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"Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Greater Vision: Manually Bending the Arc of Time Towards Justice"

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Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr:
Manually Bending the Arc of Time Towards Justice
Speech by Dr. Kristopher Burrell, January 16, 2017, St. Paul's Church—National
Historic Site, Mount Vernon, NY

Good afternoon, everyone. It is my pleasure to be here at St. Paul's Church on this Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Dr. King would have turned 88 years of age yesterday. I would like to thank Mr. David Osborne for inviting me to give this address today, and I also want to thank all of you for attending.

When I accepted the invitation to come to St. Paul's today, I began a process of learning, re-learning, and un-learning about Dr. King. As I began to read a sampling of the works that other scholars have written about him, as well as his speeches and other writings, I once again encountered the potentially transformative power of his words and actions. *I* am probably the one who will gain the most from this experience because agreeing to come speak to you today compelled me to reengage and grapple with Dr. King's ideas, thought processes, and legacies for 21st century America.

There are a countless number of ways to enter into a discussion of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in order to discuss his philosophy of nonviolent activism, his activities in the struggle for justice, and his various legacies for our own time. Rather than take everyone to the usual places, however, like Montgomery or Birmingham or Selma, I want to recall June of 1963 in New York. Nearly fifty-four years ago, Dr. King gave the commencement address to the graduating classes at the City College of New York, located in Harlem. The president of City College, Dr. Buell Gallagher was committed to civil rights and wanted Dr. King to address his students and the wider community. Dr. King agreed to speak at the commencement in large measure due to the recommendation

that he received about Dr. Gallagher from Jack O'Dell who headed the New York office of King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.¹

The year 1963 was a critical one for King, the black freedom struggle, and the country as a whole. After all, this was the centennial year of the Emancipation Proclamation, the document President Abraham Lincoln signed into law that helped formally transform the Civil War into a battle over the future of slavery. And this address at the City College of New York, which Dr. King delivered on the evening of June 12, came only a couple of months after he had written his now famous, "Letter from Birmingham Jail;" just one day after President John F. Kennedy gave his strongest affirmation of the need for racial equality to the nation; less than twenty-four hours after the assassination of Medgar Evers, the civil rights activist and head of the Mississippi NAACP, who Byron de la Beckwith shot and killed on his porch virtually in view of his wife and children; and just a couple of months before Dr. King delivered one of the most iconic speeches in American history on a late-summer afternoon in Washington, D. C.

So, examining his speech in Harlem is useful for a few reasons. First, King connected with New York City during his career as an activist, as he visited the city at least ten times between 1958 and 1967. Second, this speech at City College employed themes that King had used in previous speeches and writings. And third, this speech also foreshadowed ideas that he would emphasize more going forward as he and the movement continued to evolve.

On this late-spring evening in Harlem Dr. King addressed a crowd of 16,000. As he prepared to speak to the graduates and assembled guests, there was excitement

¹ CUNY Matters, "Martin Luther King Jr. at City College 50 Years Ago: A Historic Commencement," <http://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2013/06/06/martin-luther-king-jr-at-city-college-50-years-ago-a-historic-commencement-2/>, Accessed on December 13, 2016.

amongst the graduates and their families. They anxiously anticipated having one of the country's foremost leaders and orators speaking to them.

Dr. King, however, no doubt had a heavy heart that evening, having learned of his friend Medgar Evers' death only a few hours earlier. While he wanted to share in the graduates' special day, Dr. King also wanted to use this platform to inform and to remind the audience about the dangerous world in which they lived, and that the graduates were about to enter.

He began, not by telling the graduates that the world was their oyster and that their freshly-minted degrees would furnish them with a lifetime of material wealth. Rather, Dr. King warned that they would "be moving into a world of catastrophic change and calamitous uncertainty." He spoke of 1963 as "a day of grave crisis," in which it would be critical for all people of good will to "develop a world perspective" if humanity was to survive the technological developments that carried all of us to the brink of extinction.² Dr. King was certainly referring to the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, in which the two "superpowers" competed in every possible way for global supremacy, including the building of vast nuclear arsenals. But Dr. King was also showing his desire for and understanding of the need for a human rights movement, something for which King is not often given credit, and a view that he had not just arrived at in 1963.

