

“Facing the Challenge of a New Age”¹

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Booker T. Washington High School Gymnasium²

Rocky Mount, NC

November 27, 1962

Dr. Armstrong,³ and other distinguished platform associates,⁴ ladies and gentlemen, I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to have the privilege of coming to this community and sharing with you this evening. I’m happy to be here for at least two reasons that I can think of: One is I’m happy to see you.

¹ The transcript was completed on August 3, 2015 from a remastered reel-to-reel tape that was digitally restored by George Blood Audio (Philadelphia, PA). This transcript, and all its annotations, were completed by Professor W. Jason Miller (North Carolina State University, Department of English) who thanks William Tolbert for his valuable assistance.

² Booker T. Washington was a segregated school with a gym that held a capacity crowd of approximately 1,800 on this evening. The school closed when the city finally fully integrated its students in 1969. It was named to honor the fact that Washington himself had spoke in the city in early November of 1910. The city’s unique location along a surprisingly prominent railroad actually made it fairly accessible to men like Washington. King himself attended Atlanta’s own segregated Booker T. Washington High School for two years. Knowing the great orator’s speeches well, King had actually quoted from another famous saying of Washington in another speech he delivered less than two months earlier. On this evening, a United Choir Guild of over 100 voices, many dressed in formal white choir robes, provided music under the direction of William T. Grimes. Dr. King was briefly greeted to the city by Rocky Mount Mayor William (Billy) Harrison, then formally introduced by Pastor George W. Dudley, who was also serving as the president of the Rocky Mount Voters and Improvement League.

³ Best known for his role in athletics, Dr. Wiley “Army” Armstrong (1931-1981) was influential throughout the state of North Carolina where he served the organization of black schools for 15 years as the executive director of the North Carolina High School Athletic Conference (NCHSAC). In 1968, he helped over 100 black schools in the state integrate into the NCHSAA. Born in Edgecombe County, he graduated from Shaw University, received his M.D. degree from Meharry Medical College, and was then inducted into the North Carolina High School Athletic Association Hall of Fame in 1997. He was very active in civic and church activities in Rocky Mount, and at the time of this speech, he was the vice-president of the Rocky Mount Voters and Improvement League.

⁴ These distinguished guests included (seated from left to right on the platform behind Dr. King): Rev. Blakely (AME Zion Church), Rev. Jim Costen, Dr. W.T. Armstrong, Rev. M.L. Williams, and Rev. Willie Bowden.

The other is that uh, I'm happy to be on the ground. Dr. Armstrong was asking me about my flight from Atlanta, and I told him that ah, for some reason it was a rather turbulent, bumpy flight. And whenever the skies are acting up a bit and I'm in an airplane, I'm always happy when that plane lands at the airport. [laughter] Now I don't want anybody here to get the impression that I don't have faith in God in the air, it's simply that I've had more experience with him on the ground. [applause] (1:59)

It is a great pleasure to be in this section of the state of North Carolina. I've been in this state many, many times. But this is the first time that I have had the opportunity of coming in this section of the great state of North Carolina⁵. And I want to express my personal appreciation to you and to all of the officers and members of the Rocky Mount Voters and Improvement League for extending the invitation. And it is of course a real privilege to renew the fellowship and friendship with my dear friend George Dudley⁶. We have known each other for several years – I won't tell you how many because I guess I'm, I'm getting old now. But in all seriousness we've had a great long and uh, long relationship. And I'm certainly happy to be in the community where he labors and where he pastors and where he is giving such forthright and dynamic leadership. (3:33).

⁵ Dr. King returned to the northeastern section of North Carolina approximately a month later for a small tour of the area that included various speaking engagements in Elizabeth City, Hertford, and throughout Chowan County. He spoke to approximately 500 people at the armory in Edenton on December 20, 1962.

⁶ Pastor of Mount Zion First Baptist Church (1958-1986), George W. Dudley had first invited King to speak as soon as he arrived in Rocky Mount in February of 1958. King's words here (and in the next sentence) are sincere. The two men were close friends as they grow up together on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta. Hence, Rev. Dudley affectionately called his friend by his childhood name "Mike" when the two spoke personally or corresponded by letter.

This evening I would like to use as a subject from which to speak⁷: “Facing the Challenge of a New Age.”⁸ And I guess in making a civil rights speech, it is improper to take a text from the Bible.⁹ But tonight I want to take a text. Many, many centuries ago a man by the name of John was in prison out on a lonely obscure island called Patmos. And in such a situation he was deprived of almost every freedom but the freedom to think. He thought about many things, he thought about the old Jerusalem. But in the midst of all of this, he lifted his vision to heaven. He saw a new heaven and a new earth,¹⁰ the new Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. And if you will turn over in the book of Revelation, you will find these words: “Behold, I make all things new, the former things are passed away.”¹¹ And in a real sense those of us who live in the twentieth century are able to say with John of old, “I see a new heaven

⁷ King slaps his hand on the podium here as a means to emphasize the title of his speech.

⁸ King first began delivering a series of speeches on August 11, 1956 using either this title or the title “The Birth of a New Age.” Versions of this speech were delivered as late as 1964.

⁹ While quoting scripture in his sermons and public addresses was expected, this is an exceptionally rare time when he used a passage from the Bible as the focus of one of his public addresses.

¹⁰ Speaking in the gymnasium of the segregated school named after Booker T. Washington, King may be starting his speech at the place where Washington’s most famous address ended. It was a speech King knew well. Speaking at the Atlanta Exposition on September 12, 1895, Washington ended his well-known and often reprinted address with these final words: “far above and beyond material benefits will be that higher good, that, let us pray God, will come, in a blotting out of sectional differences and racial animosity and suspicions, in a determination to administer absolute justice, in a willing obedience among all classes to the mandates of the law. This, coupled with our material prosperity, will bring into our beloved South a new heaven and a new earth.”

