

On October 29, 1965, Abbott House, a child welfare agency in Westchester County, New York, held its first inaugural dinner. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been invited and asked to speak on "the dignity of family life." His entire speech is provided below.

"The Dignity of Family Life"

(An address by Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered on October 29, 1965, at Abbott House in Westchester County, New York. Found in *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* by Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, M.I.T. Press, 1967, pages 402-409.)

I have been asked to speak tonight on the subject of the dignity of family life. It is appropriate that a Negro discuss the subject because for no other group in American life is the matter of family life more important than to the Negro. Our very survival is bound up in it. It is a particular privilege to speak under the auspices of the Abbott House because they are combining the treatment of symptoms with a probing of causes. Their experimental work to discover new aspects of the dynamics of family relationships is fresh and creative.

For a number of years a good many writers have tartly denigrated the role of the family. Some have asserted the family will disappear in 50 years: others have argued its preservation is hopeless because sex is now used for recreation rather than procreation. One writer summed up the prevailing contemptuous attitude with the statement that "Family life is obviously a study in lunacy."

Some 30 years ago Malinowski [Bronislaw, anthropologist, b. 1884] refuted these pessimistic and negative appraisals with the striking statement, "The family, that is, the group consisting of mother, father and child, still remains the main educational agency of mankind. Modern psychologists agree that parenthood as the dominant influence of infancy forms the character of the individual and at the same time shapes his social attitudes and thus places its imprint upon the constitution of the whole society."

In more recent years the writings of Dr. Benjamin Spock have not only reinforced these views but extended them through popular media to hundreds of millions around the world.

I endorse these conclusions and would emphasize one in particular. Family life not only educates in general but its quality ultimately determines the individual's capacity to love. The institution of the family is decisive in determining not only if a person has the capacity to love another individual but in the larger social sense whether he is capable of loving his fellow men collectively. The whole of society rests on this foundation for stability, understanding and social peace.

At this point in history I am particularly concerned with the Negro family. In recent years the Negro as an individual and Negroes as a community have been thrust into public attention. The dignity and personality of the Negro as an individual has been dramatized by turbulent struggles for civil rights. Conditions of Negro communities have been revealed by the turmoil engulfing northern ghettos and southern segregated communities.

But the Negro family as an institution has been obscured and its special problems little comprehended.

A recent study [Moynihan Report, 1965] offers the alarming conclusion that the Negro family in urban ghettos is crumbling and disintegrating. It suggests that the progress in civil rights can be negated by the dissolving of family structure and therefore social justice and tranquility can be delayed for generations. The statistics are alarming. They show that in urban cities nearly 25% of Negro women, who were married, are divorced, in contrast to a rate of 8% among whites. The rate of illegitimacy in the past twenty years rose slightly more for whites than Negroes, but the number of Negro illegitimacies in proportion to its population is substantially higher than whites [3% for whites/24% for blacks]. The number of Negro families headed by women is 2½ times that of whites and as a consequence 14% of all Negro children receive aid to dependent children and 56% of Negro children at some point in their lives have been recipients of public aid.

As public awareness increases there will be dangers and opportunities. The opportunity will be to deal fully rather than haphazardly with the problem as a whole—to see it as a social catastrophe and meet it as other disasters are met with an adequacy of resources. The danger will be that the problems will be attributed to innate Negro weaknesses and used to justify neglect and rationalize oppression.

We must, therefore, learn something about the special origins of the Negro family. If we would understand why Negroes could embrace non-violent protest in the South and make historic progress there while at the same time most northern ghettos seethe with anger and barely restrained fury, we will have to know some lessons of history. The flames of Watts have illuminated more than the western skies—they lit up the agony of the ghetto and revealed that hopeless Negroes in the grip of rage will hurt themselves to hurt others in a desperate quest for justice.

The Negro family for three hundred years has been on the tracks of the racing locomotives of American history and was dragged along mangled and crippled. Pettigrew [Thomas F., sociologist, b. 1931] has pointed out that American slavery is distinguished from all other forms because it consciously dehumanized the Negro. In other cultures slaves preserved dignity and a measure of personality and family life. Our institution of slavery began on the coasts of Africa and because the middle passage was long and expensive, African families were torn apart in the selective process as if the members were beasts. On the voyages millions died in holds into which blacks were packed spoon fashion to live on a journey often of two to six months with approximately the room for each equivalent to a coffin. The sheer physical torture was sufficient to murder millions of men, women and children. But even more incalculable was the psychological damage. For those who survived as a family group, once more on the auction block many families were ripped apart.

