Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”: An Example of Racial Rhetoric under Neoclassical Investigation

The crowd was bustling at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968. A mass gathering of approximately 2,000 black sanitation workers joined forces that day, hoping to fight the segregation to which they had been exposed their entire professional, and even personal, lives. From a high-standing podium, Mr. Ralph Abernathy stepped down and the very renowned figure whom he had previously introduced strode his way to the microphone, met by a round of overwhelming applause and joyful acclaim. This man was the same individual who only years before, had presented his famed “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial and helped to ignite a countercultural movement to bring equality to all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, or skin color. This man’s countless contributions have become synonymous with honor, integrity and peaceful revolution, and to this day, whenever one utters the name Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., these positive images and many more enter his or her thoughts and fill our hearts with deepest gratitude. His proclamation on this day (typically known as the “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, though also often generically referred to as the “Promised Land” or simply “Mountaintop” speeches) would create yet another cultural revolution, in which the oppressed workers would soon strive to bring about managerial improvements in their industry, as retaliation for the numerous accounts of dehumanization and grueling turmoil they had encountered in the workplace. However, what exactly made this gripping oral
recitation so effective? Aside from being the last public address the late Dr. King made prior to his assassination, what permits these extraordinary words to be so remembered in our present age? Using the neoclassical critical approach to speech analysis, one could argue that it was Dr. King’s ability to tap into his audience’s visceral emotions and inspire them through sentimental subtext and religious symbolism (in compliance to the Aristotelian triad of pathos, ethos, and logos, as well as a cry for societal reformation by means of a problem-solution arranged outline) that compelled his followers to continue to prosper with their every involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

Opinions on the degree of material that neoclassical rhetoric encompasses wavers from one scholar to the next. Robert L. Ivie, professor of rhetoric and public culture at Indiana University, evaluates in the Quarterly Journal of Speech in May 1995, “If criticism concerns itself with the study of oratory and others of political discourse, it should yield something of value towards the intelligent resolution of public issues and the constructive conduct of civic life” (Ivie 138). Meanwhile, James Jasinski, professor and chair of communication at the University of Puget Sound, broadens the scope of rhetorical criticism, as he targets the works of A. Craig Biard and Lester Tonssen in defining, “[T]he purpose of rhetorical criticism is to express a judgment on a public speech…such judicial appraisal is a derivative of composite judgments formulated by reference to the methodologies of rhetoric, history, sociology, and social psychology….” (Jasinski 249-250). Sonja J. Foss, professor of communication at the University of Colorado in Denver, on the other hand, is less preoccupied with the dimensional nature of the practice in her 2004 guidebook Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice, but prefers instead to narrow the role of affluent communication critics into a three-step
process: “1) Reconstructing the context in which the artifact [or what one is critiquing] occurred, 2) application of five canons [invention, organization, style, mastery of subject matter, and delivery] to the artifact; and 3) assessing the impact of the artifact on the audience” (Foss 29).

In analyzing the audience of an event, importance lies in determining the standards for which groups of people are characteristically associated together. Dilip Parashwar Goankar, an associate professor of communication studies at Northwestern University, lists seven commonalities that a group, or communal public, must share, and states two of these interpersonal dynamics as, “[A] public is self-organized [and] a public is a relation among strangers” (Goankar 411). Diane Schaich Hope of State University in New York, Buffalo, attempts to convey how these standards are fulfilled within the black liberation movements (like those of the “Mountaintop” listeners) in comparison to the women’s liberation movements, noting how it is through biological inheritance (be it race or gender) that these groups are treated with disrespect and intolerance, but also remarks, “[F]or black rhetors a pre-existing audience conscious of itself is assumed; for women rhetors that audience must be created” (Hope 22). In other words, African-Americans and all other racial assortments are traditionally more able to unify themselves into a collective unit as their experiences tend to center around similar struggles or difficulties, whereas the experiences of gender groups may vary in a wider range of harsh encounters.

