Let's begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately menaced, not by Marxism, but from within. So any citizen of this country, and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to "go for broke." Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct some generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won't happen.

Now, since I am talking to schoolteachers and I am not a schoolteacher—well, I am a fairly uneducated, I beg you to let me leave that and go back to what I think to be the entire purpose of education in the first place. It would seem to me that when a child is born, if I'm the child's parent, it is my obligation and my high duty to civilize that child. Man is a social animal. He cannot exist without a society. A society, in turn, depends on certain things which everyone within that society takes for granted. Now, the crucial paradox which confronts us here is that the whole process of education seems to be working hard and is designed to prevent the child's understanding of society. Thus, for example, the boys and girls who were born during the era of the Third Reich, when educated to the purpose of the Third Reich, became barb rians. The paradox of education is precisely this: that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.

The purpose of education finally, is to create a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To examine, and then to live with these questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.

Now, if what I have tried to sketch has any validity, it becomes thoroughly clear, at least to me, that any Negro who is born in this country and undergoes the American educational system runs the risk of becoming schizophrenic. On the one hand he is born in the shadow of the stars and stripes and he is assured it represents a nation which has never lost a war. He pledges allegiance to that flag which proclaims "liberty and justice for all." He is part of a country in which anyone can become President, and so forth. But on the other hand he has also been promised all the opportunities that his forefathers have never contributed anything to civilisation—that his past is nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured. He is assured by the republic that he, his father, his mother, and his ancestors were happy, childless, watermelon-eating dandies who loved Mr. Charlie and Miss Ann, that the value he has as a black man is proven by one thing only—his devotion to white people. If you think I am exaggerating, examine the myths which proliferate in this country about Negroes.

Now all this enters the child's consciousness much sooner than we think and it doesn't think it doesn't know that it is ready. We usually fooled because we are so anxious to be fooled. But children are very different. Children, not yet deep in that it is dangerous to look too deeply at anything, look at everything; look at each other, and draw their own conclusions. They don't have the vocabulary to express what they see, and we, their elders, know how to intimidate them very easily and very soon. But a black child, looking at the world around him, though he cannot know quite what to make of it, is aware that there is a reason why he works so hard, why his father is always on edge. He is aware that there is some reason why his dog is shut up in the front of the bus, his father or mother drags him to the back of the bus. He is aware that there is some terrible weight on his parent's shoulders which menaces him. And it isn't long—in fact it begins very early—when he is in school—before he discovers the shape of his oppression.
Square Garden, or to the U.N. Building, or to any of the tremendous monuments we find all over New York. We went into a bus and we got off where I live on 131st Street and Seventh Avenue downtown through the park and we get into New York City, which is not Harlem. Now, where the boy lives—even if it is a housing project—is in an undesirable neighborhood. If he lives in one of those housing projects of which everyone in New York is so proud he has at his front door, if not closer, the plums, the vipers, the junkies—knaves of the underworld. All the children know this, though he doesn't know why.

I still remember my first sight of New York. It was really another city when I was born—where I was born. We looked down over the Park Avenue streetcar tracks. It was Park Avenue, but I didn't know what Park Avenue meant downtown. The Park Avenue I grew up on, which is still standing, is dark and dirty. No one would dream of opening a Tiffany's on that Park Avenue, and when you go downtown you discover that you are literally in the white world. It is rich or at least it looks rich. It is clean—because they collect garbage downtown. There are doormen. People walk about as though they own the world—and indeed they do. It's very, very hard for a Negro child to believe this. You don't know what it means. You know—you know instinctively—that none of this is for you. You know this before you are told. And who is it for and who is paying for it? And why isn't it for you?

Later on when you become a grocery boy or messenger and you try to enter one of those buildings a man says, "Go to the back door." Still later, if you happen to have a friend in one of those buildings, the man says, "Where's your package?"

Now this is by no means the core of the matter. That I'm trying to get at is that by the time the Negro child has had effective—by that I mean the opportunity to read and there are very few things he can do about it. He can make or less accept with an absolutely inarticulate and dangerous rage inside—all the more dangerous because it is never expressed. It is precisely those silent people whom white people see every day of their lives—I mean your porter and your maid, who never say anything more than "Yes Sir" and "No M'am". They will tell you it's raining if that is what you want to hear, and they will tell you the sun is shining if that is what you want to hear. They really hate you—really hate you because in their eyes—and they're right—you stand between them and life. I want to come back to that in a moment. It is the most sinister of the facts, I think, which we never face.

