

"REMAINING AWAKE THROUGH A GREAT REVOLUTION"

Commencement Address for Oberlin College

By Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr

June 1965, Oberlin Ohio

"[Oberlin College] President Carr, members of the faculty, and members of the graduating class of this great institution of learning, ladies and gentlemen:

I can never come to this campus without a deep sense of appreciation and gratitude for all that this great institution has done for the cultural, political, and social life of our nation and the world. By all standards of measurement, Oberlin is one of the great colleges, not only of our nation, but of the world. I am also deeply honored to share the platform today with so many distinguished citizens of our nation - particularly our great secretary of state who, through dedicated and brilliant service, has carved for himself a niche in the annals of our nation's history.

Now to the members of the graduating class: today you bid farewell to the safe security of the academic environment. You prepare to continue your journey on the clamorous highways of life. And I would like to have you think with me on this significant occasion on the subject, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution".

I'm sure that you have read that arresting little story from the pen of Washington Irving entitled *Rip Van Winkle*. The thing that we usually remember about this story is that Rip Van Winkle slept 20 years. But there is another point in that story that is almost always completely overlooked: it was a 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 III of England. When he came down, years later, the sign 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 completely lost; he knew not who he was. This reveals to us that the most striking fact about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not that he slept 20 years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up on the mountain, a great revolution was taking place in the world - indeed, a revolution which would, at points, change the course of history. And Rip Van Winkle knew nothing about it; he was asleep.

There are all too many people who, in some great period of social change, fail to achieve the new mental outlooks that the new situation demands. There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that a great revolution is taking place in our world today. It is a social revolution, sweeping away the old order of colonialism. And in our own nation it is sweeping away the old order of slavery and racial segregation. The wind of change is blowing, and we see in our day and our age a significant development. Victor Hugo said on one occasion that there is nothing more powerful in all the world than an idea whose time has come. In a real sense, the idea whose time has come today is the idea of freedom and human dignity. Wherever men are assembled today, the cry is always the same, "We want to be free." And so we see in our own world a revolution of rising expectations. The great challenge facing every individual graduating today is to remain awake through this social revolution.

I'd like to suggest some of the things that we must do in order to remain awake and to achieve the proper mental attitudes and responses that the new situation demands. First, I'd like to say that we are challenged to achieve a world perspective. Anyone who feels that we can live in isolation today, anyone who feels that we can live without being concerned about other individuals and other nations is sleeping through a revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one. The great challenge now is to make it one in terms of brotherhood.

Now it is true that the geographic togetherness of our world has been brought into being, to a large extent, through modern man's scientific ingenuity. Modern man, through his scientific genius, has been able to dwarf distance and place time in chains. Yes, we've been able to carve highways through the stratosphere, and our jet planes have compressed into minutes distances that once took weeks and months. And so this is a small world from a geographical point of view. What we are facing today is the fact that through our scientific and technological genius we've made of this world a neighborhood. And 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.** This is the great issue facing us today. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone. We are tied together. ___

"REMAINING AWAKE THROUGH A GREAT REVOLUTION"

I remember some time ago Mrs. King and I had the privilege of journeying to that great country, India. And I never will forget the experience - it was a marvelous experience - to meet and talk with the great leaders, with the hundreds of thousands of people all over the cities and villages of that vast country. These experiences will remain dear to me as long as the cords of memory shall lengthen. But I say to you this morning, my friends, that there were those depressing moments, for how can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes evidence of millions of people going to bed hungry? How can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes millions of people sleeping on the sidewalks at night; no beds to sleep in; no houses to go into. How can one avoid being depressed when he discovers that out of India's population of more than 400 million people, some 380 million make an annual income of less than \$90 a year. And most of these people have never seen a physician or a dentist. As I noticed 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." I started thinking about the fact that we spend millions of dollars a day in our country to store surplus food, and I said to myself, "I know where we can store food free of charge - in the wrinkled stomachs of the millions of God's children in Asia and Africa, in South America, and in our own nation who go to bed hungry at night."