However, once a group is collectively assimilated as one, they are unwilling to act or assume any specific role unless motivated to do so. Here, King’s speech implements the three core areas of invention through speech rhetoric: logos, pathos, and ethos. Logos (or logical appeals) is frequently less of a criteria in King’s written or spoken presentations,
as in “Mountaintop” he summarizes his entire rationale and concerns over the posterity and continual existence of America’s future, declaring, “[W]e are going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history…Survival demands that we grapple with them” (Appendix A, 47-49). Less confounded than much of the deeper nuances of King’s argumentation, the primitive contention of survival of mankind is, by King’s viewpoint, the ultimate logical incentive of seeking a solution.

For King, *pathos* (or emotional appeal) is the key to creating a stirring reaction in his audiences. Using vernacular that classifies an entire section of people mutually as one (even the concept of exhibiting connections through familial kin to a higher power), King makes such demonstrative insights as, “We are saying that we are God’s children…thirteen hundred of God’s children here suffering…Be concerned about your brother” (Appendix A, 65, 83-84, 194-195) and even attempts to build interracial solidarity, stating, “What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?” (Appendix A, 307-308). Note how the term “sick” implies that the degrading ways of others are like that of a disease, curable and possible to overcome, and how as brothers and children, everyone is coupled (or possess the ability to be coupled) to one another at a greater level despite our contrast in physical appearance or background.

*Ethos* (or evidence of speaker credibility) surfaces at distinct points within King’s speech, although his overall reputation tends to precede his presence at any given formal occasion. According to Edward C. Appel, an independent researcher accredited with Temple University whose published study of rhetoric in King’s speeches acknowledges a drastic shift in tone and verbal stature with his later works, “[H]is projection of himself as
a world-famous achiever of truly admirable rank, chief actor in the redemptive effort he
enjoins, becomes something of a staple in his public addresses” (Appel 378). King is able
to testify to his past accomplishments within the field of civil rights attainment,
referencing a prior protest in Birmingham, Alabama in opposition to political antagonist
Bull Connor and shortly thereafter citing its momentous effects despite enduring
temporary imprisonment. King reminisces, “[E]very now and then we’d get in jail, and
we’d see the jailer looking through the windows being moved by our prayers…And there
was a power there which Bull Connor couldn’t adjust to…” (Appendix A, 108-111).

As substantial as one’s content may be, there is also immense command in the
structuring and organizational patterns to which a speech, such as King’s “I’ve Been to
the Mountaintop, conforms. “Mountaintop” is problem-solution orientated, meaning, as
Stephen E. Lucas, professor of communication arts from University of Wisconsin-
Madison, explains in The Art of Public Speaking, “Speeches arranged in problem-
solution order are divided into two main parts. The first shows the existence and
seriousness of a problem. The second presents a workable solution to the problem”
(Lucas 209). King pinpoints the dilemma undergone by the sanitation workers,
clarifying, “The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and
honest in its dealing with the public servants…Three hundred sanitations workers are on
strike, and…Memphis is not being fair to them…” (Appendix A, 74-80). Later, though,
King designates a series of simplistic and practical options via the consumer market that
every member of the community could implement to promote radical changes,
suggesting, “And so, as a result of this…tell your neighbors not to buy Coca-Cola in
Memphis…not to buys Sealtest milk…[or] Wonder Bread….We are choosing these
companies because they haven’t been fair in their hiring policies” (Appendix A, 169-175).

Narrated in manuscript format, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” is a speech that runs nearly forty minutes in length, essentially a result of King’s signature tendency to take long dramatic pauses in between thoughts, and articulate key words and slogans through increased volume and meticulously slow pronunciation. Conversely, the two most commons styles of language in King’s many works are 1) repetition of phrasing and 2) religious allusion. Repetition occurs both in the beginning and concluding paragraphs of “Mountaintop” and either instance serves an appropriate purpose of participant visualization. This allows a listener to become immersed in what a speaker is describing and elaborate upon an imagined scenario in his or her own mind. The first repetitive portion reads, “I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt…I wouldn't stop there…I would move on by Greece and take my mind to Mount Olympus…I wouldn’t stop there…[I would] say, ‘If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy’” (Appendix A, 9-35). This account of time periods upon which King would not choose to reside in if given a rare hypothetical opportunity from God, is used to show the opportunities for growth and development that only the new wave ideals 1960s and its following decades are capable of providing.