¹¹ King inverts these two phrases found in the King James translation of the Bible he always used. Revelation 21:4-5 reads: [4] “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow; nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain for the former things are passed away. [5] And he that sat upon the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ And he said unto me, ‘Write: for these words are true and faithful.’ ” By inverting and recasting the original verses of Revelation, King is already modeling his theme that old things will become new. For similar biblical passages, see II Corinthians 5:17 and Isaiah 65:17.

and a new earth. I see the new Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God.” An old order is passing away, and a new order is coming into being.¹² (6:24)

We are familiar with that old order that is passing away because we have lived with it and we have seen it in all its ugly dimensions. We have seen it in other nations in the form of colonialism and imperialism. There are approximately three billion people living in the world today. The vast majority of these people do not live in the West. Most of these people live in Asia and Africa. And for years most of them have dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated and humiliated by some foreign power. But there comes a time when people get tired.¹³ There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time when 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.¹⁴ These people became tired and they decided to rise up in protest. And as a result of that, the vast majority of these former colonial subjects have their independence today. They have broken loose from the old order of colonialism. They are moving on toward the land of political and economic security. “Behold, I make all things new. The former things are passed away.” (8:33)

But not only have we seen the old order in Asia and Africa, we have seen it in our own nation, in the form of slavery and racial segregation. Nobody here tonight has escaped the evils and the tragedies of these systems. Our fore parents’ parents were brought here in 1619 against their wills from the soils of Africa. For 244 years they were treated as things rather than persons. They were treated as

¹² Though he does not quote or reference these verses of Revelation in other versions of this speech, this idea is also the central theme of all of the series of speeches King began delivering in the fall of 1956.

¹³ Using anaphora, King repeats the idea “tired” four consecutive times to begin his next four statements.

¹⁴ Though this is a line that King used often (without changing the name of the month), it is important to remember that the speech is being delivered in the month of November.

depersonalized cogs in a vast plantation machine. And even after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln on September the 22nd in 1862,¹⁵ the Negro discovered that he was still in slavery, because a few years later a system came into being known as segregation backed up by a decision from the Supreme Court of the nation known as the Plessey versus Ferguson Decision, rendered in 1896. (10:12)

Living with slavery and segregation, the Negro lost faith in himself. Many Negroes came to feel that perhaps they were inferior. This is the tragedy of the segregation. It isn't only bad because it does something to the physical body and makes for physical inconveniences, but it is bad because it does something to the soul. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and it gives the segregated a false sense of inferiority. The Negro living with this system for years felt that he was inferior. But then something happened to the Negro. Circumstances and forces of history caused him to take a new look at himself. The Negro came to feel that he was somebody. Negro masses all over began to reevaluate themselves. His religion revealed to him that God loves all of his children and that all men are made in his image, and that figuratively speaking every man from a base black to a treble white is significant on God's keyboard.¹⁶ And so the Negro could now [applause] And so the Negro could now unembarrassedly cry out with the eloquent poet:

Fleecy locks and black complexion
cannot forfeit nature's claim
Skin may differ, but affection
Dwells in black and white the same.

¹⁵ This date is especially important as the year in which the speech is being delivered, 1962, marks the centennial of this event.

¹⁶ This idea received the loudest applause from the crowd when King delivered this line seven months later before 10,000 people in Cobo Hall at the Detroit March for Jobs on June 23, 1963.

Were I so tall as to reach the pole
 Or to grasp the ocean at its span,
 I must be measured by my soul
 The mind is the standard of the man.¹⁷ (12:41)

With this new sense of dignity and this new sense of self-respect, a new Negro came into being with a new determination to struggle, to suffer, to sacrifice, and even die if necessary in order to be free.

[applause]

Then something else happened. In 1954 the Supreme Court rendered a new decision. Back in 1857 the Supreme Court of the United States rendered what was known as the Dred Scott Decision and that decision said in substance that the Negro has no rights that the white man is bound to respect, that he is merely property subject to the dictates of his owner. In 1896 the Supreme Court established the doctrine of "Separate but Equal" as the law of the land. In 1954, May 17, the Supreme Court examined the legal body of segregation and pronounced it constitutionally dead. It said in substance that the old Plessey doctrine must go, that separate facilities are inherently unequal and that to segregate a child on the basis of his race is to deny that child equal protection of the law. (14:19)

And since that day we've seen many changes. To put it figuratively in biblical language, we've broken loose from the Egypt of slavery, and we have moved through the wilderness of segregation and now we stand on the border of the promised land of integration. The old order is passing away.

[applause] There can be no gainsaying of the fact now, that old man segregation is on his deathbed and

¹⁷ These lines of poetry actually collapse the ideas of two poets. The first four lines above come from Englishman William Cowper's poem "The Negro's Complaint" (1788). Cowper was encouraged to write the poem by John Newton. The next four lines were written by Isaac Watts in his *Horae Lyricae* (1706). When he was a student, King likely heard these lines (already combined) from Benjamin Mays who used them when he spoke regularly in chapel services at Morehouse College. King delivered these lines from memory, and he used them frequently.

the only thing uncertain about it is how costly the South will make the funeral. The old order passes away. [applause] Behold, I make all things new. Former things are passed away.

