

MR. SIDNEY POITIER - KEYNOTE ADDRESS
SCLC TENTH ANNIVERSARY CONVENTION BANQUET
ATLANTA, GEORGIA - August 14, 1967

INTRODUCTION BY DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

To the Toastmistress, to the distinguished mayor of our great city, and to all of the distinguished dais guest, to the delegates attending the 10th Annual Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, ladies and gentlemen. It would certainly be unkind and unjust of me to burden you with a long introduction. It would be unkind to our speaker to burden him with a long introduction; for you already know him. And you know that he has carved for himself an imperishable niche in the annals of our nations history. It has been my good fortune to know our guest speaker for a number of years. And from the moment I met him I found him to be one of the finest and one of the warmest human beings that I have ever met. I consider him a real friend. I consider him a great friend of humanity. He is a man of great depth; a man of great social concern; an accomplished and creative artist; he is the winner of the coveted Oscar as best actor in 1964 for his performance in "Lillies of the Field." He is now starring in two current movie hits, "To Sir, With Love," and "In the Heat of the Night." Here is a man who is dedicated to human rights and freedom, and a generous contributor of funds, time, and talent in behalf of SCLC.

I think the thing that I like most about our guest speaker is the fact that the world has bestowed upon him some of the greatest honors that can be bestowed; and, although it would embarrass him for me to say it, he is a wealthy man, he is a millionaire; but here is a man, who's wealth is in here. Here is a man who has never lost a basic concern for the least of these God's children. Here is a man who in the words that we so often hear now, is a soul-brother. And it gives me

great pleasure, not to introduce, but to present to you, a great actor, a man with an unswerving devotion to the principles of freedom and human dignity, a man of genuine humanitarian concern and basic goodwill, my friend and your friend, Sidney Poitier/

SIDNEY POITIER

I have known men who, if their measure were taken, would be found to be living out their lives in ways peculiar to their nature. Men who have tamed their natural instincts to meet the required standard for indifference. Men who have a position of no position, on too many of the issues, that if left unaddressed will corrode further the dignity and integrity of human life. I have known men who will not take responsibility for a choice, even a correct choice, if it costs too much. Men, who, in the words of the hippies, "Can make the talk, but can't walk the walk." Men who need an audience to witness their giving but exercise the right to privacy in their taking. These men I have known, because more than once in my life, I too have been at some of those stations myself. But I know a man, who, again in the words of the hippie, "Made his moves and paid his dues as he walked the walk on through this life to victory, sometimes, to defeat sometimes," but always accepting responsibility for the choice that took him to either place. I know a man whose biographical material and credit need not be restated here, unless one chose to impress some of you with the awesome stature of the human being they suggest. Still, it must be said that this man I know has not been properly thanked by his fellows in direct proportion to the debt owed. This anniversary banquet celebration and your support of it brings us closer to a settlement. And may I say that I know as a fact that the courage of this man has made a better man of me. So, may I say

for all of us together....."THANK YOU MARTIN LUTHER KING." You are truly a new man in an old world.

Mr. Mayor, distinguished members of the dais, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for allowing me to visit with you, and I thank Dr. King for the invitation. An invitation which also affords me the opportunity to revisit the city that represents a pivotal crossroad in my life. It was here in Atlanta twenty-four years ago at the age of 16, when I finished a summer job as a dishwasher at a mountain resort not far from here, having been recruited for the job in Florida, I stood here in a bus terminal in this city trying to decide, where will I go from here; back to Florida, or out into the world. I made my choice to go out into the world. I bought a ticket and started my hournet with a bus ride into the unknown. Twenty-four years have since passed above my head, and now, my journey has led me here once more to pause again at the crossroads and wonder, where will I go from here.

