have made of this world a neighborhood. Now through our moral and ethical commitment, we must make of it a brotherhood. We must all learn to live together as brothers, or we will all perish together as fools. No nation can live alone. No individual can live alone. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And so it is necessary, if we are to remain awake through this great social revolution, to achieve a world perspective.

Secondly, I would like to suggest that we have the responsibility of working with determination to wipe poverty from the face of the earth. Poverty is one of the great problems facing our nation and facing our world. And anyone who fails to see this is sleeping through a revolution. Now I say to you as members of the graduating class, you are going out into a world where millions of people find themselves on a lonely island of poverty in the

midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. Something must be done to solve this problem. It is certainly true in our nation the problem is becoming even more difficult today because of a force known as automation, which is scrapping some 40,000 jobs a week. It is estimated that there are some 10 million families in our country that can be considered in conditions of chronic poverty. These families are composed of from three to four members, which means there are about 40 million individuals in our nation who find themselves in poverty-stricken conditions. Now if we are to be a great nation, we are to be a concerned nation, we must go all out to solve this problem. There is nothing new about poverty. It has been with us for years, for centuries, for generations, for ages. What is new is we now have the resources; we now have the technical know-how to get rid of poverty if we will. This is the great challenge of the hour, for God never intended for some of his children to live in inordinate superfluous wealth while others live in abject deadening poverty. God wants all of his children to have the basic necessities of life, and he has left enough and to spare in this world for that purpose.

This is not only a problem in our nation; it is a problem all over the world. We see it in so many other nations. Not long ago Mrs. King and I had the privilege of journeying to that great country known as India. I never will forget the experience. It was a marvelous experience to meet and talk with the great leaders of India, to meet and talk with hundreds and thousands of people in the cities and villages all over that vast country. These experiences will remain dear to me as long as the chords of memory shall lengthen. And I say to you this afternoon, my friends, that there were those depressing moments. How can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes evidences of millions of people going to bed hungry at night? How can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes

thousands and millions of people sleeping on the sidewalks at night? They have no houses to go in. They have no beds to sleep in. How can one avoid being depressed when he discovers that out of India's population of more than 400 million people, some 300 million make an annual income of less than 90 dollars a year? Most of these people have never seen a dentist or a doctor. As I stood there noticing these conditions something within me cried out, "Can we in America stand idly by and not be concerned?" And an answer came, "Oh no," because the destiny of the United States is tied up with the destiny of India and every other nation. And I started thinking about the fact; in the United States we spend millions of dollars a day to store surplus food. And I said to myself, I know where we could store that food free of charge, in the wrinkled stomachs of the millions of God's children in Asia, in Africa and South America, in our own nation who go to bed hungry at night. It may well be that we have spent far too much of our national budget establishing military bases around the world, rather than bases of genuine concern and understanding. All I am saying is simply this - that all life is inter-related. We are all tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. As long as there is poverty in this world no one can be totally secure. Somehow we are all tied together in this great system of humanity. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be; and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality. John Donne caught it years ago and placed it in graphic terms: "No man is an island entire in itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main," and then he goes on toward the end to say, "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." When we recognize

this and we are concerned about our brothers who are less fortunate, then we are remaining awake through a great revolution.

I would also like to suggest if we are to remain awake through this great revolution, we must work passionately and unrelentingly to remove the last vestiges of racial injustice from our nation and from the world. This problem is still with us, and I need not tell you how serious this problem happens to be today. We only need to open our newspapers and turn on our television, and we realize that it is still with us. Racial segregation is still the Negro's burden and America's shame. If we are to remain awake, we must get rid of it. Racial segregation, whether it is illegal *De jure* segregation of the South or whether it is the *De facto* segregation of the North, is not only politically unsound, it is not only sociologically untenable, it is morally wrong and sinful. Segregation is wrong, to use the words of the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, because it substitutes an "I-it" relationship, for the "I-thou" relationship. Segregation is wrong, to use the thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas, because it is based on human laws and out of harmony with the eternal, natural and moral laws of the universe. Paul Tillich has said somewhere that sin is separation. And what is segregation but an existential expression of man's tragic estrangement, his awful separation, his terrible sinfulness? And we must see this all over the nation. This is a cancer in the body politic which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized.

In grappling with this problem we must recognize the urgency of the moment. There are people all around who are saying, "Cool off." There are individuals all around who are saying, "You are pushing things too fast." And they are saying only time can solve the problem. The only answer that we can give to the myth of time is that time is neutral. It can

be used either constructively or destructively. And I am absolutely convinced that the forces of ill will in our nation have used time much more effectively than the forces of good will. And I am absolutely convinced that the Wallace's, the extreme rightists and the individuals committed to negative ends have used time much more effectively in our nation than the individuals committed to positive ends. And it may well be that we will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people who will bomb a church in Birmingham, Alabama, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say wait on time. Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive and insurgent forces of irrational emotionalism and social stagnation. And so we must help time, and realize that the time is always right to do right. And so you go out into communities, all over this nation, with a great problem. And I would urge you to be involved participants, and not detached spectators. And never rest, never be content, until in your life and in the situation in which you live, you have established the principle of the "Brotherhood of Man." And if you will but do this, you will remain awake through a great revolution.