But whenever anything new comes into history, it brings with it new challenges and new responsibilities. And I want to deal with some of the challenges that we face as a result of this emerging new age. First, we are challenged to develop a world perspective. While we are concerned about our particular problem here in the South and in the United States, we must not lose sight of problems that exist in other areas of the world. We must develop a world perspective. You see the world in which we live today is geographically one. And now we are challenged to make it one in terms of brotherhood. Now it is true that the geographical togetherness of the modern world has been brought into being to a large extent through man's scientific genius. 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 days and weeks. I think Bob Hope¹⁸ has adequately described this new jet age in which we live. He said it is an age in which it is possible to take a non-stop flight from Los Angeles to New York City and if on taking off in Los Angeles you develop hiccups, you will "hic" in Los Angeles and "cup" in New York City. You know it is possible, because of the time difference, to leave Tokyo, Japan on Sunday morning and arrive in Seattle, Washington on the preceding Saturday night, and when your friends meet you at the airport 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: man through his scientific genius has made of this world a neighborhood. And now through our moral and ethical commitment, we must make of it a brotherhood. Men everywhere must learn to live together as

¹⁸ Bob Hope (1903-2003) was a popular American comedian who starred in movies and performed most famously in United Service Origination (USO) shows where he entertained military personnel for over fifty years.

brothers or we will all die together as fools. This is what we [applause] must do. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone; we are interdependent. (18:43)

Sometime ago Mrs. King and I journeyed to that great country known as India.¹⁹ I never will forget the experience. It was a marvelous opportunity to meet and to talk with and to come to know the great leaders of India, and to meet and talk with people in the cities and the villages all over that vast country. And these experiences will remain dear to me as long as the cords of memory shall lengthen. But I say to you tonight, my friends, that there were those depressing²⁰ moments, for how can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes millions of people going to bed hungry at night? 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 go in, no houses to sleep in? How can one avoid being depressed when he discovers that out of India's population of more than 400 million people, more than 360 million make an annual income of less than 70 dollars a year? Most of these people have never seen a doctor or a dentist. And as I stood there I had to notice these conditions. Something within me cried out, can we America stand idly by and not be concerned? 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 that in America we spend more than a million dollars a day to store surplus food and I said to myself, I know where we can store that food free of charge in the wrinkled stomachs of the millions of God's children over the world who go to bed hungry at night. And maybe we spend far too

¹⁹ King is referencing the famous trip the two made to India with L.D. Reddick in early 1959. King's original and earnest plans for this trip also included a visit to Russia, but this was abandoned as a visit to this communist country during the height of the Cold War would have had too many negative and damaging political implications.

²⁰ Again using anaphora, King uses variants on the words "depressing" or "depressed" four consecutive times.

much [applause interrupts] And maybe we spend far too much of our national budget establishing military bases around the world rather than bases of genuine concern and understanding. (21:09)

All I'm saying is simply this: that all life is interrelated, and all men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. And 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. [applause] This is the way life is made, interrelated. John Donne quoted some 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.²¹

And he goes on toward the end to say:

Any man's death diminishes me,

Because I am²² involved in mankind,

Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;

²¹ Though not originally a poem, this passage (memorized by King) is from the first four lines of John Donne's poem now referred to as either "For Whom the Bell Tolls" or "No Man is an Island." The original passage was written in prose in 1624 as Meditation 17 from Donne's Devotions upon Emergent Occasions.

²² King taps the podium here.

It tolls for thee.²³

We are challenged to see this more than ever before. (22:21)

There is a second challenge which is particularly relevant for those of us who have been on the oppressed end of the old order. We must achieve excellence in our various fields of endeavor. Doors are opening now in many, many areas. We are challenged to be ready to enter these doors as they open. I see many young people here tonight, and if there is any one thing that I would like to leave with you, it is this: that opportunities are coming to us, today's young people, that did not come to our mothers and fathers. The great challenge is to prepare ourselves in order to be ready to face these challenging opportunities. Ralph Waldo Emerson said in a lecture back in 1871 that if a man can write a better book, or preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, even if he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door.²⁴ This will become increasingly true, and so we must set out to do a good job. We must work hard. We must realize that because of conditions of oppression we have been thrown behind culturally and otherwise, and that means we may have to work a little harder than other people. For he who gets behind in the race will forever remain behind and run faster than the man in front. This is what we are challenged to do. Let us set out to do a good job, not just a good Negro job. For in this new order we, we, we will be competing with people; in the old order maybe it was all right to just think of competing with Negroes. If you are setting out to be just a good Negro schoolteacher, or a good Negro doctor, or a good Negro lawyer, or good Negro

²³ These are lines 10-13 from Donne's "poem."

²⁴ Significantly altered by King, Emerson's original lines read: "If a man has good corn, or wood, or boards, or pigs to sell, or can make better chairs or knives, crucibles or church organs, than anybody else, you will find a broad hard-beaten road to his house, though it be in the woods."

preacher, or good Negro skill laborer, or good Negro beautician, or a good Negro barber, you have already flunked your matriculation exam for entrance into the University of Hope. [applause] A challenge comes to us to do a good job. And do that job so well that the living, the dead, or the unborn couldn't do it better. If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Raphael painted pictures, sweep streets like Michelangelo carved marble, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music and like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, "Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well." [applause]

If you can't be a pine on the top of the hill,
 be a scrub in the valley—but be
 the best little scrub on the side of the rill,²⁵
 Be a bush if you can't be a tree.

If you can't be a highway, just be a trail;
 if you can't be the sun, be a star.
 For it isn't by size that you win or you fail—
 be the best of whatever you are.²⁶ [applause]

²⁵ The final word of this delivered line (and the original poem) is "rill" though it's often noted in other contexts as being "hill."

²⁶ Also recited from memory, this poetry includes the first four lines and then the last four lines (13-16) of Douglass Malloch's "Be the Best of Whatever You Are" (1926). As with the Cowper / Watts poetry earlier, King may have first heard these lines from Benjamin Mays.