Dr. King had been engaging this idea for some time, including in Ghana in March of 1957 when new president Kwame Nkrumah invited him and other African American leaders to help usher the new nation into its period of independence from Great Britain.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "City College Commencement Address," June 12, 1963, New York, New York, 2, http://digital-archives.ccnycuny.edu/archival-collections/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/1963_MLK_Speech.pdf, Accessed on January 4, 2017.

King connected, not only with the exuberance of the Ghanaian people at being free from colonial rule, but he also connected the Ghanaian struggle, the African struggle for freedom, and the Asian struggle, to the African American freedom struggle.³ King delivered a sermon on the significance of Ghanaian independence and the parallel fall of European empires in April 1957. He also returned to this theme in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in April 1963. In addressing the liberal white clergymen of Birmingham he wrote, “Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of urgency toward the promised land of racial justice.”⁴

Dr. King would also further develop these ideas in the final years of his life as he spoke out very strongly against U. S. military action in Vietnam. He criticized President Lyndon Johnson’s decisions to continually escalate the war, sacrificing both his domestic anti-poverty agenda and inhibiting human rights security in the process, choosing instead to maintain the United States’ imperial claims to global economic and political supremacy. As historian Thomas F. Jackson argues in his book on Dr. King, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, “The southern black freedom struggle and anticolonial movements were both expressions of a global human rights revolution against ‘political domination and economic exploitation. . . . King consistently argued that Western nations

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Clayborne Carson, ed. (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998), 111-2.

⁴ King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 197.

had moral and political responsibilities to redress global poverty, something they would never do without world disarmament.” And by 1963 when King addressed the graduates at City College, he had been involved in anticolonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-nationalist activity for nearly a decade.⁵

Dr. King also wanted to share with those who were listening to him what he believed were the three most important “social evils” affecting the United States in 1963. He discussed these evils in the following order: the evil of war, the evil of economic injustice, and finally the evil of racial injustice. Clearly, these three social evils are still with us today, and to the extent that one could argue that life has become more perilous, more precarious for many Americans—especially the poor and people of color—I think Dr. King would be heartbroken at that prospect, although not despairing. Dr. King was often able to rebound from disappointments and continue to fight for the causes he believed in because his agitation for equality was based on an expansive concept of love. He was compelled to continue on, shaped by the social, economic, political, and personal forces that combined to mold him and the times in which he lived.⁶

King told his City College audience that the survival of the entire human race was in danger because of the combination of increasingly destructive technology and increasingly shallow morals. Dr. King was not speaking in an individualistic sense here, but rather in a societal sense. As he put it, “One of the greatest problems confronting us today is that we have allowed our civilization to outdistance our culture.” He defined civilization as “the complex of devices, techniques, instrumentalities and mechanisms by which we live.” But culture was “that realm of spiritual ends, expressed in art, literature,

⁵ Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 11-2.

⁶ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 363.

religion and morals for, at best, we live.”⁷ Our reasons for existing were not inspiring our ever-increasing technological capacity toward an elevating end, but rather were increasing the likelihood of our ultimate annihilation. This evil had to be arrested, according to Dr. King, and the only ways to accomplish that were through complete disarmament and for nations to use diplomacy rather than weapons to resolve disputes.

Then, King moved to discuss the economic inequality that continued to plague American society. It was unacceptable to Dr. King that in the world’s richest nation, millions of Americans went hungry each day, that “millions of others are deprived of adequate housing, education, and medical care because of economic insecurity,” and that the wealth gap between the prosperous few and the impoverished masses grew ever wider.⁸ When King said this in Harlem in 1963 his audience certainly understood his critique of American capitalism. A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, both New York City residents in 1963, were two of the principal organizers of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom that would occur just two-and-a-half months later. Dr. King knew, for example, that despite the nation’s overall economic growth and laws that had been put into place to grow the American middle-class, that the national unemployment rate among African Americans was twice that of whites and that increasing technological automation threatened even more jobs in the coming decades.

Nor was Dr. King’s criticism of economic inequality and American capitalism new for him in 1963. He was a young boy during the Great Depression of the 1930s and witnessed poverty up close among his neighbors and throughout the city of Atlanta. As a

⁷ King, “City College Commencement Address,” 1, http://digital-archives.ccny.cuny.edu/archival-collections/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/1963_MLK_Speech.pdf, Accessed on January 4, 2017.

