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The Kingian Legacy of Our Times

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Coretta Scott King
Fall Convocation, September 12, 2000
Doctor of Humane Letters, *honoris causa*
First lecture of URI 2000 Fall Honors Colloquium
“Nonviolence: Legacies of the Past, Bridges to the Future”
Title of Speech: “The Kingian Legacy of Our Times”

Thank you President Carothers for honoring me in this manner. I certainly want to thank the University of Rhode Island and thank all of you for being here this afternoon. I want to express a special appreciation to Dr. Bernard Lafayette for that very kind and gracious introduction. Lt. Gov. Charles Fogarty, and President Carothers, Provost Beverly Swan, Sally Dowling, Commissioner William Holland and to Dr. Bernard Lafayette again, your distinguished scholar-in-residence and members of the faculty administration, student body and friends of Rhode Island University, members of Brothers United for Action, members of Kingston community, ladies and gentlemen, I want to say, what a privilege and honor it is to me to address this fall Convocation at the University of Rhode Island.

And I am deeply honored again that you have conferred on me your highest degree the Doctor of Humane Letters and I will do my very best to prove worthy of your confidence and support. I want to also recognize a couple of other dear and long-time friends who also worked closely with my husband, Dr. and Mrs. Virgil Woods. We go back many many years and I am glad to see you here today. (applause)

And let me just say I am so gratified that the University of Rhode Island has created a Center for Nonviolence and Peace Studies, especially because it is directed by Dr. Bernard Lafayette who is one of the world’s most knowledgeable and experienced teachers and practitioners of nonviolence.

I was also pleased that the University of Rhode Island today honored the Reverend Arthur L. Hardge, another dedicated veteran of the Civil Rights movement with a statue in the front of your Multicultural Center.

Dr. Lafayette was a veteran of the Civil Rights movement or is a veteran of the Civil Rights movement who joined Martin Luther King Jr. and most of his campaigns upon joining the SCLC staff. In 1967 Dr. Lafayette was appointed the coordinator for The Poor Peoples Campaign and I am sure many of you young people don't even know what that stands for. The Poor People's Campaign was the last campaign Martin Luther King, Jr. led which he did not finish. He was assassinated before he led the march to the nations' capital of poor people, poor whites from Appalachia, poor Hispanics, poor Native Americans and poor Blacks seeking redress from our government to provide a job or a decent income, decent working conditions to all of God's children. And certainly having asked Dr. Lafayette to coordinate this very important endeavor speaks very highly as to what Martin thought of him. Dr. Lafayette worked with The King Center in planning The King Center's workshops on nonviolence, which spanned a period of over 20 years. Part of that time he served as the director of our institute on nonviolence. He's conducted education and training programs for human rights groups and cities across America, in Haiti, South Africa, Columbia and Russia. And I understand he has recently been appointed Chairman of the Governor's Select Committee on Race and Community Relations. Congratulations Dr. Lafayette.

I commend the University of Rhode Island for having the commitment to appoint someone who has walked the walk and talked the talk as the first director of this exciting new program. I say its exciting because I have spent most of my adult life learning, studying, and trying to live nonviolence as a way of life because ultimately that is what is required if you want to be truly committed to nonviolence. You must see it as your way of life and it is a process, it is a pilgrimage. Dr. Lafayette was about the

same age as many of the young people in this audience here today when he became involved in the Civil Rights movement as a college student. In fact, much of the strength and energy of the Civil Rights movement came from college students. Dr. King himself was a student when he had his revelation that organized nonviolent resistance could be used to overcome racial oppression. At the time my husband was a graduate student at Crozer Theological Seminary near Philadelphia. One Sunday afternoon he went to Philadelphia to attend a lecture by then President of Howard University, Dr. Modecai Johnson and it was there that he was first exposed to the teachings of Mahatma K. Gandhi, the subject of Dr. Johnson's lecture. Martin later would write that Johnson's message about Gandhi was so profound and electrifying that he rushed out after the lecture and bought all the books he could find about Gandhi, about Gandhi's life and work, and then read them. Later he wrote in his first book *Stride Toward Freedom*, which is the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and which was published after the Montgomery movement, and I quote:

As I read I became deeply fascinated by the philosophy of nonviolent resistance. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished and I came to see its potency in the area of social reform. Prior to reading Gandhi, I had concluded that the love ethic of Jesus was only affective in individual relationships. But after reading Gandhi I saw how utterly mistaken I was. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking for so many months. I came to feel this was the only morally and practically sound method opened to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom. This principle became the guiding light of our movement.

So clearly, like Martin Luther King Jr. , you can learn some powerful things in college if you keep your eyes and ears open. Your university education can

help empower you as a citizen and as an activist as well as prepare you for a successful career.