I would also like to suggest that in grappling with the problems of the world, if we are to remain awake through this social revolution, we must come to see that the problems of the world cannot be solved through corroding hatred and physical violence. Now, I know that many individuals still feel that violence is the answer. And I know that many individuals continue to preach doctrines of hate. We find a great deal of this alive even today in our

nation. And I am absolutely convinced that problems cannot be solved through hatred and violence. I realize that violence has often won temporary victories, but I would go on beyond that to say that even though violence may win temporary victories, it cannot bring about permanent peace. It ends up creating many more social problems than it solves. This is why I have tried to say all over this nation that in the struggle for racial justice, those of us who have been on the oppressed end of the old order must not seek to get out of this condition through violence and hatred. And this is why I believe that if the Negro succumbs to the temptation of using violence in his struggles, 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. Thank God there is another way, a way as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the techniques of Mohandas K. Gandhi. And I believe by standing up with determination against an injustice and resisting it with all of one's might, all of the soul-force that one can muster, and yet not stooping to hatred and violence in the process, the individual has the strongest force alive in the world.

More and more we are coming to see now hate is as injurious to the hater as it is to the hated. Psychiatrists are telling us that many of the strange things that happen in the subconscious, many of the inner conflicts, are rooted in hate. They are now saying love or perish. And so a movement can be based on this. Centuries ago Jesus said love your enemies. Bless them that curse you, pray for them that spitefully use you. And he went on to say, he who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. And history is replete with the bleached bones of nations. History is cluttered with the wreckage of communities that failed to follow this command. And so I believe we can remain awake in this period, by doing away

with violence and hatred. But this is not only true in our struggle within the nation. More and more on the international scale we must come to see this. Anyone who believes that violence can solve the problems of the world today is sleeping through a revolution. In the days when Sputniks and Explorers are dashing through outer space, and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can win a war. It is no longer a choice between violence and non-violence, it is either non-violence or non-existence. And the alternative to disarmament, the alternative to a greater suspension of nuclear tests, the alternative to strengthening the United Nations and thereby disarming the whole world, may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation. So our generation must come to see that war is obsolete. If we will see this, we will be able to move on toward that better day in our nation, and all over the world. So let me remind you again that we must work everywhere with zeal and determination to get rid of the evils that cloud our days. In short, if these problems are to be solved in our world, we must develop a sort of divine discontent.

You know there are certain technical words within every academic discipline that soon become stereotypes and clichés. Every academic discipline has its technical nomenclature. Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word in psychology. It is the word “maladjusted.” Now we all want to live a well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. I say to you this afternoon, my friends, there are some things in our world and in our nation which I am proud to be maladjusted; in which I call upon you to be maladjusted until the good society is realized. I must honestly say to you that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to religious bigotry. I never intend to become adjusted to the madness

of militarism, and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. It may well be that our world is in dire need for a new organization, the International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment, men and women who will be as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who in the midst of the injustices of his day, could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream;" as maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln who had the vision to see that this nation could not survive half-slave and half-free; as maladjusted as Thomas Jefferson, who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery could scratch across the pages of history words lifted to cosmic proportions, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness;" as maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth, who could say to the men and women of his generation, "He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword;" and certainly through such maladjustment we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man and to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.

This is our challenge and this is our great opportunity. May I say as you go out, and as we all continue to work for the good life, even though there are difficulties ahead, we must not despair. We must continue to have faith in the future and to realize that as we struggle to get rid of poverty, as we struggle to get rid of economic injustices, and we struggle to get rid of the long and desolate night of war, as we struggle to get rid of racial injustice, we do not struggle alone. We have cosmic companionship. Before the victory is won someone will have to get scarred up a bit. Before the victory is won some more will have to be thrown into desolate

and crowded and frustrating jail cells. Before the victory is won, some, like a courageous Medgar Evers, may have to face physical death. Physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children and their brothers from a permanent death of the spirit and nothing can be more redemptive. Somehow we must know and we must continue to believe, that the arc of the moral universe is long but extends towards justice.

And so I still have faith in the future, and I still have faith in America, and I still believe that we can and will solve these haunting problems. I believe this because I know that Carlyle is right, "No lie can live forever." I believe this because William Cullen Bryant is right, "Truth crushed to Earth will rise again." I believe this because James Russell Lowell is right, "Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, yet that scaffold sways the future. And behind the dim unknown standeth God within the shadows keeping watch above his own." With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to make of this nation a great nation, and this world a great world, and we will be able to speed up that day right here in America 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 a'mighty, we are free at last."

God grant that we will grasp the moment.

Document Note: This document is a direct transcription of the audio of the speech. Paragraphs and grammatical and/or spelling interpretations were created by the transcriber based upon an original printed document of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s. This document was created in March 2014 by Joseph Brown, Class of 2014.