The second use of repetition is King’s response to an attack of his life and how it may have prevented his from achieving all that he had, hoping to display for his audience the monumental result that just a single decision can have. As King ponders, “If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around…when we decided to take a ride for freedom…I
wouldn't have been around…when Negroes in Albany, Georgia…decided to straighten their backs up….I wouldn't have been here…when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation” (Appendix A, 283-293).

Religious terminology is often regarded as the pivotal aspect which gave King’s recitations their superlative strength. As Brett A. Miller, resigned professor of communication arts at Southwest Baptist University, asserts, “[M]etaphor has a great deal of influence in the rhetoric of religion…metaphor and theological syntax combine to transfigure reality into a meaningful expression” (Miller 215-224). Spouts of religious insinuation are present in numerous passages from “Mountaintop,” orienting the world’s population as “God’s children,” using the Biblical allegorical symbol of water (baptismal purity) in the arsenal of sprayed fire hoses from the battling city street mobs (the element of sin in their environment), the escape of the Israelites from Egypt (the perseverance of the victimized prevailing over adversity), and even closing his speech with “I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go to the mountain…And I’ve seen the Promised Land…Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!” (Appendix A, 313-316).

Though the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered only days after touching an entire city and nation with these words of endless love and peaceful advancement in “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” the beauty and subtle brilliance of his work is still celebrated in institutions of speech academia today. His efforts represented in the principles of neoclassical speech rhetoric are validation enough of his overwhelming success as a public speaker. King’s strategic execution of logos, ethos, and pathos, in conjunction with a problem-solution speech structure and stylized spiritual diction, were only a few of many factors that inspired future generations to resume the position where he left off and
endeavor, at every second, to promote racial and social harmony, for all to revel in and cherish as a divine and upright method for the progressive evolution of all humanity.
Appendix A

King, Jr., Martin Luther. “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” *Top 100 Speeches*. 21 October 2006.

American Rhetoric Online.

http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm

“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”: Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Thank you very kindly, my friends. As I listened to Ralph Abernathy and his eloq
Thank you very kindly, my friends. As I listened to Ralph Abernathy and his eloquent
and generous introduction and then thought about myself, I wondered who he was
talking about. It's always good to have your closest friend and associate to say
something good about you. And Ralph Abernathy is the best friend that I have in the
world. I'm delighted to see each of you here tonight in spite of a storm warning. You
reveal that you are determined to go on anyhow.

Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world. And you
know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind
of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the
Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" I
would take my mental flight by Egypt and I would watch God's children in their
magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red
Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land. And in spite of its
magnificence, I wouldn't stop there.

I would move on by Greece and take my mind to Mount Olympus. And I would see
Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes assembled around the
Parthenon. And I would watch them around the Parthenon as they discussed the
great and eternal issues of reality. But I wouldn't stop there.
I would go on, even to the great heyday of the Roman Empire. And I would see
developments around there, through various emperors and leaders. But I wouldn't
stop there.

I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance, and get a quick picture of all
that the Renaissance did for the cultural and aesthetic life of man. But I wouldn't
stop there.

I would even go by the way that the man for whom I am named had his habitat. And
I would watch Martin Luther as he tacked his ninety-five theses on the door at the
church of Wittenberg. But I wouldn't stop there.

I would come on up even to 1863, and watch a vacillating President by the name of
Abraham Lincoln finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation
Proclamation. But I wouldn't stop there.
I would even come up to the early thirties, and see a man grappling with the
problems of the bankruptcy of his nation. And come with an eloquent cry that we
have nothing to fear but "fear itself." But I wouldn't stop there.
Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy."

Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding.

Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee -- the cry is always the same: "We want to be free."

And another reason that I'm happy to live in this period is that we have been forced to a point where we are going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn't force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them. Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence. That is where we are today.