There's a real challenge to work courageously and untiringly to remove every vestige of segregation from this nation, North and South. Let us not compromise²⁷ at this point. Segregation is wrong. Let us not compromise at this point. Segregation is a cancer in the body politic which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized. Let us not compromise on this. Segregation is an illegitimate child born as the result of an illicit intercourse between injustice and immorality.²⁸ We cannot compromise on this. We must make it clear that we will no longer be content with the doctrine of separate but equal. We will no longer be content with the building of a big school building for Negroes only, however beautiful it is. It may be air conditioned but if it is segregated, it is an inferior school.²⁹ [applause] We must make it clear³⁰ that we are no longer content with token integration, for token integration is little more than token democracy. We must make it clear that we are concerned about shaking the very structure of this society to the point that a moral balance comes into being. And that genuine good faith integration will become a reality. (28:41)

But it isn't just coming. Somebody here tonight believes that. Somebody's looking at me tonight who feels that we can just sit down and do nothing, and it'll just come. Well, I'm afraid that you don't know history if you believe that. History is a long story, and sometimes tragic story, of the fact that privileged groups never give up their privileges voluntarily.³¹ They never do it without strong

²⁷ King restates the ideas of defining segregation and then speaks of "not compromising" in four consecutive sentences.

²⁸ This idea previews another line to come later about everyone needing to be something of a "creative obstetrician." These ideas highlight the alternative title King sometimes used for this speech: "The Birth of a New Age."

²⁹ These last three sentences took on added significance as they were delivered in the gym of a segregated school.

³⁰ During his pause, King can be heard tapping the podium here.

³¹ Though he will later distance himself from "communism," King's logic reveals just how well he understood Karl Marx's ideas on revolution.

resistance. History is a long story of the fact that time never solves a problem by itself, for time is neutral. It can be used either constructively or destructively. And he who is sitting around waiting on time will be waiting another century.³² [applause] We've got to see this and see that it is necessary to work and struggle. And we must know that integration is not some lavish dish that the white man will pass out on a silver platter while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite. We are going to be free, we're going to have to work for it. We're going to have to struggle³³ for it. We're going to have to sacrifice for it. (30:19)

We need to do three or four things that I want to mention briefly. If we're going to break down the barriers of segregation, we must continue to register and vote in large numbers, for I am convinced that one of the most significant steps that the Negro can take at this hour³⁴ is that short walk to the voting booth. It can change conditions. I have seen it in so many situations. I lived in Montgomery, Alabama where we didn't have the ballot. They used various conniving methods to keep us from getting it. And so we didn't have it. And because of that we had a city commission recalcitrant at every point. We had a community that stood in the way of our longings and aspirations at every point. I live in Atlanta, Georgia now and we have the ballot. And I can say to you that because of that, things are

³² "Another century" can be understood in the context of King's earlier reference to the Emancipation Proclamation being written exactly one hundred years earlier than the year he is speaking.

³³ King strikes the podium once here.

³⁴ King strikes the podium here.

happening in Atlanta. No mayor can be elected in Atlanta, Georgia³⁵ without the Negro votes.³⁶ A very interesting thing happened. The man who is the mayor now was running against an arch-segregationist in the run-off, a man named Lester Maddox. Mr. Lester Maddox, he ended up getting more white votes than Mr. Ivan Allen, who's the present mayor. Mr. Lester Maddox got 35,000 white votes; Mr. Ivan Allen got 33,000 white votes. (32:08) but the other side is Mr. Ivan Allen got 32,000 Negro votes and Mr. Lester Maddox didn't get a single Negro vote and Ivan Allen beat him overwhelmingly 65,000 to 35,000.³⁷ Mr. Allen was running for Governor of Georgia, he was a segregationist, he went around the state saying that he would preserve segregation.³⁸ But when he started running for the mayor of Atlanta, Georgia, and seeing the powerful Negro votes, he said I've seen the light now, I know that integration is coming. And as soon as he got elected, he started working in that light.³⁹ I'm speaking

³⁵ King tapped his knuckles on the podium several times here to emphasize his point.

³⁶ King is referencing the run-off election of 1961 following the retirement of former mayor William B. Hartsfield. After Muggsy Smith was eliminated from contention, Ivan Allen went on to win when he received 65% of the vote.

³⁷ In regard to the actual numbers, in the predominantly black precincts, Allen secured an overwhelming 21,611 votes to Maddox's 237.

³⁸ King is referencing Allen's unsuccessful bids for office in 1954 and 1957 when he ran on a segregationist platform.

³⁹ Despite his past, (and King's brief portrayal of his first two years in office which he offers here in the speech) Allen made several significant and genuine strides in race relations. On his first day in office as mayor, he removed all the "white" and "colored" signs in city hall. Allen was the only southern politician to testify in Congress on behalf of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This was such a bold move that he received death threats that forced him to be under police protection for a year. Moreover, Allen personally organized a 1,500 person banquet honoring King for winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He rushed to Coretta King's side and was still there when word of her husband's assassination was confirmed. Finally, Allen himself took to the streets without a helmet trying to stop a 1966 riot in his city sparked by the death of a black resident at the hands of a white officer's bullet.