⁸ King, “City College Commencement Address,” 2, http://digital-archives.ccny.cuny.edu/archival-collections/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/1963_MLK_Speech.pdf, Accessed on January 4, 2017.

boy of five he questioned his parents about the people standing in bread lines. He later credited that experience with shaping his anti-capitalist feelings as an adult.⁹ King grew up in a household in which social activism on behalf of improving African Americans' economic conditions was led by his father, Martin, Sr. The elder King led efforts to equalize teachers' salaries in Atlanta and also helped bring about integrated elevators in the Atlanta courthouse.¹⁰ From his father and grandfather, Martin, Jr. learned about the patterns of economic exploitation that blacks endured from a tender age, and he never forgot them as he pursued his higher education or afterwards.

Dr. King graduated from Morehouse College at the age of 19, from Crozier Theological Seminary with a Bachelors of Divinity at 23, and from Boston University with a Doctorate in Systematic Theology at 26. In fact, as he grew older and furthered his education, Dr. King read many of the major nineteenth century critics of capitalism and developed his understandings according to their social critiques and his religious training. So, he found immense value from reading Walter Rauschenbusch and Karl Marx, along with Reinhold Nieburh, Benjamin Elijah Mays, and Howard Thurman; the last two were African American theologians and scholars that King was able to learn from while at Morehouse.¹¹ Historian Thomas Jackson demonstrates that "King's own writings reveal he was a committed socialist and Gandhian by 1950."¹² King's analysis of the interrelatedness of the evils of militarism, economic inequality, and systemic racial injustice would only become more sophisticated throughout his public career. In other words, these ideas that are associated with the "radical-King" of the post-1965 period

⁹ King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 1-2.

¹⁰ King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 3.

¹¹ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 26.

¹² Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 15.

were part of King's frames of analysis going back decades. In fact, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had begun its first effort to address the crisis of joblessness in 1962 with Operation Breadbasket. In discussing economic injustice, King was returning to a consistent topic in his writings and speeches, but also his on-the-streets activism.

Dr. King then turned to the evil of racial injustice most recently evidenced by the assassination of Medgar Evers. In profound personal pain, Dr. King condemned the state of Mississippi for its long history of brutal oppression towards African Americans. He cited not only the "dastardly act" of killing Medgar, but also the deaths of the Reverend George Lee, a local NAACP official and activist who had been killed by the Ku Klux Klan for trying to exercise the right to vote;¹³ Emmett Till, the Chicago teen who died at the hands of two white men for allegedly whistling at a white female store owner in 1955; and the two students that were killed by a white mob at the University of Mississippi.¹⁴ The tragedy laid not just in the loss of these individual lives, but also in the societal structures—segregation and discrimination—that simultaneously caused their deaths and allowed the perpetrators to go unpunished—at least at the time. King exhorted that "we must work passionately and unrelentingly to rid our nation of every vestige of segregation and discrimination.

But lest his northern audience arrogantly look down their noses at the South and revel in their own faux enlightened attitudes or think that racial inequality was a problem that only African Americans had the responsibility to solve, King gave them a proverbial, "I don't think so!" He made clear, "It is also necessary to realize that the problem of

¹³ "George Lee, Northeastern University School of Law, nuweb9.neu.edu/civilrights/George-lee/, Accessed on January 11, 2017.

¹⁴ King, "City College Commencement Address," 3-4, http://digital-archives.cuny.cuny.edu/archival-collections/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/1963_MLK_Speech.pdf, Accessed on January 4, 2017.

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 students 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.”¹⁵

King returned to the theme of the three evils threatening American society in other speeches after this, including at the First Annual National Conference on New Politics in 1967 in a speech titled, “The Three Evils of Society.”

True to form, Dr. King would not leave those eager graduates or the assembled crowd without prescriptions for change and marching orders. According to King, racial inequality had to be seen as a moral issue for the country, first and foremost, if it was ever going to be eradicated.¹⁶ And people had to guard against two dangerous myths that would prevent the country from living up to its founding ideals and becoming its best self. The first myth was that time would solve racial injustice by itself, while the second was that legislation could not help in getting rid of racial inequality because morals could not be legislated.¹⁷ King vigorously rejected both of these premises and his reasons hold lessons for us today, as they did for the people listening to him in 1963.