All I'm saying is simply this: that all mankind is tied together; all life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. 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 interrelated structure of reality. John Donne caught it years ago and placed it in graphic terms: *No man is an Island, entire of 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; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.* And by believing this, by living out this fact, we will be able to remain awake through a great revolution.

I would like to mention, secondly, that we are challenged to work passionately and unrelentingly to get rid of racial injustice in all its dimensions. Anyone who feels that our nation can survive half segregated and half integrated is sleeping through a revolution. The challenge before us today is to develop a coalition of conscience and get rid of this problem that has been one of the nagging and agonizing ills of our nation over the years. Racial injustice is still the Negro's burden and America's shame. We've made strides, to be sure. We have come a long, long way since the Negro was first brought to this nation as a slave in 1619. In the last decade we have seen significant developments - the Supreme Court's decision outlawing segregation in the public schools, a comprehensive Civil Rights Bill in 1964, and, in a few weeks, a new voting bill to guarantee the right to vote. All of these are significant developments, but I would be dishonest with you this morning if I gave you the impression that we have come to the point where the problem is almost solved.

We must face the honest fact that we still have a long, long way to go before the problem of racial injustice is solved. For while we are quite successful in breaking down the legal barriers to segregation, the Negro is now confronting social and economic barriers which are very real. The Negro is still at the bottom of the economic ladder. He finds himself perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. Millions of Negroes are still housed in unendurable slums; millions of Negroes are still forced to attend totally inadequate and substandard schools. And we still see, in certain sections of our country, violence and man's inhumanity to man in the most tragic way. All of these things remind us that we have a long, long way to go. For in Alabama and Mississippi, violence and murder where civil rights workers are concerned, are popular and favorite pastimes.

Let nobody give you the impression that the problem of racial injustice will work itself out. Let nobody give you the impression that only time will solve the problem. That is a myth, and it is a myth because time is neutral. It can be used either constructively or destructively. And I'm absolutely convinced that the people of ill will in our nation - the extreme rightists - the forces committed to negative ends - have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation, not merely for the vitriolic words and violent actions of the bad people who bomb a church in Birmingham, Alabama, or shoot down a civil rights worker in Selma, 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 wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals. Without this hard work, time becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always right to do right.

"REMAINING AWAKE THROUGH A GREAT REVOLUTION"

There is another reason why we must get rid of racial injustice. Not merely because it is sociologically untenable or because it is politically unsound, not merely to meet the communist challenge or to create a good image in the world or to appeal to African and Asian peoples, as important as that happens to be. In the final analysis racial injustice must be uprooted from American society because it is morally wrong. Segregation is morally wrong, to use the words of the great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, because it substitutes an I-it relationship for the I-thou relationship. Or to use the thinking of Saint Thomas Aquinas, segregation is wrong because it is based on human laws that are out of harmony with the eternal natural and moral laws of the universe. The great Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, said that sin is separation. And what is segregation but an existential expression of man's tragic estrangement - his awful segregation, his terrible sinfulness? And so in order to rise to our full moral maturity as a nation, we must get rid of segregation whether it is in housing, whether it is a *de facto* segregation in the public schools, whether it is segregation in public accommodations, or whether it is segregation in the church. We must see that it is morally wrong. We must see that it is a national problem. And no section of our country can boast of clean hands in the area of brotherhood. We strengthen our nation, above all we strengthen our moral commitment; as we work to get rid of this problem.

Now there is another problem facing us that we must deal with if we are to remain awake through a social revolution. We must get rid of violence, hatred, and war. Anyone who feels that the problems of mankind can be solved through violence is sleeping through a revolution. I've said this over and over again, and I believe it more than ever today. We know about violence. It's been the inseparable twin of Western materialism, the hallmark of its grandeur. I am convinced that violence ends up creating many more social problems than it solves. This is why I say to my people that if we succumb to the temptation of using violence in our struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness. 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. For it is possible to stand up against an unjust system with all of your might, with all of your body, with all of your soul, and yet not stoop to hatred and violence. Something about this approach disarms the opponent. It exposes his moral defenses, weakens his morale, and at the same time, works on his conscience. He doesn't know how to handle it. So it is my great hope that, as we struggle for racial justice, we will follow that philosophy and method of non-violent resistance, realizing that this is the approach that can bring about that better day of racial justice for everyone.

