

CITY COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS  
by DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.  
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President Gallagher, members of the faculty of the City University of New York, members of the graduating classes, ladies and gentlemen:

Let me first commend the members of the graduating classes for reaching this significant milestone. Tonight you bid farewell to the friendly security of this academic environment and prepare to enter the clamorous highways of life. As you move out in your various fields of endeavor, you will be moving into a world of catastrophic change and calamitous uncertainty.

Indeed we live in a day of grave crisis. The crisis of this age presents a real challenge to all men of good will. We are challenged to develop a world perspective. No nation or individual can live alone in the modern world. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. All life is inter-related and all men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

John Donne placed this in graphic terms. "No man is an island, entire of itself; everyman is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." And he goes on toward the end to say, "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Another urgent challenge facing mankind today is a responsibility of keeping our moral progress commensurate with our scientific and technological advances. One of the great problems confronting us today is that we have allowed our civilization to outdistance our culture.

Some years ago, Professor MacIver, following the German sociologist, Alfred Weber, gave a clear distinction between civilization and culture. Civilization deals with what we use. Culture with what we are. Civilization is that complex of devices, techniques, instrumentalities and mechanisms by means of which we live. Culture is that realm of spiritual ends, expressed in art, literature, religion and morals for which, at best, we live.

Our dilemma is found in the fact that we have allowed the means by which we live to outdistance the ends for which we live. So much of our modern life can be summarized in the arresting dictum of the poet Thoreau. "Improved means to an unimproved end." Unless we can re-establish meaningful ends for living we may very well destroy ourselves by the misuse of our own instruments.

This presents a special challenge to education. It is clear that education has a two-fold function to perform in the life of man. The one is utility and the other is culture. Education must enable a man to become more efficient and it must also humanize him.

The complete education will equip one with the power of concentration but it will also give him worthy objectives upon which to concentrate. It will give him a critical faculty for precise judgment, but it will also give him profound sympathies with which to temper the asperity of his judgments. It will give him not only knowledge which is power but wisdom which is control. Not only truth which is light but goodness which is warmth.

We are also challenged to maintain a keen sensitivity to the social evils of our day. First that is the evil of war which threatens the very survival of the human race. If we assume that life is worth living, we must find an alternative to war. In a day when stupendous space ships are dashing through outer space and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can win a war. The alternative to disarmament, the alternative to suspension of nuclear tests, and the strengthening of the United Nations may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation.

The second social evil that clouds our day is economic injustice. Millions of people still go to bed hungry at night. Millions of others are deprived of adequate housing, education, and medical care because of economic insecurity. Can we be content while these our brothers are smothering in an airtight cage of poverty? We must work assiduously to bridge the gulf between superfluous, inordinate wealth and abject, deadening poverty. We must not rest until all men have the basic necessities of life, realizing that there is enough, and to spare, in this world for that purpose.

The third social evil that should arouse the conscience of every American is that of racial injustice. This tragic injustice has risen to ominous proportions. Less than twenty-four hours ago a dastardly act occurred in the State of Mississippi which revealed the moral degeneracy to which some will sink on the question of race. Just as the sunlight of reason stemmed into American homes and the wisdom and courage of a President were eloquently expressed in an appeal for justice and human dignity, the most sullen cloud which has appeared on our national horizon has darkened our sky.

In the death of Medger Evers, America has lost one of those pure patriots whose most passionate desire was to be an American, and to be acknowledged as an American. Truly Mr. Evers died in the trenches on the front line where the issue is now joined between that which our President has called for and the last ditch stand of the segregationists who would prefer to create a bloodbath of violence than to relinquish the deadening status quo.