In arguing against the idea that time would resolve the problem of racial injustice, Dr. King was responding to the arguments made by some white liberals and black conservatives such as George Schuyler, a columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*

¹⁵ King, “City College Commencement Address,” 3, http://digital-archives.ccnycunyu.edu/archival-collections/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/1963_MLK_Speech.pdf, Accessed on January 4, 2017.

¹⁶ King, “City College Commencement Address,” 4, http://digital-archives.ccnycunyu.edu/archival-collections/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/1963_MLK_Speech.pdf, Accessed on January 4, 2017.

¹⁷ King, “City College Commencement Address,” 4, http://digital-archives.ccnycunyu.edu/archival-collections/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/1963_MLK_Speech.pdf, Accessed on January 4, 2017.

newspaper, that African Americans were pushing for equality too hard and too fast, and that the consequent shocks to white people's way of life would only cause resentment that would harm race relations.

Time, Dr. King argued, was neutral. There was nothing inherent in the passage of time that would produce positive outcomes on issues related to racial any other injustice. Only constructive action taken by people of good will would ultimately bring about beneficial results, while apathy on the part of good people would have devastating consequences for the future of the country. Dr. King's warning about the myth of time was really a call to action for those who truly wanted to eradicate those most pressing social evils. Those who wanted to bring about positive change could not simply sit on the sidelines and believe that time itself would work some magic it did not possess. Rather, people needed to agitate and cause social disruption, nonviolent social tension. As Dr. King wrote just a couple of months earlier in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue so that it can no longer be ignored."¹⁸

Dr. King agitated not only to bring opposing forces to the negotiating table, but also to foster concrete changes and produce tangible benefits for people, ultimately elevating the nation's morals. And this was why King rejected the idea that passing laws that prohibited racial discrimination, and promoted equality and fairness was unimportant. Laws mattered, although the vigorous enforcement of those laws mattered even more. Dr. King was pleased that President John F. Kennedy was now about to advocate civil rights legislation, but he was not so naïve as to think that any civil rights

¹⁸ King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 190.

legislation would pass Congress without external pressure coming from committed citizens of goodwill. People's activities were needed to help ensure that southern Senators and northern right wing Republicans would not filibuster the bill and kill it before passage. This is why it was still so important to go through with the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom even after the announcement of potential civil rights legislation. Black Americans and others of good will needed to provide moral witness for the importance of this legislation and physically illustrate that they would not allow this bill to simply die in Congress. As Dr. King said in his "I Have A Dream Speech," "There will neither be rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."¹⁹

So, our lesson from Dr. King is that we continue to need more committed people of goodwill to apply pressure on our government and to raise consciousness as the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina have. Since black women began #BlackLivesMatter in 2012 they have created social tension in order to force Americans to deal with racial inequality throughout the society. That they did so is in line with Dr. King's definition of nonviolent direct action.

The Moral Mondays movement, led by Reverend William Barber, is bringing a Christian sensibility and has revived the tactics that King used during the 1950s and 1960s. Moral Mondays has employed sit-ins, civil disobedience, and singing songs synonymous with the 1960s movement, among other strategies. Reverend Barber and his allies have been protesting efforts by the Republican Party in North Carolina to deny Medicaid expansion, gun restrictions, and expand private-school vouchers. Their

¹⁹ King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 224-5.

movement quickly spread to other southern states throughout 2014.²⁰ And Reverend Barber explicitly modeled the Moral Mondays protests on the examples provided during the 1950s and 1960s. As Barber remarked, "They first had to win the moral high ground, and they had to capture the attention and consciousness of the nation. When those two things came together, it gave space for people like Lyndon Baines Johnson, who was a segregationist, to step out of his normal pattern of politics into a new way."²¹

#BlackLivesMatter and Moral Mondays recognize, as Dr. King would have liked, that without this continual, external, moral pressure, we will not manually bend the arc of time towards justice.

²⁰ Lisa Rab, "Meet the Preacher Behind Moral Mondays," *Mother Jones*, April 14, 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/04/william-barber-moral-monday-north-carolina>, Accessed on January 14, 2017.

²¹ Ibid.