In international relations, we must come to see this. We must find some alternative to war and bloodshed. In a day when man-made vehicles are dashing through outer space, and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death in the stratosphere, no nation can win a world war. It is no longer a choice between violence and non-violence; it is either non-violence or non-existence. The alternative may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation, our earthly habitat transformed into a tragic inferno that even Dante could not imagine. So this is our challenge: to see that war is obsolete, cast into limbo.

I do not wish to minimize the complexity of the problems to be faced in achieving disarmament and peace. But we shall not have the courage, the insight, to deal with such matters unless we are prepared to undergo a mental and spiritual change. It is not enough to say we must not wage war. We must love peace and sacrifice for it. We must fix our visions not merely on the negative expulsion of war, but upon the positive affirmation of peace. We must see that peace represents a sweeter music, far superior to the discords of war. Somehow we must transform the dynamics of the world power struggle from the negative nuclear arms race which no one can win to a positive contest to harness man's creative genius for the purpose of making peace and prosperity a reality for all of the nations of the world. In short, we must shift the arms race into a peace race.

All that I've said is that we must work for peace, for racial justice, for economic justice, and for brotherhood the world over. We have inherited a big house, a great world house in which we have to live together - black and white, Easterners and Westerners, Gentiles and Jews, Protestants and Catholics, Moslem and Hindu. If we all learn to do this we, in a real sense, will remain awake through a great revolution.

"REMAINING AWAKE THROUGH A GREAT REVOLUTION"

I urge you to continue the tradition that you have followed so long, for this institution has probably done more than any other to support the struggle for racial justice. You have given your time, you have given your earnings, you have given your bodies, you have participated in demonstrations, you have participated in the determined struggle to keep this issue in the forefront of the conscience of the nation. I urge you to continue to do so as you go out into your various fields of endeavor. Never allow it to be said that you are silent onlookers, detached spectators, but that you are involved participants in the struggle to make justice a reality.

We sing a little song in our struggle - you've heard it - *We Shall Overcome*. And by that we do not mean that we shall overcome the white man. In the struggle for racial justice the Negro must not seek to rise from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage, to substitute one tyranny for another. A doctrine of black supremacy is as dangerous as a doctrine of white supremacy. God is not interested in the freedom of black men or brown men or yellow men. God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race, the creation of a society where every man will respect the dignity and worth of personality. So when we sing *We Shall Overcome*, we are singing a hymn of faith, a hymn of optimism, a hymn of faith in the future.

I can still sing that song because I have faith in the future. I believe that we, as Negroes, are going to gain our freedom in America because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. Before the Pilgrim fathers landed at Plymouth we were here; before Thomas Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence we were here; before the words of the *Star-Spangled Banner* were written we were here. For more than two centuries our forbears labored here without wages. They made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters; in the midst of the most oppressive conditions they continued to grow and develop. Certainly if the inexpressible cruelties of slavery couldn't stop us, the opposition that we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

Yes, we shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. We shall overcome because Carlyle is right: "No lie can live forever." We shall overcome 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 shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.***

We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right: "Truth, crushed to earth, shall rise again." 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, and speed up the day when, in the words of the prophet Amos, "Justice will roll down like waters; and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Let us stand up. Let us be a concerned generation. Let us remain awake through a great revolution. And we will speed up that great day when the American Dream will be a reality. We, in the final analysis, can gain consolation from the fact that at least we've made strides in our struggle for peace and in our struggle for justice. We still have a long, long way to go, but at least we've made a creative beginning.

And so I close by quoting the words of an old Negro slave preacher who didn't quite have his grammar right, but uttered words of great and profound significance:

***Lord, we ain't what we oughta be;
We ain't what we wanna be;
We ain't what we're gonna be;
But thank God we ain't what we was! "***