King's comments here may reflect more than the point he wants to make about the importance of the ballot. Allen's lasting error as mayor came at this very time. In late 1962, Allen erected a fence to separate a white neighborhood from a black neighborhood. It was eventually removed to avoid legal challenges. This act coincides with the historical moment in time when King is delivering this speech.

about the power of the ballot. We will be able to change things, change the structure of, the political structure of the South and of the nation if we will go out and get the ballot. (33:12)

Now we've got to give of our means if we're gonna' be free. Oh it is a shame that we give so little to such a serious cause. And I think about the amount of money that we give to the civil rights movement, to the organizations working in this field, and I become ashamed. And it will be tragic indeed if historians will be able to say in future generations⁴⁰ that at the height of the twentieth century the Negro spent⁴¹ more for frivolities than he did for his own freedom and for the cause of justice. So let us give big money for the cause of freedom. (34:08)

Then we've gotta continue to work for meaningful legislation. This is important. I know some people say, well, you can't legislate morals. They say, why do you think about legislation? You can't change anybody through legislation. You've read this argument. They said it's through education. So if you work through educational processes a hundred or two hundred years, the whole thing will work itself out. Well, not only is it true that we can't afford to wait that long, the other side is true. It may be true that morality cannot be legislated but behavior can be regulated.⁴² It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, religion and education will have to do that, but it can keep him from

⁴⁰ King slaps the podium here to emphasize this point.

⁴¹ To reinforce, but soften what he did moments earlier by slapping the podium, King now taps the podium here. As techniques traditionally used by preachers, his call in the very next sentence might be understood as being similar to a preacher asking for a tithe or offering during a church service. One of King's objectives with this speech and personal appearance was to help raise visibility and funds for the Rocky Mount Voters and Improvement League.

⁴² In typical call and response fashion, a voice in the background from one of the distinguished members on the platform can be heard saying: "I hear you."

lynching me,⁴³ and I think that's pretty important also. [applause]⁴⁴ So legislation may not be able to change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless and this is what we must do through edu-ah-legislation. It will take religion and education to change bad internal attitudes, but legislation can control the external effects of those bad internal attitudes. And so we must work for meaningful legislation, civil rights legislation. It's about time now for all of the Negroes in North Carolina to get registered and vote and send some senators up to Washington who will vote right on civil rights. I wish we could have sent Frank Graham⁴⁵ up there a few years ago, and everything would be all right.

[applause] (36:12)

And also, we must continue to work through the courts. This is important that we work through the courts, to clarify the law and to break down the system of segregation wherever we can. And no

⁴³ Lynching, the illegal hanging, burning, and sometimes mutilation occurred most often to black men, women, and teenage children throughout the North and South. Some estimates range as high as 10,000 victims. The number of 4,742 is the number of confirmed victims from 1880-1968. Teeth, toes, bones, and other items from these tortures were often sold as souvenirs. Postcards were made and sold for pennies apiece, and by the first few years of the twentieth century, this business grossed over one million dollars a year in numbers not adjusted for inflation.

⁴⁴ Again, someone on the platform responds to King with "I hear you."

⁴⁵ Though appointed to the U.S. Senate on March 29, 1949 to fill the vacancy caused by the death of J. Melville Broughton, Frank Graham lost the nomination after serving until November 26, 1950. Graham, who served as president of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from 1930-1949, was a liberal progressive on race relations. Graham lost a dramatic 1950 bid for the senate to Willis Smith. After Graham won 48.9% of the vote in the primary (Smith secured only 40.5%), a run-off was allowed under state law. Though Smith originally declined the run-off opportunity, he was buoyed by the timely passing of the Sweatt v. Painter case in which the NC Supreme court outlawed segregation in schools. Reactionaries against this, as well as the appearance of Jesse Helms personally joining a rally outside of Smith's home changed Smith's mind. Graham was labeled as a socialist and "communist supporter." Unable to overcome flyers that read "White People Wake Up," Graham lost the run-off to Smith by 19,325 votes. Graham was also hurt by the fact that the majority of blacks that were registered to vote were registered as Republicans. The campaign is generally regarded as one of the most overtly racist elections in North Carolina history. Run-off elections are no longer allowed in primaries when the top candidate has at least 40% of the vote.

one can doubt that a brilliant job has been done dating from the Supreme Court's decision of 1954,⁴⁶ all the way up and then decisions before that, by brilliant attorneys all over this nation, and by the brilliant and dedicated and diligent work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. We must continue to work through the courts and support this great organization and all those who are seeking to change these conditions. (37:06)

And then after working through the courts, and after working through legislation, after going to the polls, let us never forget that a court order can never deliver rights, it can only declare them. And only when people themselves begin to act are laws and rights which are on paper given life blood. And so every individual must be something of a creative obstetrician presiding at the birth of a new age,⁴⁷ willing to engage in non-violent direct action to supplement what can be done through the courts. And I say that at this point: marvelous things have been done. Non-violent direct action⁴⁸ is a powerful instrument. Let us never overlook the power of non-violence. It has a way of disarming the opponent. It exposes his moral defenses. It weakens his morale and at the same time it works on his conscience and he just doesn't know what to do with it. He doesn't know how to handle it. If he doesn't beat you, wonderful. If he beats you, you develop the quiet courage of somehow accepting blows without retaliating. If he doesn't put you in jail, wonderful. Nobody with any sense likes to go to jail. But if he puts you in jail, you go in that jail and transform it from a dungeon of shame to a haven of freedom and

⁴⁶ King is referencing the historic Brown v. Board of Education case that theoretically outlawed segregation in schools.

⁴⁷ "The Birth of a New Age" was the alternative title King sometimes used for this speech throughout 1956.

