

THREE TO REMEMBER

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Our political parties seem to be in an unfriendly paralysis and may be unable to compromise.

For some time there has been a lack of willingness among politicians to concur on issues. This political behavior has been very apparent in the last election and in congress over the past two years. This paper is about three speeches. These speeches have something to say about today's dilemma. It is my hope that in listening to selections from these speeches, we will be energized to resolve our differences and continue together to create this unique history.

These three speeches are from three different men, born in three different centuries. Men, whose origin are from three different continents. The speeches presented ideas that are very relevant today.

The first speech was written several days before it was given, and the writer knew that it was an important time in the history of this country, a time when we needed to hear again that we should live together as prescribed by our forefathers. He stood on hill in front of 15,000 people and said:

Four score and seven years ago our forefathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that this nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate - we cannot consecrate - we cannot hallow - this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us - that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion - that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain - that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom - and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

The Gettysburg Address was given on November 19, 1863. At the Battle of Gettysburg 75,000 Confederate soldiers under General Robert E. Lee met 97,000 Union soldiers under General George G. Meade. Thirty percent of those who fought or 50,000 were casualties. Lincoln's

Address followed a much longer speech given by Edward Everett that dedicated The Soldiers' National Cemetery. Mr. Everett was a friend of Daniel Webster, who turned down the opportunity to speak as had Longfellow, Whittier and Bryant. The cemetery was part of the Rural Cemetery Movement. It was designed by William Saunders to recognize those who died there on June 1-3, 1863.¹ The design of the cemetery is concentric half circles of flush grave markers grouped by state. There was no attempt to identify the dead soldiers as members of the Confederate or Union Armies. Preparing these graves was gruesome business as they had been buried once and had to be identified and moved.

Mr. Lincoln used 87 years as a reference to the Declaration of Independence rather than referring to the Constitution of the United States, thus underlining the ideology of the Declaration of Independence, not the binding literalness of the Constitution.² Lincoln had deep concern that if the nation split, the Union as conceived would not survive. He was very concerned that the noble idea drafted by Jefferson and signed at the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776 could not continue if the Union lost the war. The Civil War was also concerned about slavery. Lincoln had addressed that issue on September 22, 1862 when he said there would be an Emancipation Proclamation to free slaves in 10 Southern states unless there was "reunion" by January 1, 1863. The threat of the Proclamation did not solve the division of states and Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The 13th Amendment officially ended slavery when it was ratified on December 18, 1865.

In the last sentence of the Address, God is referenced. The phrase "under God" was added to the final text; some argue that it was added to the speech after Lincoln heard the phrase "under Providence".³ Geoff Nunberg, in a posting dated June 20, 2004, interprets Lincoln's use of the phrase to mean "with God's help". There will be references to God in the other speeches.

He stood behind a lectern facing east toward a national monument on a warm summer morning. He had been speaking 10 or so minutes when he paused looked up from his prepared text and out onto his audience and said from his heart, and without notes:

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

¹ Pp. 23, 24,74 "Lincoln at Gettysburg, The Words that remade America", Garry Willis, Simon & Schuster, 1992

² Pp. 38 "Lincoln at Gettysburg, The Words that remade America", Garry Willis, Simon & Schuster, 1992

³ pp. 298,item 29, ibid

.....I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.⁴

Prior to the now iconic interruption of the August 28, 1963 speech, he used his homiletic skills, rhythm and repetition and his fascination with words and phrases.

“When will you be satisfied? We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of unspeakable horrors of police brutality.

We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro’s basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one.

We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating “for whites only”. We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Dr. Martin Luther King began the “Dream Speech” with a reference to what had occurred 100 years before. Saying:

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free; one hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination; one hundred years later the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity; one hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land.

So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

The speech was given to an estimated one million people standing around and in the reflecting pool that stretches between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial reflecting the images of those great monuments and providing a shimmering reflection of those great men. To end his speech Dr. King chose the Liberty Bell as metaphor.

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.

⁴ p 104-105, “I Have A Dream Writings And Speeches That Changed The World”, Martin Luther King, Jr., Harper San Francisco, 1986

Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. The Rockies of Colorado, the slopes of California, the Stone Mountain of Georgia, Lookout Mountain of Tennessee, every hill of Mississippi, let freedom ring.