And also in the human rights revolution, if something isn't done, and done in a hurry, to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed. Now, I'm just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period to see what is unfolding. And I'm happy that He's allowed me to be in Memphis.

I can remember -- I can remember when Negroes were just going around as Ralph has said, so often, scratching where they didn't itch, and laughing when they were not tickled. But that day is all over. We mean business now, and we are determined to gain our rightful place in God's world.

And that's all this whole thing is about. We aren't engaged in any negative protest and in any negative arguments with anybody. We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people. We are saying -- We are saying that we are God's children. And that we are God's children, we don't have to live like we are forced to live.

Now, what does all of this mean in this great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity.

Secondly, let us keep the issues where they are. The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, sanitation workers. Now, we've got to keep attention on that. That's always the problem with a little violence. You know what happened the other day, and the press dealt only with the window-breaking. I read the articles. They very seldom got around to mentioning the fact that one thousand, three hundred sanitation workers are on strike, and that Memphis is not being fair to them, and that Mayor Loeb is in dire need of a doctor. They didn't get around to that.

Now we're going to march again, and we've got to march again, in order to put the
issue where it is supposed to be -- and force everybody to see that there are thirteen
crossed hundred of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through
dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out. That's the
issue. And we've got to say to the nation: We know how it's coming out. For when
people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it,
there is no stopping point short of victory.

We aren't going to let any mace stop us. We are masters in our nonviolent
movement in disarming police forces; they don't know what to do. I've seen them so
often. I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle
there, we would move out of the 16th Street Baptist Church day after day; by the
hundreds we would move out. And Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs
forth, and they did come; but we just went before the dogs singing, "Ain't gonna let
nobody turn me around."

Bull Connor next would say, "Turn the fire hoses on." And as I said to you the other
night, Bull Connor didn't know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow
didn't relate to the transphysics that we knew about. And that was the fact that
there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. And we went before the
fire hoses; we had known water. If we were Baptist or some other denominations,
we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been
sprinkled, but we knew water. That couldn't stop us.

And we just went on before the dogs and we would look at them; and we'd go on
before the water hoses and we would look at it, and we'd just go on singing "Over
my head I see freedom in the air." And then we would be thrown in the paddy
wagons, and sometimes we were stacked in there like sardines in a can. And they
would throw us in, and old Bull would say, "Take 'em off," and they did; and we
would just go in the paddy wagon singing, "We Shall Overcome." And every now and
then we'd get in jail, and we'd see the jailers looking through the windows being
moved by our prayers, and being moved by our words and our songs. And there was
a power there which Bull Connor couldn't adjust to; and so we ended up
transforming Bull into a steer, and we won our struggle in Birmingham.

Now we've got to go on in Memphis just like that. I call upon you to be with us when
we go out Monday.

Now about injunctions: We have an injunction and we're going into court tomorrow
morning to fight this illegal, unconstitutional injunction. All we say to America is, "Be
true to what you said on paper." If I lived in China or even Russia, or any totalitarian
country, maybe I could understand some of these illegal injunctions. Maybe I could
understand the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges, because they
hadn't committed themselves to that over there. But somewhere I read of the
freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I
read of the freedom of press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the
right to protest for right. And so just as I say, we aren't going to let dogs or water
hoses turn us around, we aren't going to let any injunction turn us around. We are
going on.

We need all of you. And you know what's beautiful to me is to see all of these
ministers of the Gospel. It's a marvelous picture. Who is it that is supposed to
articulate the longings and aspirations of the people more than the preacher?
Somehow the preacher must have a kind of fire shut up in his bones. And whenever
injustice is around he tell it. Somehow the preacher must be an Amos, and saith,
"When God speaks who can but prophesy?" Again with Amos, "Let justice roll down
like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Somehow the preacher must say with Jesus, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me," and he's anointed me to deal with the problems of the poor."

