

Commencement Address to the Graduating Class of Morgan State College, June 2, 1958
by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Preface

Remarks from the Rededication of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Oak Tree, State House Grounds, Annapolis, MD; February 28, 2007; given by Dr. Edward C. Papenfuse, State Archivist and Commissioner of Land Patents, Maryland State Archives

Last summer [2006], when Diane Wilson of the Department of General Services brought the sorry state of the signage for the Dr. Martin Luther King memorial oak tree to the attention of the State House Trust, I asked the director of the Maryland State Archives, *Legacy of Slavery* project (<http://mdslavery.net>), Chris Haley, and researcher John Gartrell, to find the text of a sermon or speech Dr. King gave in Maryland so that any quote used on a dedicatory plaque would have a true Maryland connection. Little did I expect John Gartrell to find a speech that, to date, all King scholars have missed, a speech that inspired a new generation of Morgan graduates and undergraduates to pursue a course of non-violent resistance to racism and bigotry.

On June 2, 1958, Hughes Memorial Stadium at Morgan State College in Baltimore was filled with 3,000 visitors, including the Governor of Maryland, Theodore McKeldin, and 290 Morgan graduates who listened spellbound as Dr. Martin Luther King gave a 40 minute commencement address extemporaneously and completely without notes. It is an extraordinary exhortation to excellence in the face of adversity which only the *Afro American* published in full in its late Baltimore City and Washington editions. It sings with elements of prose and poetry that Dr. King would use again and again to inspire the nation and the world.

Dr. King was a master communicator who incorporated familiar hymns and popular quotations shaped to his meaning into the rhythm of his message. To date we have not been able to find a recording of the address, but it must have been an electrifying experience for all who were there, including the late Walter Sondheim and the Baltimore philanthropist Jacob Blaustein, who also received honorary degrees from Morgan that day.

When we awarded the contract for the new plaque to a local Annapolis firm, Sign Craft, the words John Gartrell chose from Dr. King's Morgan address so inspired their graphic artist, Sharron Fletcher, she spent hours of her own time in creating the artwork which she and her employers have donated to the State's art collection.

Many of the words Dr. King spoke that day are familiar to us. They form the basis of a philosophy of advocacy and action that would lead to a Nobel Peace Prize 6 years later in 1964. A few excerpts hint at the power of the preacher that day:

"In this new world, no individual or no nation can live alone. The new world is a world of geographical togetherness --- we must make it a world of spiritual togetherness ..."

"We must learn to live together as brothers or we will all die together as fools...."

"...go out to do a good job. Do it well. This is the challenge of the hour. Do it so well nobody could do it better. Do it as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it. Do it so well that the living, the dead and unborn could not do it better. ... If you can't be a pine on the top of the hill, be a shrub in the valley, but be the best shrub on the side of the hill; Be a bush if you can't be a tree ..."

"Let me say to you ... that social progress is never inevitable. ... It only comes through the persistent effort and the hard work of dedicated individuals. Without this persistent work, time itself becomes the ally of the insurgent and primitive forces of irrational emotionalism and social stagnation...."

And to thunderous applause Dr. King concluded, expanding a partisan speech of a friend into words that five years later would echo down the mall from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and throughout the land:

"In a few years from now, you will be able to sing with new vim, "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."

That must be come literally true.

Freedom must ring from every mountainside --- yes, let it ring from the prodigious hilltops of

New Hampshire;

Let it ring from the mighty mountains of New York;

Let it ring from the heightening Alleghanys of Pennsylvania;

Let it ring from the snow capped Rockies of Colorado;

Let it ring from the curvaceous slopes of California

But not only that, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!

Let it ring from Look Out Mountain of Tennessee;

Let ring from every hill and mole hill of Mississippi;

Let it ring from every mountain of Alabama--

from every mountainside --- let freedom ring!

And when this happens "all men will be able to stand together, black men, and white men, Jews and Gentiles. Protestants and Catholics, and sing a new song--

Free at last, free at last, great God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Commencement Address to the Graduating Class of Morgan State College, June 2, 1958
by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Introduction

By John Gartrell, Research Archivist, Maryland State Archives

By June 2, 1958, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, then 29, found himself in the epicenter of one of the greatest sociopolitical movements in American history, the Civil Rights Movement. He became a national figure through his leadership and involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and numerous protests throughout the South. Of all the qualities King exhibited as a leader in these endeavors, his ability to communicate his message through the spoken word likely made the greatest impact on his supporters both outside and within the African American community.

King's style as an orator was something mainstream America had never really encountered before. In his speeches, King meshed his Judeo-Christian foundation, studies of great philosophers and writers; interpretation of America's founding principles, the African American experience, and the inherent values of all humanity to evoke a message of unity and brotherhood across all of man's socially constructed barriers. He spoke to the Morgan State College Class of 1958 as though he was preparing the next great wave of crusaders in the struggle to help a nation rediscover its lost ancestral soul.