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children – black men and white men, Jew and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics – will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, "Free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

Abraham Lincoln's speech and Dr. Martin Luther King's speech are teathered by the human suffering in our democracy that is bonded to freedom. The third speech is not about human suffering, nor is it about the God referred to by Lincoln and King. It is about the way we treat each other and this planet. As occupiers of this continent we have chosen to eliminate forests, slaughter buffalo to extinction and take the tops off mountains to get at coal. This last speech is by an Indian who lived from 1780 to 1866. It was given at a gathering in Seattle on March 1, 1854 where this Indian chief was agreeing to surrender "his" native land to the white settlers and the U.S. Government. Chief Seattle gave the speech, sometimes incorrectly called the "Environmental speech", in his native language of Lushootseed. It was witnessed by Dr. Henry A. Smith and was first published in the Seattle Sunday Star 33 years later on October 29, 1887. Because of the time that separates when the speech was given and when it was documented there has been much discussion as to the accuracy of what was said. Never the less, the intent of what was said I find relevant today. A book by Albert Furtwangler, "Answering Chief Seattle" published by University of Washington Press in 1997 and a paper by John Kucich published in a book edited by Lucy E. Frank called "Representation of Death in 19th Century U.S. Writing and Culture" published by Ashgate Publishing Ltd of England and Burlington, Vermont dissects the language and nuances of the speech in great detail. As I have found many versions of the speech, I have chosen to present excerpts which I believe convey Chief Seattle's intent.

The White Chief (refers to Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens) says that the Big Chief at Washington (President Franklin Pierce) sends us greetings of friendship and goodwill. This is kind of him, for we know he has little need of our friendship in return, because his people are many. My people are few.

Our good father in Washington; for I presume he is now our father as well as yours... sends us word that if we do as he desires he will protect us. His brave warriors will be to us a bristling wall of strength, and his wonderful ships will fill our harbors, so that our ancient enemies far to the northward – the Haides and Tsimshians – will cease to frighten our women, children and old men. Then in reality he will be our father and we his children, but can that ever be? Your God is not our God! Your God loves your people and hates mine! He folds his strong loving arms about the white man and leads him as a father leads his infant son, but he has forsaken his red children; he makes your people wax strong every day, and soon they will fill the land; while my people are ebbing away like a fast receding tide that will never flow again. The white man's God cannot love his red children or he would protect them. They seem to be orphans who can look nowhere for help. How then can they become brothers? How can your father become our father and bring us prosperity and awaken in us dreams of returning greatness? Your God seems to be partial. He came to the white man. We never saw him; never heard his voice; He gave white man laws but had no word for his red children whose teeming millions filled this vast continent as the stars fill the firmament.

No, we are two distinct races and must ever remain so. There is little in common between us. The ashes of our ancestors are sacred and the final resting place is hallowed ground, while you wander away from the tombs of your fathers seemingly without regret.

Our dead never forget the beautiful world that gave them being. They still love its winding rivers, its great mountains and its sequestered vales, and they ever yearn in tenderest affection over the lonely hearted living and often return to visit and comfort them.

But why should we repine? Why should I murmur at the fate of my people? Tribes are made up of individuals and are no better than they. Men come and go like the waves of the sea. A tear, a tamanawus (guardian spirit), a dirge and they are gone from our longing eyes forever. Even the white man, who's God walked and talked with him, as friend to friend, is not exempt from all common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see.

We will ponder your proposition and when we decide we will let you know. But should we accept it, I here and now make this condition that we will not be denied the privilege without molestation of visiting at anytime the tombs of our ancestors, friends and children.

Every part of this soil is sacred... even the rocks that seem dumb as they swelter in the sun along the silent seashore in solemn grandeur thrill with memories of past events connected with the fate of my people, and the very dust under your feet responds more lovingly to our footsteps than to yours, because it is the ashes of our ancestors.

At night, when the streets of your cities and villages shall be silent, and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled and still love this beautiful land.

The white man will never be alone. Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not altogether powerless.

Chief Seattle's speech is important to me because it reminds me that there are people who live in this land who have different points of view than I do.

Dr. Martin Luther King's speech cautions me that compassion takes time to develop.

And Lincoln's Gettysburg Address emphasizes how fragile this Republic can be, and I want it to continue so my great, great grandchildren can enjoy it.

Lincoln's speech referred to God as the protector, King's speech refers to the same God, but wonders why under God one hundred years later the Negro was still not free. In Chief Seattle's speech he wonders if the God he knows is not different than the God of the good father in Washington. God can be seen differently and religion can be practiced differently.

At the World's Parliament of Religions held in conjunction with the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians and others met to discuss religion. It was agreed that Christianity was not the universal religion. This opened the possibility that Christianity was one of many faiths⁵

Do race, color and creed provide so significant a chasm that we cannot bridge it? Are there barriers so great that as humans we cannot find a common resolve? Will we forever be seeking ways to unite?

⁵ "A People's History of Christianity", Diana Butler Bass, Harper One 2009, pp 276-278

We struggle this November evening with injustice and difference, we should not falter in our resolve, for there are those who preceded us who knew of our challenge and believed we can set aside our human nature and find solutions that allow all to live in freedom and peace.

Lincoln was concerned about States seceding and threatening the Union, Rev King was concerned about how we treat each other and Chief Seattle made us aware that we often treat similar ideas differently. These three speeches are for me as relevant and poignant today as when they were given.