

MLK: “Now Is the Time”  
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“Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

“Those who are not looking for happiness are the most likely to find it, because those who are searching forget that the surest way to be happy is to seek happiness for others.”

— [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

I almost named the sermon “We Can Never Be Satisfied” – it’s one of the four anaphoras in the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. An anaphora is a rhetorical device that emphasizes the speaker’s point by repeating a phrase at the beginning of a series of clauses.

“One hundred years later, the Negro still is not free . . . Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy . . . We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.” And well, you know what the fourth one is.

Experts agree that this speech was not his best or most powerful, and yet it’s his most famous. King’s greatness as a speaker, James Baldwin said, lay “in his intimate knowledge of the people he is addressing, be they black or white, and in the forthrightness with which he speaks of those things that hurt or baffle them.”\*

It’s incredible how many good parts of the “I Have a Dream Speech” have been forgotten by the eclipse of its famous ending. I heartily recommend the short book, “The Speech,” by Gary Younge, a Black British journalist who analyzes the story and context of the famous 17 minute speech, only 302 words of which are most recognized and remembered. Upon hearing it again in its entirety, one cannot deny its timeliness at the dawn of 2017, when we bid farewell to our first Black president.

In President Obama’s Farewell speech he delivered in Chicago this past week, he sought to speak to the whole of America as much as MLK did that hot August afternoon in Washington DC, in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial. Like MLK, Obama gave us some specific instructions on how to move forward after his progressive presidency. No doubt that MLK is one of the figures who inspired Obama to become a Community Organizer in the first place. I have learned that the line between activism and governance is thin, the truth of which Obama has modeled. He told us on Tuesday,

“Our democracy is threatened whenever we take it for granted. All of us, regardless of party, should throw ourselves into the task of rebuilding our democratic institutions. When voting rates are some of the lowest among advanced democracies, we should make

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\* P. 99 in book “The Speech” by Gary Younge, published 2013.

it easier, not harder, to vote. When trust in our institutions is low, we should reduce the corrosive influence of money in our politics, and insist on the principles of transparency and ethics in public service. When Congress is dysfunctional, we should draw our districts to encourage politicians to cater to common sense and not rigid extremes.

And all of this depends on our participation; on each of us accepting the responsibility of citizenship, regardless of which way the pendulum of power swings. Our Constitution is a remarkable, beautiful gift. But it's really just a piece of parchment. It has no power on its own. We, the people, give it power – with our participation, and the choices we make. Whether or not we stand up for our freedoms. Whether or not we respect and enforce the rule of law. America is no fragile thing. But the gains of our long journey to freedom are not assured.

In his own farewell address, [Obama continued] George Washington wrote that self-government is the underpinning of our safety, prosperity, and liberty, but ‘from different causes and from different quarters much pains will be taken...to weaken in your minds the conviction of this truth;’ that we should preserve it with ‘jealous anxiety;’ that we should reject ‘the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest or to enfeeble the sacred ties’ that make us one.”

End quote. The world is hungry for a new prophet – a living prophet. And like all prophets before him, Obama is not a perfect human being. Regardless, I'm definitely interested in what he'll be doing after he sleeps for two weeks and goes on vacation with Michelle. He talks about his future goals in the interview he gave in Rolling Stone the day after Trump won the election. He is, in fact, going to lead the redrawing of districts, which will be an unsexy and tenacious fight, but who better to lead it than a man of Obama's credentials. I'm going to be receiving a marvelous organizing training by the standard-setters of such training, the Midwest Academy, based in Chicago, in March in Sierra Madre, so I can be confident in my organizing knowledge, and can be of service to President Obama's new vision.

The Beyond Our Walls committee has made a lot of food, so do join us at 12:30 for the first organizing session that's taking place at this church in 2017. We'll be looking at the various civil freedoms and progressive policies under attack, and we'll pick our battles for maximum impact.

While President Obama and Dr. King in some ways have little in common, in other ways they are quite similar. They speak eloquently of an idealism that still calls to us, one that might redeem the founders of our democracy as well as its living inheritors.

I was on my pal Chuck Freeman's radio program, Soul Talk Radio, this past Thursday and we were doing a bit of debate around Obama's legacy, a little “good Rev./bad Rev.” Chuck contends that Obama is a sentimental propagandist, and I conceded that perhaps he is at times, sugar-coating our deeply violent and discriminatory American legacy, and not adequately identifying the suffering of the current age.

But we need that idealism articulated, I posit, so that we know what we're fighting for. We are reminded in this way that, for millions of Americans, the status quo is not enough and never has been. We are reminded that half the country takes our democracy SO for granted, that they didn't even bother to vote in November.

It was not such in 1963, when MLK gave his I Have a Dream speech. And that is in part why, with toil and struggle and imprisonment, some key Civil Rights legislation was passed in that era. But because, since then, we've been happy to imagine the best and turn our attention to our personal prosperity and time-consuming consumer habits, much has come undone. In some ways, having a black president caused us to live in a pretend post-racial la-la land. We have started to wake up since 2014, with the resurgence of an organizing movement known as Black Lives Matter, as well as many cities across the country winning higher minimum wage initiatives.