The intervening years have allowed me a close look at man and his world. The unknown has been explored. I come tonight with some conclusions, a few gray hairs, and some perrenial questions to which I have found no answers. And if you note a touch of sadness about my eyes, it comes from bearing witness to too many disappointments in the relationship between man and his world.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have never had much to say from a podium, a lecturn, a rostrum, or a dais about our old world, and this evening will be no exception. Speech-making is not my bag. The arts of the theatre is my main game. And though politics, society, philosophy are a real part of my life, I have elected not to go very deeply into things political, social, or philosophical this evening. Because I am distressed at the way the game of politics is currently being played

in too many arenas. And it pains me that we have woven our social fabric from such peculiar threads: turmoil and chaos, to name a few. And the philosophy of materialism by which men shape and conduct much of their lives seems to have become the principal force in all of their undertakings. So much so that it is leading in my psyche to a harvest of too many negative by products. Greed, selfishness, indifference to the suffering of others, corruption of our value system, and a moral deterioration that has already scarred our souls irrevocably. On my bad days I am guilty of suspecting that there is a national death-wish active within our borders. And on my worst days the death-wish seems to be international, to say the least.

No, I will not go into those bags tonight. I will not burden you or myself this evening with the insanity of this old world. You will come face to face with it soon enough, when you address the front page of your morning newspaper over breakfast in a few hours. And if that doesn't send you back to bed, try the early morning news broadcast on your television set. And if you are a real bad news glutton you can get another dose from your car radio as you drive to work. Of course as you walk into your place of employment a fellow worker who hasn't read the newspaper or listened to T.V. or radio might say, "Good morning." And you will say, "What's so good about it, are you crazy?"

That's the way it is this evening, with all too many people from Maine to Florida, from New York to California; too much bad news; because the world is old, and in terrible shape. The disarray is monumental. But the world is as men are, old and out of shape. And as long as old men continue to maneuver an old world there will be little likelihood for change. For to change the world, we must first change men. We must have new men; the old are not up to the task. The stamina,

the resilience, the vision, the genius, and the love required is nowhere sufficiently in evidence. And we are perilously close to the point of no return. Only new men can bring forth a new world, and new men can be created only if old men like me and you have enough love left in our hearts to create and incubate a whole new breed; a whole new generation of men. Men among whom the absence of greed and selfishness will be as striking in their new world as they are shamefully present in our old one. Men who will teach love among human beings in such typical places as schools and churches. In such force that hate will never again find this earth fertile ground for its nurture. Yes, the news is mostly bad now tonight. How good it will be depends on how we invest the little love left in our hearts. As an old man who has seen all the corners in this corrupt old world, who wants to change this corrupt old world, I have decided to start with myself.

Last time, I went out from these crossroads on a selfish mission. This time, the journey will be different. I would like to have all of you for company. So the best good news I have for you tonight is that I will go from here back out there into what I have known and try to make a new world full of love, and that new world, such as it will be, as far as I'm concerned, will have had its beginning in my old heart..... here, tonight. Thank you.

TOASTMISTRESS: MRS. DOROTHY F. COTTON

Many of us know Andy Young, but perhaps we don't know anything of the background with which he comes to SCLC. And because of the lateness of the hour, I will say very quickly and briefly now that he comes with a rich background with the National and Institutional Church, he worked with the National Council of Churches, works still with the World Council of Churches, and has depth and insight, and has an ability to interpret the task of SCLC like few people we've known. Reverend Andrew Young, our Executive Director will make a presentation at this time.

REVEREND ANDREW YOUNG

I think no words that I can say would bear fitting tribute to the moving witness that you've heard this evening. And yet this is not a new witness. Perhaps Sidney Poitier is just now consciously making this decision. And yet over the past years, God has been using him, and he has been very much on this path as long as I've known him. For in a society that denies all dignity and worth to black men, he made us proud to be black, and taught us that black was beautiful and its beautiful to be black. In a country that pronounces God as dead, he made a secular generation sing, "Amen" to the warmth and love in humanity, which is really the ground of all true religion. Amidst the tensions and neuroses of our lives, and of modern life in general, Sidney Poitier has dramatized sensitivity and concern. So that men of prejudice break the emotional shackles that have enslaved them for generations.

Children applaud, and men cry, Sidney, for your passionate betrayals of what man really ought to be. Yes, Sidney Poitier, it's an honor for us to honor you, for you teach us and have taught us what it really means to be a man in our time. And so Sidney Poitier, whose sermons in cinematography have done so much to broaden the horizons of brotherhood for the American public, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference gives you this humble expression of the great love and appreciation we all have in our hearts for your work, for your art, and for your person.

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