There is something else the Negro child can do, too. Every street boy and I was street boy, so I know—looking at the society which has produced him, looking at the standards of that society which are not honored by anybody, looking at your churches and the government and the politicians, understands that this structure is operated for someone else's benefit, not for his. And there's no room in it for him. It is really cunning, really ruthless, really strong and many of us are—He becomes a kind of criminal. He becomes a kind of criminal because he can live. Harlem and every ghetto in this city—every ghetto in this country—is full of people who live outside the law. They wouldn't dream of calling a policeman. They wouldn't for a moment, listen to any of those professions of which we are so proud on the Fourth of July. They have turned away from this country totally and forever. They live by their wits and really long to see the day when the entire structure comes down.

The point of all this is that black men were brought here as a source of cheap labor. They were indispensable to the economy. In order to justify the fact that men were treated as though they were animals, the white republic had to brainwash itself into believing that they were indeed, animals and deserved to be treated like animals. Therefore it is almost impossible for any Negro child to discover anything about his actual history. The reason is that this "animal", once he suspects his own worth, once he starts believing that he is a man, has begun to attack the entire power structure. This is why America has spent such a long time keeping the Negro in his place. What I am trying to suggest to you is that it was not an accident, it was not an act of God, it was not done by well-meaning people muddling into something which they didn't understand. It was a deliberate policy hammered into place in order to make money from black flesh. And now, because we have never faced this fact, we are in intolerable trouble.

The Reconstruction, as I read the evidence, was a bargain between the North and South to this effect: "We've liberated
from the land—and delivered them to the bosses.” Then we left Mississippi to come North we did not come to freedom. We came to the bottom of the labor market, and we are still there. Even the Depression of the 1930s failed to make a dent in Negroes’ relationship to white workers in the labor unions. Even today, so brainwashed is this people that they seriously ask in that they suppose to be good faith, “What does the Negro want?” I’ve heard a great many asinine questions in my life, but that is perhaps the most asinine and perhaps the most insulting. But the point here is that people who ask that question, thinking that they ask it in good faith, are really the victims of this conspiracy to make Negroes believe that they are less than human.

In order for me to live, I decided very early that some mistake had been made somewhere. I was not a “nigger” even though you called me one. But if I was a “nigger” in your eyes, there was something about you—there was something you needed. I had to realize when I was very young that I was none of those things I was told I was. I was not, for example, happy. I never touched a watermelon for all kinds of reasons. I had been invented by white people, and I knew enough of life by this time to understand that whatever you invent whatever you project that is your art that a whole country of people believe I’m a “nigger”, and I don’t, and the battles on! Because if I am not that I’ve been told that I am, then it means that you are not what you thought you were either! And that is the crisis.

It is not a real “Negro” revolution that is upsetting this country. What is upsetting the country is a sense of its own identity. If, for example, one managed to change the curricula in all the schools so that Negroes learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you would be liberating not only Negroes, you’d be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history. And the reason is that if you are compelled to lie about one aspect of anybody’s history, you must lie about all. If you have to lie about my real role here, if you have to pretend that I hoed all that cotton just because I loved you, then you have done something to yourself. You are mad.

Now let’s go back a minute. I talked earlier about those silent people—the porter and the maid—whom I said, don’t look up at the sky if you ask them if it is raining, but look into your face. My ancestors and I were very well trained. We understood very early that this was not a Christian nation. It didn’t matter what you said or how often you want to church. My father and my mother and my grand father and my grandmother knew that Christianity didn’t cut this way. It was as simple as that. And if that were so there was no point in dealing with white people in terms of their own moral professions, for they were not interested in them. That one did use to turn any smiling all the time, and tell white people what they wanted to hear. But people always accuse you of reckless talk when you talk like this.

All this means that there are in this country tremendous reservoirs of bitterness which have never been able to find an outlet, but my find an outlet soon. It means that well-meaning white liberals place themselves in great danger when they try to indulge with Negroes as though they were missionaries. It means, in brief, that the Negro is demanded to be silent people so that they can breathe for the first time and tell you what they think of you. And a price is demanded to liberate all those white children—some of them near forty—who have never grown up, and who never will grow up, because they have no sense of their identity.

That passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one’s heroic ancestors. It’s astounding, to me, for example, that so many people really appear to believe that the country was saved by heroes who never had to be heroes. It happen not to be true. What happened was that people left Europe because they couldn’t stay any longer and had to go somewhere else to make it. That’s all. They were hungry, they were poor, they were convicts. Those who were making it in England, for example did not get on the Mayflower. That’s how the country was settled. Not by Gary Cooper. Yet we have a whole race of people, a whole republic who believe the myths to the point where even today they select political representatives I can’t call heroes by name Cooper. I can’t call heroes by name Cooper. I can’t call heroes by name Cooper. I can’t call heroes by name Cooper. Now this is dangerously infantile, and it shows in every level of national life. When I was living in Europe, for example, one of the worst revelations to me was the way Americans walked around Europe buying this and buying that and insulting everybody—not even out of malice, just because they didn’t know any
better. "Well, that is their way they have always treated me. They weren't cruel, they just didn't know that you were alive. They didn't know you had any feelings.

That I am trying to suggest here is that in the doing of all this for 100 years or more, it is the white American man who has long since lost his grip on reality. In some peculiar way having created this myth about Negroes, and the myth about his own history, he created myths about the world so that for example he was astounded by the fact that some people could prefer Castro, astounded that there are people in the world who don't go into hiding when they hear the word "Communism" astounded that Communism is one of the realities of the twentieth century, and the willingness by personnel that it does not exist. The political level in this country now, on the part of people who should know better, is abysmal. The Bible says somewhere that there is no vision the people perish. I don't think anyone can doubt that in this country if today we are menaced—intolerably menaced—by a lack of vision.

It is inconceivable that a sovereign people should continue, as we do so abjectly, to say, "I can't do anything about it. It's the government." The government is the creation of the people. It is responsible to the people. And the people are responsible for it. No American has the right to allow the present government to say when Negro children are being bombed and hosed and shot and beaten all over the deep South, that there is nothing we can do about it. There must have been a day in this country's life when the bombing of four children in Sunday School would have created a public uproar and endangered the life of a Governor Wallace. It happened here and there was no public uproar.

I began by saying that one of the paradoxes of education was that precisely at the point when you begin to develop a conscience, you must find yourself at war with your society. It is very easy to call yourself as an educated person. And on the basis of the evidence—the moral and political evidence—one is compelled to say that this is a backward society. Now if I were a teacher in this school, or any Negro school, and I were dealing with Negro children, who were in my care, only a few hours of every day and would then return to their homes and to the streets, children who have an apprehension of their future which every hour grows darker and grimmer, I would try to teach them—I would try to make them know—that those streets, those houses, those dangers, those agencies by which they are surrounded, are criminal. I would try to make each one of them be the victim of a criminal conspiracy to destroy him. I would teach him that if he intends to get to be a man, he must at once decide that he is stronger than this conspiracy and that he must never make his peace with it. And that one of his weapons for destroying it depends on what he thinks he is worth. I would teach him that there are currently few standards in this country which are worth a man's respect. That it is up to him to begin to change these standards for the sake of the life of this country. I would suggest to him that the popular culture—as represented—for example, on television and in comic books and in movies—is bad, and I would ask him to be aware that these are fantasies and they have nothing to do with reality. I would teach him that the press he reads is not as free as it says it is and that he can do something about that, too. I would try to make him know that just as American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it, so is the world larger, more daring, more beautiful and more terrible, but principally larger—and that it belongs to him. I would teach him that he doesn't have to be bound by the experiences of any given administration, any given policy, any given time—that he has the right and the opportunity to examine this world and try to show him that one has not learned anything about Castro when one says, "He is a Communist". This is a way of not learning something about Castro, something about Cuba, something in fact about the world. I would suggest to him that he is living, at the moment, in an enormous province. America is not the world and if America is going to become a nation, she must find a way—and this child must help her to find a way—to use the tremendous potential and tremendous energy that this child represents. If this country does not find a way to use that energy, it will be destroyed by that energy.