

Mohandas K. Gandhi, Nelson R. Mandela, & Martin Luther King Jr. International Conference

Conference Opening Keynote Address

Chapter 6: Where do We Go from Here? Gandhi, Mandela and King's still Unanswered Question

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Welcome and thank you to those who organized this conference and to those who have sacrificed your time and economic resources to be here.

I understand that my role tonight is to explain why this conference was organized. WHY ARE WE HERE?

- TO COMMEMORATE THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF MOHANDAS K. GANDHI as the most notable figure in the global struggle to overcome European colonialism;
- MARTIN LUTHER KING, Jr. as the most prominent leader of the struggle against racial barriers to equal citizenship in the United States; and
- NELSON ROLIHLALA MANDELA as the most well-known leader internationally, of the long struggle against the apartheid system of South Africa.

I mention Gandhi, King, and Mandela in that order because we should recognize that Gandhi's success in India inspired King's efforts in the United States, and the success of the American civil rights movement strengthened the international campaign to apply the necessary economic and political pressure to convince the South African government to release Nelson Mandela from

Clayborne Carson

twenty-seven years of imprisonment, and to begin the process of building a multiracial democracy here in this country.

My understanding of why these three men have special historical importance has expanded in unexpected ways since that day, 28 August 1963, when as a 19-year old college student, I hitched a ride to Washington, D.C. and watched King deliver his 'I Have a Dream' oration in Washington, D.C.

I could not have known then that I would come to know and write about many of the 'foot-soldiers' of the civil rights movement who were inspired by King but also sometimes impatient with him.

- AFTER KING'S SPEECH, I could not have known then that two decades later, his widow would ask me to direct a long-term project to edit and publish her late husband's papers.
- I could not have known that four decades after the march, I would help to design the King National Memorial that stands not far from the site of his dream speech.
- I could not have known then that I would travel throughout the world and witness King's as well as Gandhi's global impact.
- And earlier in this century, especially after meeting Professor Prasad Gollanapalli, the Gandhian activist who is here at this gathering, my travels would finally bring me to India where I could deepen my understanding of the Gandhian movement's impact on many other leading American civil rights activists.
- With Prasad's guidance, I became sufficiently knowledgeable to bring a group of my Stanford students to India in 2008 and then help plan the U.S. State Department's commemoration the 50th anniversary of Coretta and Martin King's visit to the place they called 'The Land of Gandhi'. I was honoured to accompany a distinguished American delegation that included Martin Luther King III, and Congressman John Lewis, who had once attracted my special attention as the youngest speaker at the 28 August 1963 March on Washington.
- A decade later, I was both surprised and honoured to be invited to Mumbai to receive the Jambalal Bajaj Award for Promoting Gandhian Values Internationally.

Now, I am once again surprised and honored to be invited here to Pietermaritzburg 130 years after Gandhi's eviction from a train at Pietermaritzburg station (07 June 1893).

THESE ARE A FEW OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS THAT I OFFER AS WE BEGIN THESE MEETINGS:

- That we refrain from merely quoting the words of Gandhi, King, and Mandela and instead focus on emulating their courageous actions.
- That we not look to the past but to the future in order to interpret the global significance of their legacies for our time.
- That we recognize that they left to us a responsibility to continue the still unfinished struggle for global human rights. Twentieth century struggles against colonialism, racial segregation, and apartheid brought about more equality in the civil rights in India, the United States, and South Africa, but those struggles did little to advance the cause of equal human rights for millions of the world's people.

Therefore, I hope that this gathering will move beyond remembering the courageous struggles led by Gandhi, King, and Mandela and instead be inspired by them to INTERNATIONALIZE their struggles in our perilous times.

During the last year of HIS life, Martin Luther King published 'WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? CHAOS OR COMMUNITY?'

We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house', in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace. However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers. Equality with whites will not solve the problems of either whites or Negroes if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty and in a universe doomed to extinction by war.

'We live in a day', said the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead,

when civilization is shifting its basic outlook; a major turning point in history where the pre-suppositions on which society is structured are being analyzed, sharply challenged, and profoundly changed.

Clayborne Carson

What we are seeing now is a freedom explosion, the realization of ‘an idea whose time has come’, to use Victor Hugo’s phrase. The deep rumbling of discontent that we hear today is the thunder of disinherited masses, rising from dungeons of oppression to the bright hills of freedom. In one majestic chorus, the rising masses are singing, in the words of our freedom song, ‘Ain’t gonna let nobody turn us around’. All over the world like a fever, freedom is spreading in the widest liberation movement in history. The great masses of people are determined to end the exploitation of their races and lands.

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself. The Bible tells the thrilling story of how Moses stood in Pharaoh’s court centuries ago and cried, ‘Let my people go’. This was an opening chapter in a continuing story. The present struggle in the United States is a later chapter in the same story. Something within has reminded the Negro 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 spirit of the times, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers in Asia, South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice.

I SUGGEST THAT KING’S FINAL QUESTION IS STILL UNANSWERED AND STILL RELEVANT, ESPECIALLY GIVEN THAT HIS SUBTITLE POSES THE ALTERNATIVES OF CHAOS OR COMMUNITY.

I invite you to read today’s newspaper to determine whether the world is moving more toward chaos or community.

We can use this gathering as an opportunity to congratulate ourselves both for recognizing the accomplishments of Gandhi, King, and Mandela or for recognizing that their visionary ideals were unfinished when they left us.

We can leave here believing that we have accomplished something important just by being one of the privileged people willing and able to travel here or we can use this gathering as an opportunity to meet new friends and start the difficult task of building a global network of human rights advocates.

So, our task, our call to action, is,

INTERNATIONALIZING THE MOVEMENTS INSPIRED BY GANDHI, MANDELA, AND KING.

INCREASING UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN RIGHTS

- Perhaps gaining civil rights in our own nations has made us complacent, and about achieving the ideal of human rights. Perhaps we have the good fortune to have passports that enable us to cross many national borders rather than be stopped when we try to get in.
- Perhaps gaining the right to vote has made us complacent and unable to see when autocracy and tyranny masquerade as democracy.

I LEAVE YOU WITH A HUMBLE REQUEST: THAT YOU USE THIS GATHERING AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE A NEW ACQUAINTANCE FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY WHO BELIEVES IN THE IDEAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND IS WILLING TO WORK WITH YOU – USING THE AMAZING COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES NOW AVAILABLE TO US – TO ACHIEVE THIS IDEAL.

IF YOU AGREE TO THIS REQUEST, I WILL PROMISE YOU THAT I WILL DO EVERYTHING I CAN, TO CONNECT YOU AND YOUR ACQUAINTANCE WITH A GLOBAL NETWORK OF SIMILARLY COMMITTED PEOPLE.

I ALSO SUGGEST THAT WE CALL THIS GLOBAL NETWORK ‘THE WORLD HOUSE.

THANK YOU.

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