"Now is the time," as battle cry, is simple and apt today. Obama borrowed a similar phrase directly from MLK's speech as he was campaigning for president in 2007. He said, "I am running in this race because of what Dr. King called 'the fierce urgency of now.' Because I believe there is such a thing as being too late, and that hour is almost upon us." No, Obama may not have picked the urgent battles we wanted him to once in office, but he picked them himself. He had little choice but to focus on the economy which he retrieved to a stable condition, and healthcare for the uncovered was something he picked and succeeded at in large measure.

Like MLK, Obama will not enjoy widespread support in the decades to come – he will have to continue to fight for it, even among his progressive cohorts, just as MLK did throughout the 1960's. It may be that we don't truly listen to Obama's words until he is dead, but I think we will see a different Obama post-presidency. One who is more like the man who ran in 2007, calling on "the fierce urgency of now." Thank God Obama was not assassinated – remember how worried we were about that? The truth remains that MLK's speech was only lifted out of obscurity *after* he was killed.

The phrase "Now is the time" in MLK's speech captured a reality that was very pertinent in 1963, when much of the civil rights leadership had been slow to acknowledge the impatience of its base – (much like democratic leadership did not adequately acknowledge the discontent of its historical base, which lost us the presidency). Younge writes that it was the lesson King had tried to convey in his letter from the Birmingham jail, and that one of the organizers of the March for Freedom and Jobs relayed to Kennedy, when he told the president, who was reluctant about the march taking place, that, "The Negroes are already in the streets; it is very likely impossible to get them off." Younge says, "[ 'Now is the time,' is, in a sense, the lesson of every liberation campaign: a successful movement needs to recognize its most propitious moment to strike and seize it."

Yes, sir, and "my Lord," now is the time.

Now, with one week to go before the inauguration of Donald Trump, the corrosion of democratic safeguards has never been on such a brink of disastrous corrosion. We must counter these trends non-violently, with dignity, and with power.

There are many things I'm going to miss about Obama being our president, but there is one I want to especially highlight, that MLK modeled in spades and for which he set the standard, and that is the honorable manner with which civic discourse was presented.

In the very same ways, MLK and Obama have been criticized as being "too weak," for not hitting back, for insisting on a philosophy not only of non-violence, but of dignity, which includes choices of words and manner of dress. MLK said in his speech, "We must forever conduct our struggle on the high place of dignity and discipline."

I believe that. Part of that dignity and discipline is a leadership style that honors promises and agreements. Obama had no scandals because his conduct matched the honor of his high office. Obama followed one of my favorite creeds of Mark Twain, when he said, "stick to the truth because it's easiest to remember." No, many of us wanted him to be more boldly progressive but it's true that he was in office *who he said* he was going to be, a moderate centrist. It was poignant to hear Vice-President Biden affirm this key quality, that throughout the 8 years, the president upheld his promises to him, when he accepted the Presidential Medal of Freedom this past week.

There is spiritual significance in decency in that it demands of us that we align our conduct with our moral character. Such conduct is not born of a vacuum, but of the thoughtful consideration that is the agency of high moral conscience.

This thoughtful consideration honors the sacred ties that hold this fragile, on-going experiment of democracy together. We are all in this together, as Obama has always contended, and as MLK stands before him, we seek the leaders who shall stand in front of both men, in the generation to come. Leaders who lead without more bloodshed and violence than is surely necessary. Leaders who will guide us with dignified efficacy, be they black, or brown, yellow, red, or white.

If idealism and optimism is an ideology, then sign me up. Sign me up as one of the dreamers. Dear Lord, help give us who would answer the call the strength to articulate beyond the attainable, for that vision of God MLK evoked, in the utterance of the most famous amphora of our time "I Have a Dream!"

In those quivering cadences, his wife Coretta Scott King recalled, "it seemed as if the Kingdom of God appeared. But it only lasted for a moment."

Now is the time to resurrect such a moment. I conclude with the last paragraphs of Gary Younge in his book, "The Speech":

King could have limited his address to what was immediately achievable. He might have spelled out a ten-point plan and laid out his case for tougher legislation or made the case

for fresh campaigns of civil disobedience in the North. He could have reduced himself to an appeal for what was possible in a time when what was possible and pragmatic was neither satisfactory nor sustainable.

Instead he swung for the bleachers. Not knowing whether the task of building the world he was describing was Sisyphean or merely Herculean, he called out in the political wilderness, hoping his voice would someday be heard by those with power to act upon it. In so doing he showed that it is not naïve to believe that what is not possible in the foreseeable future may nonetheless by necessary, worth fighting for, and worth articulating. The idealism that underpins his dream is the rock on which our modern rights are built and the flesh on which pragmatic parasites feed. If nobody dreamed of a better world, what would there be to wake up to?