⁴⁸ Different from merely protesting, "non-violent direct action" is used to describe an approach that calls for an immediate and measurable change that has been clearly defined.

human dignity.⁴⁹ [applause] (39:00) Even if he tries to kill you, you develop the power within, seeing that some things are so dear, some things are so precious, some things are so eternally true that they're worth dying for. And if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live. [applause] If a man is 30 or 33 as I happen to be, facing some great challenge and truth, some great creative opportunity, some great need to stand up for what is right, and he is afraid to do it because he fears that he may lose a job or that his house will get bombed or that he will be killed, and he wants to live a few more years. He may live until he's 80, but he is just as dead at 33 as he is at 80, and just as tainted[interrupted by applause] (40:15) Somehow the cessation of breathing in his life is merely the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. He died when he failed to take a stand for what was right, this is what non-violence says to every individual who stands up in the struggle: that some things are so great and dear that they are worth dying for. (40:47)

And it also says that you can work for that which is morally right with means that are right. You can work to secure moral ends through moral means. One of the great philosophical debates of history has been over the question of ends and means. And there have been those who have argued that the ends justifies the means. I think the great weakness and tragedy of communism⁵⁰ is right here. Read Lenin and as he says: lying, deceit, violence, withholding and concealing the truth are all justifiable means to bring about the end of the classless society.⁵¹ This is where non-violence breaks with

⁴⁹ The phrase "human dignity" was often used by A. Philip Randolph, the dean of civil rights leaders at this time and the official organizer of the March on Washington in 1963.

⁵⁰ Though he clearly understands the principles of both Marx and Lenin, King intentionally distances himself from accusations of being a communist sympathizer. It is interesting to note here that King only distances himself from communism in regards to what he characterizes as its acceptable method of violence. The general idea of revolution, change, and a shared classlessness are not places where his ideals "break" with Lenin.

⁵¹ The language is a bit confusing. King is not trying to say that there will be an end to a classless society. Rather, he is trying to say that the end they want to bring into being is one of a classless society.

communism and any other system which argues that the end justifies the means, because somehow the end is pre-existent in the means and immoral means cannot bring about moral ends. And this is what non-violence says. [applause] (41:44)

And then it makes it possible for the individual to seek to get that which is right and defeat an unjust social order, and yet maintain an active love for the perpetrators of that unjust social order. You can stand up against segregation and love the segregationist. This is the power of non-violence. No, we need not hate.⁵² We need not become bitter. We need not get our weapons. We have a powerful weapon, the power of our souls. Hate is dangerous. It affects the hater as well as the hated. Psychiatrists are telling us now that many of the strange things that happen in the sub-conscious, many of the inner conflicts are rooted in hate. And so they are now saying, love or perish. And isn't it wonderful that we have a weapon rooting from our great tradition of Christianity which says there is another way. We need not hate. There is another way. We need not use violence. And there is another way. And we can stand before our most violent opponents and say, we will meet your natural capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we will still love you.⁵³ We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. And so throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children and as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drive us out on some wayside road and beat us and leave us half

⁵² In response to King, a voice can be heard saying "That's right."

⁵³ In the use of epistrophe that follows in "we will still love you," King is alluding to lines 15-16 from Langston Hughes's poem, "Brotherly Love" (1956) that was written in direct response to King's role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56.

dead, we will still love you. Be assured [interrupted by applause] Be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and to your conscience that we will win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory. [applause] (44:21)

Yes my friends, I believe that the answer this is the limited insight that I have tried to gain in this whole struggle. And if we will do this, we will⁵⁴ be able to achieve not only de-segregation but also integration. And we will not go into the new age with the wrong attitude. We will not seek to rise from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage thus subverting justice. We will not substitute one tyranny for another. Black supremacy is as dangerous as white supremacy. And God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men, brown men, and yellow men. God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race. [applause] And so we have a marvelous opportunity to go on in these days ahead and break down all of the barriers of segregation. We may have to sit in sometime. We may have to wade in sometimes.⁵⁵ We may have to stand in sometime.⁵⁶ We may have to kneel in sometime. We may have to picket sometime. We may have to boycott sometime. We may have to jail-in sometime. But all of this together is to get America out of the dilemma in which she finds herself as a result of segregation. (45:58)

This has been the beauty of the student movement. These young people have taken our deep groans and passionate yearnings for freedom, and filtered them in their own tender souls and fashioned them into a creative protest, which is an epic known all over the world. And for all of these months they

⁵⁴ Engaging in anaphora, “We will” is used here to begin four consecutive ideas.

⁵⁵ “Wade ins” occurred when blacks protested against segregated pools and beaches.

⁵⁶ With his use of “We may” at the beginning of these seven sentences coupled with the repetition of the word “sometime” at their end, King is combining anaphora and epistrophe here.

have moved in a uniquely meaningful orbit imparting life and heat to distant satellites. And as a result of their work, more than 150 cities in the South have integrated their lunch counters⁵⁷ within the last two years without a single court suit. Buses are integrated all over the South, even in Alabama, and in some places in Mississippi, and you know when that can happen some work has been done. [laughter] So we see something taking place. And I can only say to you tonight: Let us continue. As we live in this new age with all of its great possibilities. Let us maintain faith in the future.

I know some of you, and suddenly all over, we get weary. I know that. And somebody is asking here tonight, how long will it take to solve this problem?⁵⁸ How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne? Somebody's asking tonight,⁵⁹ when will wounded justice be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men? When will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night, (48:04) plucked from weary souls the manacles of fear and the chains of death. How long somebody's asking will justice be crucified, and truth be buried?⁶⁰ How long will we have to struggle in

⁵⁷ This would have had great resonance for the audience as the integration of lunch counters had direct ties to North Carolina. The Royal Ice Cream Parlor was the site of a protest in Durham, NC on June 23, 1957 and the Greensboro sit-ins gained national attention (including from King himself) in February of 1960.

⁵⁸ King concluded with his most famous version of this "How Long, Not Long" set piece when he spoke from the steps of the capital at the final march to Selma, Alabama, on March 25, 1965.

⁵⁹ Someone can be heard responding "Yes."