Against this ghastly background the Negro family began the process of organization in the United States. On the plantation the institution of legal marriage did not exist. The masters might direct mating or if they did not intervene marriage occurred without sanctions. There were polygamous relationships, fragile monogamous relationships, illegitimacies,

abandonment, and, most of all, the tearing apart of families as children, husbands, or wives were sold to other plantations. But these cruel conditions were not yet the whole story. Masters and their sons used Negro women to satisfy their spontaneous lust or, when a more humane attitude prevailed, as concubines. The depth was reached in certain states, notably Virginia which we sentimentally call the state of presidents. In this state, slaves were bred for sale, not casually or incidentally, but in a vast breeding program which produced enormous wealth for slave owners. This breeding program was the economic answer to the halting of the slave traffic early in the 19th century.

Through the ante-bellum era, the Negro family struggled against these odds to survive, and miraculously many did. In all this psychological and physical horror many slaves managed to hold on to their children and developed warmth and affection and family loyalties against the smashing tides of emotional corruption and destruction.

The liberation from slavery which should have initiated a birth of stable family life meant a formal legal freedom but as Henrietta Buckmaster [writer, b. 1909] put it, "with Appomattox, four million black people in the South owned their skins and nothing more."

Government policy was so conflicted and disinterested that a new inferno engulfed the Negro and his family. Thrown off the plantation, penniless, homeless, still largely in the territory of their enemies and in the grip of fear, bewilderment and aimlessness, hundreds of thousands became wanderers. For security they fled to Union army camps, themselves unprepared to help. One writer describes a mother carrying a child in one arm, a father holding another child and eight other children with their hands tied to one rope held by the mother, who struggled after Sherman's army and brought them hundreds of miles to safety. All were not so fortunate. In the starvation-induced madness some Negroes killed their children to free them of their misery.

These are historical facts. If they cause the mind to reel with horror it is still necessary to realize this recital is a tiny glimpse of the reality of the era. And it does justice neither to the enormous extent of the tragedy nor can it adequately describe the degree of human suffering and sorrow. The enormity of the tragedy utterly defies any attempt to portray it in terms the human mind can comprehend.

Following this period millions were returned to a legal form of slavery, once again imprisoned on plantations devoid of human rights and plunged into searing poverty generation after generation.

Some families found their way to the North in a movement Frazier [E. Franklin, sociologist, b. 1894] aptly describes as "into the city of destruction."

Illiterate, undisciplined, afraid, and crushed by want, they were herded into slums. City life then, as now for migrant groups, has been ruinous for peasant people. The bewilderment of the complex city undermined the confidence of fathers and mothers, causing them to lose control of their children whose bewilderment was even more acute. Once more the Negro's problem had two rather than one cutting edge. Because the institution of marriage

was not legal under slavery, and with indiscriminate sex relations often with masters, mothers could identify their children but frequently not their fathers; hence a matriarchy developed. After slavery it did not die out because in the cities there was more employment for women than for men. Though both were unskilled, the women could be used in domestic service at low wages. The woman became the support of the household, and the matriarchy was reinforced.

The Negro male existed in a larger society which was patriarchal while he was the subordinate in a matriarchy.

The quest of males for employment was always frustrating. If he lacked skill he was only occasionally wanted because such employment had little regularity and even less remuneration. If he had a skill, he also had his black skin, and discrimination locked doors against him. In the competition for scarce jobs, he was a loser because he was born that way.

The rage and torment of the Negro male was frequently turned inward because if it gained outward expression its consequences would have been fatal. He became resigned to hopelessness, and he communicated this to his children. Some, unable to contain the emotional storms, struck out at those who would be less likely to destroy them. He beat his wife and his children in order to protest a social injustice, and the tragedy was that none of them understood why the violence exploded.

Even had the Negro family been assured of adequate food on the table, it would still be insufficient to secure a constructive life for the children. In all cities they are herded through grades of schooling without learning. Their after-school life is spent in neglected filthy streets which abound in open crime. Most white people are ignorant of the extent to which crime surrounds the Negro in the ghettos, or the degree to which it is organized and cultivated there by crime syndicates. Numbers, prostitution and narcotics rackets pervade the ghettos and because they are white-owned enterprises they drain staggering economic wealth out of the community, leaving a wealth of misery and corruption behind. Even when he and his family resist its corruption, its presence is a source of fear and of moral debilitation. For many Negro children, the care and protection of a mother is unknown because she is busy caring for a white child in order to earn the money to keep her disintegrating family together. Dick Gregory, telling of his youth, describes how his mother stole food from her employer to keep the family adequately fed. When she called her children to the table to bless the food, he responded with the sardonic, poignant humor for which he is now so well known by saying, "You come down to the basement and bless what I stole and I'll bless what you stole."