And I want to commend the preachers, under the leadership of these noble men: James Lawson, one who has been in this struggle for many years; he's been to jail for struggling; he's been kicked out of Vanderbilt University for this struggle, but he's still going on, fighting for the rights of his people. Reverend Ralph Jackson, Billy Kiles; I could just go right on down the list, but time will not permit. But I want to thank all of them. And I want you to thank them, because so often, preachers aren't concerned about anything but themselves. And I'm always happy to see a relevant ministry.

It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.

Now the other thing we'll have to do is this: Always anchor our external direct action with the power of economic withdrawal. Now, we are poor people. Individually, we are poor when you compare us with white society in America. We are poor. Never stop and forget that collectively -- that means all of us together -- collectively we are richer than all the nations in the world, with the exception of nine. Did you ever think about that? After you leave the United States, Soviet Russia, Great Britain, West Germany, France, and I could name the others, the American Negro collectively is richer than most nations of the world. We have an annual income of more than thirty billion dollars a year, which is more than all of the exports of the United States, and more than the national budget of Canada. Did you know that? That's power right there, if we know how to pool it.

We don't have to argue with anybody. We don't have to curse and go around acting bad with our words. We don't need any bricks and bottles. We don't need any Molotov cocktails. We just need to go around to these stores, and to these massive industries in our country, and say, "God sent us by here, to say to you that you're not treating his children right. And we've come by here to ask you to make the first item on your agenda fair treatment, where God's children are concerned. Now, if you are not prepared to do that, we do have an agenda that we must follow. And our agenda calls for withdrawing economic support from you."

And so, as a result of this, we are asking you tonight, to go out and tell your neighbors not to buy Coca-Cola in Memphis. Go by and tell them not to buy Sealtest milk. Tell them not to buy -- what is the other bread? -- Wonder Bread. And what is the other bread company, Jesse? Tell them not to buy Hart's bread. As Jesse Jackson has said, up to now, only the garbage men have been feeling pain; now we must kind of redistribute the pain. We are choosing these companies because they haven't been fair in their hiring policies; and we are choosing them because they can begin the process of saying they are going to support the needs and the rights of these men who are on strike. And then they can move on town -- downtown and tell Mayor Loeb to do what is right.
But not only that, we've got to strengthen black institutions. I call upon you to take
your money out of the banks downtown and deposit your money in Tri-State Bank.
We want a "bank-in" movement in Memphis. Go by the savings and loan association.
I'm not asking you something that we don't do ourselves at SCLC. Judge Hooks and
others will tell you that we have an account here in the savings and loan association
from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. We are telling you to follow
what we are doing. Put your money there. You have six or seven black insurance
companies here in the city of Memphis. Take out your insurance there. We want to
have an "insurance-in."

Now these are some practical things that we can do. We begin the process of
building a greater economic base. And at the same time, we are putting pressure
where it really hurts. I ask you to follow through here.

Now, let me say as I move to my conclusion that we've got to give ourselves to this
struggle until the end. Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point in
Memphis. We've got to see it through. And when we have our march, you need to be
there. If it means leaving work, if it means leaving school -- be there. Be concerned
about your brother. You may not be on strike. But either we go up together, or we
go down together.
Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.
One day a man came to Jesus, and he wanted to raise some questions about some
vital matters of life. At points he wanted to trick Jesus,
and show him that he knew a little more than Jesus knew
and throw him off base....

Now that question could have easily ended up in a philosophical and theological
debate. But Jesus immediately pulled that question from mid-air, and placed it on a
dangerous curve between Jerusalem and Jericho. And he talked about a certain man,
who fell among thieves. You remember that a Levite and a priest passed by on the
other side. They didn't stop to help him. And finally a man of another race came by.
He got down from his beast, decided not to be compassionate by proxy. But he got
down with him, administered first aid, and helped the man in need. Jesus ended up
saying, this was the good man, this was the great man, because he had the capacity
to project the "I" into the "thou," and to be concerned about his brother.