The history of Mississippi is one of ruthless denial of every American concept of justice and law. Here the Reverend George Lee was shot in cold blood. Here teen-age Emmett Till was killed in monstrous fashion. Here a bloodthirsty mob brought about the death of two persons at the State University. This tragic murder of morality, murder of a man one hundred years after emancipation was declared, a murder of a man who peacefully insisted on the elemental freedom of mankind, is an inexpressible tragedy and an unspeakable outrage. As long as acts like this are possible no one in our na-

tion is safe or free. We must honestly see that the harvest of violence that we are now reaping is due to seeds of apathy planted in the past. Therefore, we must work passionately and unrelentingly to rid our nation of every vestige of segregation and discrimination.

It is also necessary to realize that the problem of racial injustice is not merely a sectional problem, but it is a national problem. No section of our country can boast of clean hands in the area of brotherhood. We must see that the de facto segregation of the north is as injurious to the Negro student as the legal segregation of the south. And therefore it means that we must work all over America to make the American dream a reality.

In this period of social change we must guard against two myths that will make it impossible for us to achieve the ideal society. One is the myth of time. This is the idea that only time can solve the problem of racial injustice and that if we will sit down comfortably by the wayside the problem will soon solve itself.

Well, the only answer that we can give to this myth of time is that time is neutral. It can be used either constructively or destructively. At times a people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. And it may well be that we will have to repent in this generation, not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and apathy of the good people.

Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Evolution may be true in the biological realm and in this point Darwin is right. But when Herbert Spencer seeks to apply it to the whole of society, that is very little evidence for it. We must come to see that human progress comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the insurgent forces of evil and the forces of social stagnation. We must see that the time is always ripe to do right, and we must forever help time.

The other myth is that which states that legislation cannot help in solving the problem of racial injustice because you cannot legislate morals. Well, this represents a half-truth. It may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me -- which is pretty important also. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless.

And so through legislation we often control the external effects of bad internal attitudes and that is the need in this session of Congress for strong, vigorous civil rights legislation. And it is very significant that the President of our nation is now preparing to call for civil rights legislation to eliminate segregation in public accommodations where we have inter-state commerce involved, legislation which will speed up school integration, and legislation which will deal with the right to vote for all citizens of our nation.

But realism impels me to be apprehensive about the practical possibility of strong civil rights legislation being enacted during this session of Congress -- if the forces of good will will not get together and bring the necessary pressure to bear so that the Southern senators will not filibuster the civil rights bill to death and so that the coalition of Southern Dixie-crats and right-wing Northern republicans will not again bring into being the legislative incinerator that will burn to ashes any progressive move in the area of civil rights. And therefore all people of good will in America must work hard to see that this job is done.

Some of us have come to the conclusion that if the filibuster is threatened and actually used, it will be necessary to present our very bodies in a non-violent, creative protest in Washington, and it would be necessary, or should be necessary, for thousands and thousands of people to join in such a non-violent march on the Congress of the United States so that this issue can be placed on the conscience of people all over this nation.

I'm only saying that this problem will not be solved in our country until enough people come to see that racial discrimination is morally wrong and they are willing to take a stand against it. For this is, in the final analysis, not merely a political issue, not merely an economic issue, but it is a moral issue. Racial segregation is wrong because it substitutes an I-It relationship for the I-Thou relationship, and relegates persons to the status of things. And therefore we must get rid of it, not merely because it is diplomatically expedient, but because it is morally compelling.

There are certain technical words within every academic discipline which 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 modern psychology. It is the word 'maladjusted.' This word is a ringing cry to modern child psychology. And suddenly we all want to live the well adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But I say to you this evening that there are some things within our social order to which I'm proud to be maladjusted, and to which I call upon men of good will to be maladjusted until the good society is realized.

I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. And I can only say that it may well be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. And this is why I would like to call for the immediate formation of 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 unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth, who could say to his followers: "Love your enemies...Bless them that curse you...Pray for them that spitefully use you."

With 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. With this faith and with this work we will be able to speed up the day when all of God's children will be able to live together as brothers.

With this faith and this work we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith and this determination we will be able to bring into being that great day when all of God's children --black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands right here in this nation and sing, in the words of the old Negro spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"