SPEAKER

YOLANDA DENISE KING



The Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholarship: funds raised by the St. Stephen's family to incoming student: Eric Roderick

It is indeed a privilege and a pleasure for me to be here with you today and to share in this very special occasion. I am certain that this day will be long remembered and cherished by you, the graduates, as well as by the members of your family—and so it should be. For you have successfully completed one of the most essential steps in your life's journey. You have been doubly enriched; for you have received a solid education within a Christian commitment and community.

The principle which your institution was built upon is founded in the motto, "except the Lord build the house their labor is in vain that build it." That remains an essential truth and must remain a constant objective, particularly in this technological computerized age. In far too many instances we have lost touch with the important values that are necessary to insure complete life. In far too many instances we have become lazy. We have more idle time than has ever before been known to man. Everything is push button now. All you have to do is plug it in, put a little pressure to it, pull up, and plop in front of the television.

I mention television because it is one of my concerns and one of the arenas in which I work as a performing artist. Though it could be used to stimulate knowledge and culture; it, with only a few exceptions, serves only to promote the middle-age spread because we sit doing nothing and, because it is devoid of mental stimulation, thinking nothing. In fact, in too many instances the educational system in this conutry has taught students how to memorize, but not how to think; how to earn a living, but not how to live. In far too many instances the values of materialism and greed and unconcern for the welfare of others has been the mode rather than the essential enduring values of love, understanding, and service.

Now it is true that western civilization has enabled mankind to reach tremendous heights, many of which we now take for granted. We can simply pick up the phone and communicate on the other side of the globe. Through the airplane, humanity has been able to virtually annihilate distance and time. We have produced mighty bridges to span the seas and skyscraping buildings to kiss the skies. We have even been able to transport ourselves and walk on the moon.

Oh yes, we, as mankind, are remarkable beings. We have achieved incredible feats. However, we now find that never was the world so filled with discontent and unhappiness, with crime, with divorce and broken homes, with sickness and mental illnesses, with violence and destruction. Never has it been possible for man to eradicate all life from the face of the planet. The sad reality is, as my father stated in his acceptance speecch of the Nobel Peace Prize, "Though we have learned to fly the air like birds and swim the seas like fish we have not learned the simple art of living together as brothers and sisters."

"Non-violence — self-dignity, self-respect"

Therefore, it is my hope that your years here have been spent with challenge and that you have been stimulated properly. I hope that you have taken the opportunity to open yourselves to all of the knowledge that has been presented. I hope that you have gained the discipline and the useful skills that will enable you to succeed in whatever vocation you choose. But, most importantly, I hope that you have learned how to live. I hope that you have begun to acquire those essential values that will insure that you will have a complete life—one full of meaning and purpose. For it is only these principles that can transform this world into a place where indeed people can live in peace, in justice, and in brotherhood.

With these thoughts in mind I would like to focus your attention very briefly on a concern that is of utmost importance to me. Everywhere you go, everywhere you turn, it is there. You cannot pick up a newspaper without reading about it. You rarely turn on your television set without either seeing or hearing about the violence that pervades our world. What remains true is that in this day, when so much of our lives are filled with violent acts, unconscious acts that, in many instances we don't even think about, in this day when the possibility of nuclear annihilation is quite real, we must find an alternative to war, destruction and violence.

My father stated that fact quite eloquently when he stated that, "The choice is either non-violence or non-existence. If modern man continues to flirt unhesitantly with war he will transform this earthly habitat into an inferno such as even the mind of Dante could not imagine. This may well be mankind's last chance to choose between chaos and community." He was speaking about war in that instance, but war is not the only arena in which non-violent principles are imperative. If, indeed, we are to ever live in peace we must practice the principles in our everyday lives. For this is where it must begin; in our homes, in our playgrounds, in our schools, with everyone we meet. Instead of utilizing violent responses to resolve conflicts, non-violent principles must be employed as the method in which we work together and live together.

Violence not only includes the physical acts of picking up a stick or shooting a gun to hurt someone. Selfishness is also violence. Greed and vengeance are violence. On the other hand the most important principle in non-violence is love. It is not love in a sentimental or affectionate sense because it would, no doubt, be humanly impossible to love, in the affectionate sense, someone who is trying to harm us. The kind of love that non-violence calls us to is an understanding good will toward our fellow man. It is the realization that despite our faults, despite the evil things that we may do, despite our differences, we are all children of one God. There is a unity that binds all of us together. If I harm or destroy *you* I am in effect destroying *myself*.