⁶⁰ King's dramatic imagery featuring a sacred throne, justice crucified, and truth buried establishes the imagery to come in the "not long" section of his speech where he braids together his own imagery with that of other poets. This movement from crucifixion to the second coming highlights the main theme of the speech in several highly imaginative ways. In addition to its biblical imagery, it also emphasizes the import role poetry played in King's ability to communicate his theme.

order to get those rights which are basic, God-given rights deep down in the Constitution of this nation?⁶¹ (48:30).

And I can only say to you tonight: not long.⁶² I do not know the date, but I've read a few lines in history. And it tells us a story, a story that has broad moral implications, and that is that there is a check-point in the universe, and that evil may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the powerful forces of justice and goodness. It tells us in our own Christian faith that evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy the palace and Christ the cross. But one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C. so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. It tells us a story: not long. How long? Not long, that is the story of my faith.

⁶¹ King's use of "how long" echoes several passages of poetry in the Bible. It's important to remember that these are not only passages of scripture, but also passages of poetry. The first two verses of Psalm 13 are the most relevant:

How long wilt thou forget me, Oh Lord? for ever?

How long wilt thou hide my face from me?

How long shall I take counsel in my soul,

having sorrow in my heart daily?

How long shall mine enemy be exalted over me?

In addition to Psalm 13, the phrase "how long" is also used in Psalm 35:17, Psalm 79:5,10, Psalm 80:4, and Psalm 89:46. Other biblical questions that begin with "how long" include Habakkuk 1:2, Exodus 10:3, I Samuel 16:1, and Jeremiah 31:22.

⁶² A laugh can be heard here. Because of where it occurs (as King moves from "How long?" to "Not long") it is likely from the same man who laughs later when King moves from listing states in the North to then extend freedom to mountains in the South. Though not certain, this laugh (and the laughs that follow) are most likely from Rev. Blakley who was known for his unusually high and cackling laugh.

There is something in this universe which justifies Carlyle in saying, “No lie can live forever.”⁶³

There is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, “Truth crushed to earth will rise again.”⁶⁴ There is something in this universe which justified James Russell Lowell in saying,

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.⁶⁵

There is something in this universe which justified the Bible in saying: you shall reap what you sow.⁶⁶

How long? Not long. [applause] (50:22) That is the story . . .⁶⁷

⁶³ This is from Thomas Carlyle’s (1795-1881) prose piece The French Revolution (1837) where the Englishman wrote: “For if there be a Faith, from of old, as we often repeat, that no Lie can live for ever. The very Truth has to change its vesture, from time to time; and be born again. But all Lies have sentence of death written down against them, and Heaven’s Chancery itself; and, slowly or fast, advance incandescently towards their hour” (Part I, Book VI, chapter 3).

⁶⁴ The American Bryant (1794-1878) begins stanza 9 of the poem “The Battlefield” (1839): “Truth, crushed to earth, shall rise again / the eternal years of God are hers.”

⁶⁵ Lines 38-40 of the American James Russell Lowell’s (1819-1891) poem “The Present Crisis” (1844) read:

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.

⁶⁶ Three passages from the Bible that speak of “reaping what you sow” are Galatians 6:7, Job 4:8, and 2 Corinthians 9:6.

⁶⁷ King’s inaudible next words were likely “That is the story . . . of my faith.”

And so my friends of Rocky Mount, I have a dream tonight. It is a dream rooted⁶⁸ deeply in the American dream⁶⁹:

I have a dream that one day down in Sasser County, Georgia,⁷⁰ where they burned two churches down a few days ago⁷¹ because Negroes wanted to register and vote, one day right down there little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls and walk the streets as brothers and sisters.

⁶⁸ King's metaphor of "rooted" suggests that this dream has the American dream as one of its roots, but it has other roots as well that have enabled it to grow into something all its own. Two of the other roots would include biblical prophecy and the poetry of Langston Hughes.

⁶⁹ King began taking the idea of the American dream as a subject for his speeches as early as 1960.

⁷⁰ Sasser County, Georgia does not exist. At least two explanations are possible for why King references Sasser as a county. First, it is possible that King, using this brand new set piece, simply slipped and referred to the city as a county. Second, King may have intentionally created a new county that doesn't exist to highlight the fact that he is now dreaming of a new world. With its historically and well known counties like "Bad Baker" County and "Terrible Terrell" County, the fictitious Sasser would be a better and brighter place in which children of all colors could truly join hands as brothers and sisters. Sasser, Georgia, is located in Terrible Terrell" County. As such, this vision of "Sasser County" would truly represent the old order passing away and the new order coming into being.

⁷¹ King had recently visited the city of Sasser exactly eleven days earlier where he spoke at a ceremony to commemorate the burning of two churches (Mount Mary Baptist and Mount Olive Baptist). Sasser was also very much on his mind as he had just finished traveling to New York City to raise \$10,000 from Nelson Rockefeller to restore these buildings.

I have a dream that one day right here in Rocky Mountain, North Carolina,⁷² the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will meet at the table of brotherhood, knowing that out of one blood God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth.⁷³

⁷² Only two sentences earlier, King rightly named the city as “Rocky Mount.” Here his choice to call the city “Rocky Mountain” suggests intentionality. This choice can be understood as King imagining that this segregated city will become integrated as he continues to dream of a new world. The choice adds to the prophetic and visionary nature of this dream.

⁷³ King is alluding to Acts 17: 26. This verse has a long history of being used to argue in favor of equality for African Americans. In context, the verse reads: “²⁴ God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; ²⁵ Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; ²⁶ And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation. ²⁷ That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: ²⁸ For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.”

