

The Appeal of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech

By Christopher Hollis

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech is one of the most inspirational speeches that has ever been written. Using just words, Martin Luther King, Jr., inspired a nation to finally understand "that all men are created equal." With a repetitive tone, the sharing of his dream, and the use of persuasive elements, Martin Luther King, Jr., makes people realize the importance of the message he is trying to convey. His message is clear, "let freedom ring."

The theme of King's speech is laid out early, since the first three sentences speak of freedom, even though the word is not mentioned until later. In sentence three, King says that, "It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity," in which he refers to the event in sentence two where "a great American," Abraham Lincoln, "in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation," which gave freedom to all slaves. Even though the black man was freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, persecution of the black man was harsh in the 1960's. King makes the point "that all men are created equal," as stated in the Constitution of the United States. He communicates the idea that this equality for all men was so important to our founding fathers yet has been long since forgotten or ignored by people of his generation and of others before his.

Although King uses repetition of the words "I have a dream," in which he uses "I," he more often uses the word "we," making the message quite clear that he has a dream and that we, all American's, either have or should have his dream, which is equality for all men. For the reader who reads this speech or to the listener who hears this speech, it would seem as though King is talking directly to us. Using words like "we" or "our," he keeps the attention of the audience, since they are not just being read to, they are being referenced as a part of the speech by saying that he and the audience together must do this, rather than saying that "you," the audience, must do this. The context of the word "we" fits nicely in the speech, whereas "you" would become too repetitive and perhaps make the audience more annoyed than interested and persuaded, which is the intended purpose of the speech.

The tone of King's speech is passionate, though the speech reads smoothly, since the idea of a speech is to be spoken rather than written. Since the speech was originally spoken rather than written, it follows a natural rhythm that the reader gets caught up in. The point of making the speech read smoothly is to let the reader feel the rhythm of the words, so that the reader can get swept up in the idea that the writer or speaker is trying to project. King's creative references and use of many kinds of adjectives make the speech sound much more interesting, while still making it easy to understand and informative.

In this speech, King is also very persuasive in influencing the audience of his ideas. Citing the Constitution which was created by our forefathers, King infers that they meant for America to be a nation in which the black and white man are created equal, since the Constitution states "that all men are created equal." With the persuasive elements in his speech, the passionate tone, and the smoothness of it, King is very successful in the communication of his ideas. Times have changed since 1963, in part because of King's well communicated ideas.

Later in the speech, King speaks of many places that we know. We know of the "snowcapped Rockies of Colorado" and of "Lookout Mountain of Tennessee." King uses much repetition of a particular line from the song "My Country 'Tis of Thee," which is "let freedom ring." He says to "let freedom ring" from all these places telling the reader that "we" need to fight for freedom right here in our own nation, in a setting that we know, our own towns, cities, and in our own backyards. While a war abroad might seem distant and unimportant to American's at home, King presses the point that the war is here in America, not beyond our borders in some distant land. He makes this point to make people understand that the issue of civil rights directly affects Americans and must therefore not be avoided.

King makes his message clear in that although we should do most anything to fight for equality, let us use words and non violent actions that lead to peace rather than violence which would lead to yet more hatred between peoples. "In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not feel guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred." King's emphasis on change through non violence was the reason behind the success of the speech, which because of its persuasiveness, helped along the Civil Rights Movement. The white man was often not afraid of change itself, only the means through which it was brought about. King's peaceful non hostile approach did not drive listeners then or readers now away, since the speech does not attack any group or individual. The speech is seeking to unite a nation, meaning that since many people would like a nation in peace rather than at war within, this speech appealed to not only the black man, but the white man as well.

King mentions that all activities of white men should not "lead us to a distrust of all white people," in which he speaks to the black men, "for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny," which refers to all American's destinies being dependent on each other, "and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom," since both sides would have less persecution and more freedoms if there was peace. King says that "We cannot walk alone," meaning that this has to not only be the black man's fight, but the white man's fight as well, for only then will change occur. Even though certain white people had been so cruel to his race throughout the one hundred years since the Emancipation Proclamation, he does not call the white man a racist. King became such a prominent figure because unlike some other civil rights leaders, his dream for freedom involved a path that did not involve violence. King refers to the white people who also share his dream

as being "our white brothers," and that both the white man and the black men cannot walk alone since their destinies are bound together. He even addresses the white men and black men in the crowd as "my friends" later in the speech. King was persuasive because his speeches motivated not only black people, but motivated white people. His speech did not criticize the white man, and therefore the white man became open to King's dream, which eventually became not only the black man's dream, but the white man's dream, and finally, collectively, the American dream.

King's speech eventually united a nation. His speech is so acclaimed because of the persuasive, passionate tone that appealed to so many because of the speeches' peaceful resolve of uniting a nation through non violence. King's "I Have a Dream" speech speaks directly to the reader. King uses words that tell the reader that this is something that he cannot do alone, that the road to freedom is something that "we" must all strive for together through peaceful means, since the destiny of all men, black or white, depend on the struggle for freedom. King's excellent use of these writing techniques is the reason why his speech is so appealing to readers now, and forever.

Source

Quotes are quoted from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech," which was delivered on August 28, 1963, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.