Other principles of non-violence follow from love; love of truth, love of justice, love of peace. So simple when you say it but yet so profound and so constantly elusive. But it is only these principles that will enable us to live together as brothers and sisters and to work together to bring about the necessary social change that will move us toward the beloved community that my father dedicated his life to bring about.

It is ironic that non-violence has been classified by many as a method of cowards for, indeed, it is more difficult, it is more courageous, to face your opposition, to face your enemies with understanding and with good will rather than to resort to violence which only begets more violence. Unlike violence, non-violence seeks not to destroy but to build, to *re*-create. For, you see, ultimately no one ever wins a fight. Even the one who is the victor in a skirmish will eventually have to face a stronger opponent. The person who chooses to fight his or her way through life will always have to do that and sooner or later he or she will lose. That is the *way* of violence.

There is a better way and a more powerful way through *non-violence*. The key to this power lies with the transformation that occurs within the people who are committed to this philosophy. It brings about a self-dignity and self-respect that is undeniable. It summons up reserves of creativity, of strength and courage that one did not know he even possessed.

We read about that power—that transformation—manifested on a broader level in India as Mahatma Gandhi and his followers challenged the might of the British Empire and successfully liberated India from the political domination and economic exploitation inflicted upon them for centuries. Their only weapons were truth, soul-force, love, and courage.

Closer to home we saw it happen in this country during the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of my father. Guided by the principles of non-violence, adhering to the philosophy of non-cooperation with unjust laws that discriminated and enslaved an entire race of people, and utilizing the technique of non-violent direct action the Civil Rights Movement virtually dismantled official discrimination in the south in 10 years.

"You have a choice, you can make a





For many of you the Civil Rights Movement may seem like ancient history. You were babies then—or not yet born—and you didn't have to deal with the ugly wounds of segregation—the sitting on the back of the bus, the "white" or "colored only" signs, and then, during the force of the struggle, the snapping dogs tearing the clothing from the limbs of demonstrators and the searing firehoses pinning them against walls. They all seem like misty images from a horror story we might have read or seen on television. But the Civil Rights Movement was no mirage. That Movement succeeded in abolishing law enforced racial discrimination and ended disenfranchisement of the black population of the south. Because of that movement black, brown, and white students can attend schools together where once they could not. Because of that movement black people can vote all over this country where once we could not. Because of that movement we can go just about anywhere we please (that is, if we can afford it) where once we could not.

Oh yes, we saw tremendous progress, but we can't stop there and, unfortunately, too many people did stop. They thought that everything was fine. We were an integrated society now and the work was done. But the reality is that, in 1981, we are still confronted with a system that perpetuates the chain of poverty by providing only 20 billion dollars for education while alloting, at least in the 1981 budget, 158.7 billion dollars for the Pentagon and related defense systems. Any country who considers itself civilized while spending eight times as much to destroy and kill as it does to educate its citizens is toying with destruction.

With these absurd realities in mind need we question why the assassinations; why the crime that pervades our lives? The answers are very clear. Our priorities are warped. We are still confronted with a system that allows students to graduate from schools all across this country and not be able to read, write, or even to think. We are still confronted with a system that stifles human progress and wastes human lives by allowing, in some communities, over 50% of its minority youths to go without employment. Now, certainly, in 1981 there are more black and brown faces in higher places but for far too many people, both black and white, it is not even a question of getting a piece of the American pie, for by the time the pie gets around to them there is nothing in that pie plate but crumbs.

When my father was assassinated he was bringing together poor people across racial and religious lines to dramatically demonstrate the widespread poverty that still exists in this, the richest country in the world. He realized that the freedom to go or to sit or to eat anywhere you pleased meant nothing if you did not have the money to do any of these things. He was bringing together poor people in a Poor People's Campaign to demand the right to work and to make a decent salary. My father realized that it isn't about black vs white or vs brown or any of the ethnic divisions that are used to pit all of us against each other. Rather it's about money—pure and simple economics. Who gets what and how much.

I'm not saying, by any means, that racism does not exist but the racial differences of black and white—or whoever—have been used and conditioned into the

difference in this world"



psyche of humanity to keep far too many of us fighting over the scraps. The major social problems that we face here in this country such as inadequate housing, inadequate health care, unemployment, and inflation, have no color but, on different levels, they affect all of us.