The shattering blows on the Negro family have made it fragile, deprived and often psychopathic. This is tragic because nothing is so much needed as a secure family life for a people seeking to pull themselves out of poverty and backwardness. History continues to mock the Negro because even as he needs greater family integrity because he had so little in his heritage, in the larger American society today severe strains are assailing white family life. Delinquency is not confined to the underprivileged—it is rampant among

middle and upper social strata, and more than one observer argues that juvenile delinquency is a product of widespread adult delinquency. In short, the larger society is not at this time a constructive educational force for the Negro.

The dark side of the picture appears almost to make the future bleak, if not hopeless. Yet something says this is not true. Back two hundred years on the coasts of Africa mothers fought fiendish slave traders to save their children. They offered their bodies to slavers if they would leave the children behind. On some slave ships that are known, and many that will never be known, manacled Negroes crawled from the holds and fought unarmed against guns and knives. On slave plantations parents fought, stole, sacrificed and died for their families. After liberation countless mothers wandered over roadless states looking for the children who had been taken from them and sold. And finally in the modern era mothers, fathers and their children have marched together against clubs, guns, cattle prods and mobs, not for conquest but only to be allowed to live as humans. The Negro was crushed, battered and brutalized, but he never gave up. He proves again life is stronger than death. The Negro family is scarred, it is submerged, but it struggles to survive. It is working against greater odds than perhaps any other family experienced in all civilized history.

But it is winning. Step by step in agony it moves forward. Superficial people may superciliously expect it to function with all the graces and facility of more advantaged families. Their unfeeling criticism may hurt, but it will not halt progress. If the Negro is called upon to do the impossible, he may fail in the eyes of those ignorant of his tortured history, but in his own eyes the Negro knows he is imperceptibly accumulating the resources to emerge fully as a total human being. In the past ten years, he has learned how to win battles against vicious adversaries. In the process he learned also how to win battles with himself. No one in all history had to fight against so many physical and psychological horrors to have a family life. The fight was never lost; victory was always delayed; but the spirit persisted, and the final triumph is as sure as the rising sun.

A hundred times I have been asked why we allowed little children to march in demonstrations, to freeze and suffer in jails, to be exposed to bullets and dynamite. The questions implied that we have a want of family feeling or recklessness towards family security. The answer is simple. Our children and our families are maimed a little every day of our lives. If we can end an incessant torture by a single climactic confrontation, the risks are acceptable. Beyond that our family life will be born anew if we fight together. Other families may be fortunate to be able to protect their young from danger. Our families, as we have seen, are different. Oppression again and again divided and splintered our families. We are a people torn apart from era to era. It is logical, moral and psychologically constructive for us to resist oppression united as families. Out of this unity, out of the bond of fighting together, forges will come. The inner strength and integrity will make us whole again.

The most optimistic element revealed in this review of the Negro family's experience is that the causes for its present crisis are culturally and socially induced. What man has torn down he can rebuild. At the root of the difficulty in Negro life is pervasive and persistent

economic want. To grow from within the Negro needs only fair opportunity for jobs, education, housing and access to culture. To be strengthened from the outside requires protection from the grim exploitation that has haunted it for 300 years.

The Negro family lived in Africa in nature's jungle and subdued the hostile environment. In the United States, it has lived in a man-made social and psychological jungle which it could not subdue. Many have been destroyed by it. Yet others have survived and developed an appalling capacity for hardships. It is on this strength that society can build. What is required is a recognition by a society that it has been guilty of the crimes and that it is prepared to atone. With that beginning there need be no doubt about the end.

Much of the ugly experiences of Negro history have been obscured and forgotten. A society is always eager to cover great misdeeds with a cloak of forgetfulness, but no society can repress an ugly past when the ravages persist into the present. America owes a debt to justice which it has only begun to pay. If it loses the will to finish or slackens in its determination, history will recall its crimes and the country that would be great will lack the most indispensable element of greatness—justice.

I do not think that the tiny nation that stood in majesty at Concord and Lexington, that electrified the world with the words of the Declaration of Independence, will defame its heritage to avoid a responsibility. That is why I believe not only in the future of the Negro family but in the future of the family of man.