Now you know, we use our imagination a great deal to try to determine why the
priest and the Levite didn't stop. At times we say they were busy going to a church
meeting, an ecclesiastical gathering, and they had to get on down to Jerusalem so
they wouldn't be late for their meeting. At other times we would speculate that there
was a religious law that "One who was engaged in religious ceremonials was not to
touch a human body twenty-four hours before the ceremony." And every now and
then we begin to wonder whether maybe they were not going down to Jerusalem --
or down to Jericho, rather to organize a "Jericho Road Improvement Association."
That's a possibility. Maybe they felt that it was better to deal with the problem from
the causal root, rather than to get bogged down with an individual effect.

But I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible that those men
were afraid. You see, the Jericho road is a dangerous road. I remember when Mrs.
King and I were first in Jerusalem. We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down
to Jericho. And as soon as we got on that road, I said to my wife, "I can see why
Jesus used this as the setting for his parable." It's a winding, meandering road. It's
really conducive for ambushing. You start out in Jerusalem, which is about 1200 miles -- or rather 1200 feet above sea level. And by the time you get down to Jericho, fifteen or twenty minutes later, you're about 2200 feet below sea level. That's a dangerous road. In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the "Bloody Pass." And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking. And he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt, in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the priest asked -- the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

That's the question before you tonight. Not, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to my job. Not, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor?" The question is not, "If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?" The question is, "If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?" That's the question.

Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation. And I want to thank God, once more, for allowing me to be here with you.

You know, several years ago, I was in New York City autographing the first book that I had written. And while sitting there autographing books, a demented black woman came up. The only question I heard from her was, "Are you Martin Luther King?" And I was looking down writing, and I said, "Yes." And the next minute I felt something beating on my chest. Before I knew it I had been stabbed by this demented woman. I was rushed to Harlem Hospital. It was a dark Saturday afternoon. And that blade had gone through, and the X-rays revealed that the tip of the blade was on the edge of my aorta, the main artery. And once that's punctured, your drowned in your own blood -- that's the end of you.

It came out in the New York Times the next morning, that if I had merely sneezed, I would have died. Well, about four days later, they allowed me, after the operation, after my chest had been opened, and the blade had been taken out, to move around in the wheel chair in the hospital. They allowed me to read some of the mail that came in, and from all over the states and the world, kind letters came in. I read a few, but one of them I will never forget. I had received one from the President and the Vice-President. I've forgotten what those telegrams said. I'd received a visit and a letter from the Governor of New York, but I've forgotten what that letter said. But there was another letter that came from a little girl, a young girl who was a student at the White Plains High School. And I looked at that letter, and I'll never forget it. It said simply,

Dear Dr. King,

I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School."

And she said,

While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I'm a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune, and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed,
you would have died. And I'm simply writing you to say that I'm so happy that you
didn't sneeze.

And I want to say tonight -- I want to say tonight that I too am happy that I didn't
sneeze. Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when
students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters. And I knew that as
they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American
dream, and taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which
were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the
Constitution.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1961, when we decided to
take a ride for freedom and ended segregation in inter-state travel.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1962, when Negroes in
Albany, Georgia, decided to straighten their backs up. And whenever men and
women straighten their backs up, they are going somewhere, because a man can't
ride your back unless it is bent.

If I had sneezed -- If I had sneezed I wouldn't have been here in 1963, when the
black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation, and
brought into being the Civil Rights Bill.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have had a chance later that year, in August, to try to
tell America about a dream that I had had.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been down in Selma, Alabama, to see the great
Movement there.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been in Memphis to see a community rally around
those brothers and sisters who are suffering.

I'm so happy that I didn't sneeze.

And they were telling me --. Now, it doesn't matter, now. It really doesn't matter
what happens now. I left Atlanta this morning, and as we got started on the plane,
there were six of us. The pilot said over the public address system, "We are sorry for
the delay, but we have Dr. Martin Luther King on the plane. And to be sure that all of
the bags were checked, and to be sure that nothing would be wrong with on the
plane, we had to check out everything carefully. And we've had the plane protected
and guarded all night."

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the
threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white
brothers?

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it
really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.

And I don't mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not
concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up
to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not
get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to
the promised land!

And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man!
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!!
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