One of my favorite analogies that dramatically reveals this truth, tells of a man driving a car across the highways and byways of life. The car symbolizes our world. The driver represents those of us who are well off in this society; those who never have, and never will know what it is like to wake up in a cold house with no food and no means of providing those necessities. The driver symbolizes the controlling forces in our society. Along with the driver there are other passengers, those in the front seat (who are doing pretty well in terms of material prosperity) those in the back, and, yes, those who are forced to ride in the trunk, barely able to even breathe. *Those* passengers represent that part of society that continues to be trampled upon, continues to be oppressed: struggling —stifled—never having any say-so about the direction of their lives.

Now if the driver loses control of that car and it starts to go over a cliff we're all going to go—black, brown, white, and red. No matter how much money you have in the bank, no matter what position you hold, no matter if you have a PhD., an M.D., or no D., if that car goes, we all go; and all of our protestations to prevent this from happening will be "as sounding brass and tinkling cymbals." And the only way to prevent this from happening is for all of the riders to pitch in. Yes, we may have come over to this country in different ships but now we are all in the same boat.

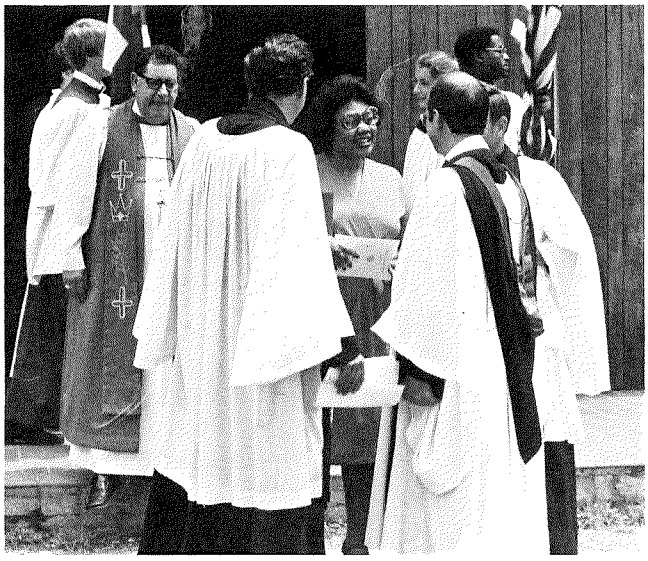
That is where we are today and it is not a pretty picture. I guess you may not have wanted to hear this on this glorious day of celebration but my conscience would not have let me rest if I did not share these concerns with you. Yes, times are very hard. There are difficult problems that have to be solved. But we do have a choice. We can choose the way of hate or greed and violence, which will end in destruction for all, or we can choose the way of love, of understanding, of good will, of non-violence, which will bring peace to all.

Many people ask me, as I travel around the country, with the madness that is happening in Atlanta, with the terrorism that invades so much of this world, how in the world can you possibly talk about non-violence? But my response to that is to redouble my efforts to insure that the message of non-violence is carried wherever I go because, if we do not find non-violent solutions, non-violent alternatives, the violence that we see will continue to escalate and I do not have to tell you what the future may hold.

Graduates, as you leave here today, going your very different ways, continuing to grow, to develop, and to learn more about yourself, realize that you have a *choice*, you *can* make a difference in this world. Social systems are a result of collected individual convictions. The elimination of poverty, of racism, of war, of violence from the face of the earth, can only begin with the individual where he or she is right now. I'm reminded of the thought, written by Edmund Burke, "All that is necessary for the forces of evil to win in this world is for enough good people to do nothing."

Graduates, it is you who will hold the reins of power as the years unfold. The only way that things can get better is for people like you and me to do it. You have a choice. I urge you to make the right choice. "Reach out, reach out, and touch somebody's hand and make this world a better place, because *we can.*"

God bless you.



and then it was over—except for the goodbyes



Left: Cindy Buxton, Patti Sinkin, Chris Cohen, Jerry Ball, Alice Brooks, Todd Johnson, Hector Morales, Steve Quander, Holly Nitch applaud classmates. Below: Exit the new Alumni past the honor guards; Robin Hofheinz, Elaine Romberg, Bill Stanton, Malcolm Smith (giving the parting touch).