I have a dream⁷⁴ that one day men all over this nation will recognize that all men were created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.⁷⁵

I have a dream tonight.⁷⁶ One day the words of Amos will become real:

“Let justice roll down like waters

and righteousness like a mighty stream.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ It is no coincidence that King’s cadence, theme, and repetition of “I have a dream” bear a very strong resemblance to Langston Hughes’s (1902-1967) poem “I Dream a World” (1941). King knew this poem well, and he even rewrote it line by line and placed it in the same position of his speech when he delivered the first version of this address in Buffalo, NY, on August 11, 1956. Hughes’s poem reads:

I dream a world where man
 No other man will scorn,
 Where love will bless the earth
 And peace its paths adorn.
 I dream a world where all
 Will know sweet freedom's way,
 Where greed no longer saps the soul
 Nor avarice blights our day.
 A world I dream where black or white,
 Whatever race you be,
 Will share the bounties of the earth
 And every man is free,
 Where wretchedness will hang its head
 And joy, like a pearl,
 Attends the needs of all mankind-
 Of such I dream, our world!

⁷⁵ King is referencing Thomas Jefferson’s words from the Declaration of Independence (1776): “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.”

⁷⁶ After introducing the theme of his new set piece with the words “deeply rooted in the American dream,” King has doubled the cadence of his previous uses of anaphora and epistrophe in this speech by creating eight total lines that begin with “I have a dream.”

⁷⁷ King is referencing the poetry (and prophecy) of Amos 5:24: “But let justice roll down like waters / And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

I have a dream tonight:

One day every valley shall be exalted

and every mountain and hill shall be made low.

Crooked places will be made straight,

and the rough places will be made strange,⁷⁸

The glory of the Lord will be revealed

and all flesh shall see it together.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Though the end of this word is nearly mumbled (or lost in his vibrato delivery), King seems to say the word “strange.” In Isaiah 40: 4, this word is “plain.” His pause before this phrase (beginning with “and”) may suggest that he has forgotten part of this passage. This may be due in part to the fact that this is a new set piece in his repertoire. However, another explanation is that King has (perhaps for the third time) intentionally mispronounced a place name to communicate his vision of a new world. A world in which Sasser County replaces “Terrible Terrell” County, “Rocky Mountain” replaces Rocky Mount, and the “strange” replaces what is “plain” highlight the prophetic nature of this dream. Taking the idea mentioned earlier in this verse of Isaiah, King’s incantatory vision transforms the “rough places” of the world (the racist and / segregated cities of Sasser and Rocky Mount) by making them wonderfully new and “strange.”

⁷⁹ The poetry (and prophecy) of Isaiah 40: 4-5 reads: “

Every valley shall be exalted,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low:

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough places plain:

And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,

and all flesh shall see it together

For the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

I have a dream tonight.⁸⁰ One day men will do unto others as they would have others to do unto them.⁸¹

I have a dream tonight.⁸² One day my little daughter⁸³ and my two sons will grow up in a world not conscious of the color of their skin but only conscious of the fact that they are members of the human race.⁸⁴

I have a dream tonight that someday we will be free.⁸⁵ We will be free.⁸⁶ [applause]

We will be standing here, we will be able to sing with new meaning

My country, tis of thee,

Sweet land of liberty,

⁸⁰ A voice responds by saying "Tell it."

⁸¹ This idea is often referred to as "The Golden Rule." It is taken from what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 7:12: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

⁸² The same voice again responds by saying "Tell it."

⁸³ King's daughter Bernice was born March 28, 1963. Hence, by the time King speaks later on August 28, 1963 at the March on Washington, this line becomes "my four little children."

⁸⁴ This is one of the most recognizable ideas mentioned by King in his address at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. In that context he spoke words more similar to the ones he used in Detroit on June 23, 1963. During his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington D.C., King said: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

⁸⁵ The idea of freedom that King declares here is further amplified by the final words of the speech when he recites lyrics to the song "Free at Last."

⁸⁶ Though no press coverage from this event even mentioned the fact that King spoke about a "dream," this moment marks what is clearly the loudest ovation of the entire address.

Of thee I sing.

Land where my fathers died,

Land of the pilgrims' pride,

May⁸⁷ every mountain side,

Let freedom ring.⁸⁸

That must become true all over America if this is to be a great nation. 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 Alleghenies of Pennsylvania,

Let it ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado,

Let it ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

⁸⁷ King's subtle shift from the song's word "From" to his word "May" could suggest that he is dreaming of a time when the earth itself will sing of the new world as opposed to merely hearing men and women singing as they stand on these mountain ranges. If so, then he is continuing to envision a new world where the earth and all its places are radically changed.

⁸⁸ Based on the list of state names and mountain ranges that follows, King clearly took this construct of using the song "America" (also known as "My County, 'Tis of Thee") from Archibald Carey's 1952 address before the Republican National Convention. After reciting this opening stanza of this song, Carey ended his speech with: "That's exactly what we mean—from every mountain side, let freedom ring. Not only from the Green Mountains and the White Mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire; not only from the Catskills of New York; but from the Ozarks in Arkansas, from the Stone Mountain in Georgia; from the Great Smokies of Tennessee, and from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia."

But not only that, from every mountain side let freedom ring.⁸⁹

So let it ring from Stone Mountain in Georgia,

Let it ring from Lookout Mountain in Tennessee.

Let it ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi.

Let it ring from every mountain of North Carolina,⁹⁰

From every mountain side, let freedom ring.

And when this happens 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 almighty we are free at last!⁹¹

⁸⁹ A loud and prolonged cackling laugh begins here. It is uncertain, but likely, that this is from the same man (Rev. Blakley) who laughed earlier when King first said "Not long."

⁹⁰ King would often insert the state in which he was speaking in this line. Here, in this list of mountain ranges, the earlier verbal shift in the speech from Rocky Mount to "Rocky Mountain" is given an even greater resonance.

⁹¹ These are words from the Negro Spiritual "Free at Last."