King wanted the graduates to be proud of their accomplishments, yet he reminded them that they had a responsibility to contribute their absolute best to the new world emerging before their very eyes. His message to the 290 members of Morgan State College's graduating class and the nearly 3000 persons in attendance at Hughes Stadium was themed, "A Great Time to Be Alive." And it stands as a reflection of a style cultivated from the pulpit and the podium prior to 1958 and a projection of his orations that followed after 1958.

When King declared to the audience at Morgan that, "There comes a time, as it were, that people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July, and left standing in the piercing chill of an Alpine November,"¹ he was illustrating the frustration African Americans felt after centuries of being designated slaves and second class citizens. He was speaking of the right of anyone who fought against powers that hindered that person's progress. But he was also echoing a theme he used to address a mass meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association in Montgomery. In the wake of the arrest of Mrs. Rosa Parks and on the dawn of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King inspired his riveted audience:

"And you know my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. There comes a time when

people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November. There comes a time..."²

King's reuse of this phraseology at the Morgan graduation shows that the success of the Boycott was only a building block to overthrowing injustice; the struggle was not over. He further detailed for the graduates that the fight against inequality was a winnable battle because he believed that they were fighting on the right side, and in this universe, right would always triumph over wrong. Still he warned that this revelation did not warrant complacency, "Let me say to you this evening that social progress is never inevitable. It is not only on the wheels of inevitability. It only comes through the persistent effort and hard work of individuals."³ These statements were another fundamental part of King's philosophies. Humans had a power within themselves to change the world around them. King made a similar remark to his congregation at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1957:

"Don't go back to your homes and around Montgomery thinking that the Montgomery City Commission and that all of the forces in the leadership of the South will eventually work this thing out for Negroes, its going to work out; its going to roll in on the wheels of inevitability. If we wait for it to work itself out, it will *never* be worked out. Freedom only comes through persistent agitation, through persistently rising up against the system of evil."⁴

Yet, King's address on Morgan's campus was not simply a continuation of themes from his early years as a public figure. He also used themes that would become more memorable to America as time marched on. On that fateful June afternoon King described an awakening in African Americans that birthed the period of protest they were living in. He said, "Then something happened to the colored person – circumstances made it possible and necessary for him to travel more...His rural plantation background, gradually gave way to urban industrial life, his cultural life was gradually rising through the steady decline of crippling illiteracy."⁵ King revisited this message in a speech at the Great March in Detroit in 1963, adding a little more depth to the ambitious development of African Americans in the country:

"And so his rural, plantation background gradually gave way to urban industrial life. And even his economic life was rising through the growth of industry, the influence of organized labor, expanded educational opportunities. And even his cultural life was rising through the steady decline of crippling illiteracy. And all of these forces conjoined to cause the Negro to take a new look at himself."⁶

As he reached the close of his address, Morgan State College was treated to a preview of one of the most famous refrains of King's life. His crescendo on June 2, 1958 was very similar to the one he would deliver on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963:

“In a few years from now, you will be able to sing with new vim, ‘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.

That must be come literally true.

Freedom must ring from every mountainside – yes, let it ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire

Let it ring from the mighty mountains of New York

Let it ring from the heightening Alleghanys of Pennsylvania

Let it ring from the snow capped rockies of Colorado

Let it ring from the curvaceous slopes of California

But not only that, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!

Let it ring from Look Out Mountain of Tennessee

Let it ring from every hill and mole hill of Mississippi

Let it ring from every mountain of Alabama

From every mountainside – let freedom ring!

And when this happens all men will be able to stand together, black men, and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, and sing a new song Free at last, free at last, great God Almighty, we are free at last!”

One can see then that this commencement address is a worthy link in the chain of King’s career as an orator. It combines his past, present, and future themes with personal touches to cater to the assembly in Hughes Stadium (note his reference to quoting Shakespeare to his wife Coretta). The fact that you can trace some of the themes from this speech to his early days of the Bus Boycott in 1955 throughout his speeches in the 1960’s displays the timeless nature of his basic belief in justice, equality, and the good in all people. It is a testament to the consistency of his message.

¹ *Baltimore Afro-American Late Edition* 7 June 1958.

² The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University has a useful documentary history of Dr. King’s life available online at www.stanford.edu/group/King/index. The King Papers Project listed numerous secondary sources that hold King’s original words. The source consulted for this excerpt is Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard ed. *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: IPM/Warner Books, 2001). The speech is entitled “Address to First Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) Mass Meeting, At Holt Street Baptist Church,” 5 December 1955.

³ *Afro-American* 7 June 1958.

⁴ Carson and Shepard, ed. "The Birth of a New Nation," Sermon Delivered to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 7 April 1957.

⁵ *Afro-American* 7 June 1958.

⁶ Carson and Shepard, ed. "Speech at the Great March on Detroit" 26 June 1963.