About the same time as my husband was awakening to the power of nonviolence and Ghandi's teachings, I was a student at Antioch College over in Yellow Springs, Ohio. We had not met at that point, but I feel that I was already being prepared for a role in the nonviolent civil rights movement. Like Martin, I was raised in a religious family. My father wasn't a preacher, but both of my parents were active in our church and they embraced the teachings of Jesus Christ about love, forgiveness and reaching out to help people in need. I think the teachings of all religions support the principle of nonviolence when they are faithfully applied by their followers. People who live by the principles of their faith develop a firm foundation that can strengthen their understanding of and commitment to nonviolence.

The concept of service was something that was part of my upbringing and so it was natural for me to get involved in civic activities at Antioch, which had a strong tradition of political liberalism among its students and faculty. I was active in the campus chapter of the NAACP as well as race relations and civil liberties committees and I was a student delegate to the Progressive Party convention of 1948 where we were seeking to elect Henry Wallace to the Presidency of the United States on the progressive party ticket. I don't know how many of you go back that far.

During my freshman orientation at Antioch the words of the great educator and founding President of Antioch, Horace Mann, in his address to the first graduating class, these words were used to motivate us to commit our lives in service to humanity and I can still hear these compelling words ringing in my ears:

*Be ashamed to die
Until you've won some victory for humanity*

An imposing statue of Horace Mann carrying these words stands on the front campus of Antioch College challenging future generations to dedicate their lives in service to humankind.

*Be ashamed to die
Until you've won some victory for humanity*

Now that's a pretty heavy guilt trip to lay on a freshman. And I guess a lot of freshman read the inscription, thought about it for half a minute and then went about their business. But since Antioch had a long standing tradition of social activism and young people who were interested in social change naturally gravitated toward Antioch, I think a lot of students took Horace Mann's challenge very seriously, I know I did.

*Be ashamed to die
Until you've won some victory for humanity*

I would encourage all of you to let Horace Mann's challenge work on your conscience and I can promise you that if you accept this challenge you will find a deeper sense of fulfillment and you will meet lots of interesting people who will enrich your life beyond what you thought was possible.

When I first met Martin in Boston a few years later, after Antioch, I had already decided that involvement in social activism was going to be a permanent part of my life. During our courtship and married life in Boston, Martin and I had a number of conversations about Ghandi's leadership and teachings and I could

see that he was intrigued by the possibilities of applying Ghandi's teachings in the struggle for racial justice. But he was not yet envisioning himself as a leader of nonviolent demonstrations. That role was thrust upon him after we moved to Montgomery, Alabama and he was chosen as spokesperson for The Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. This was when we began to apply Ghandi's strategies for social change and our dialogue about nonviolence intensified and began to take on a practical character. What Martin did was to mold a creative synthesis of the spiritual and moral teachings of Christian beliefs together. With the Ghandian strategy of nonviolent resistance, as he later wrote in his book *Stride Toward Freedom*:

*Price furnished the spirit and motivation of our movement,
while Ghandi furnished the methods*

As the Montgomery Bus Boycott progressed, we became increasingly convinced that the philosophy and methods of nonviolence provided the key to our liberation from racial segregation and this belief was affirmed in every campaign of the Civil Rights Movement. Not only did nonviolence help us to win the desegregation of public facilities, voting rights, and other reforms, nonviolence was also changing the hearts and minds of millions of Americans of all races who were examining racial prejudice for the first time.

We learned that a firm commitment to nonviolence gives a liberation movement a unique credibility because it requires that we love our adversaries even as we oppose their actions. This commitment to love makes it possible to end a conflict with a spirit of friendship instead of fostering animosity, which is the usual outcome of a difficult struggle. The Civil Rights Movement is rich with stories of people on both sides of the struggle who had their consciousness transformed by nonviolence, from Martin Luther King, Jr. to George Wallace. Am I right Dr.

Lafayette? A commitment to nonviolence involves a kind of spiritual transformation, it is a revolutionary change when you renounce violence not only of the fist and gun, but also violence of the tongue and of the heart and making this commitment of nonviolence become more than a method of social change it becomes a way of life. We make a decision that no matter how abusive adversaries become, we refuse to engage in retaliation or retribution as a matter of principle and making a commitment to nonviolence we recognize the wisdom of an Old Spanish proverb, which says that:

The most honorable revenge is the one not taken

This does not mean we don't resist injustice, on the contrary, nonviolence requires that we resist injustice and with militants if necessary, but nonviolence also requires that we resist with a loving open hearted spirit that seeks to win the understanding and ultimately the friendship of the adversary, as well as the sympathy of the public. A commitment to nonviolence also demands from its adherence the highest standards of humility and courtesy, we refuse to return insults and we don't engage in personal attacks on others. We criticize policies, behavior, and systemic injustice not people. All adversaries are treated with utmost respect for their human dignity. It takes a lot of soul searching and hard work to make such a deep personal commitment, but it produces powerful and positive results not only in social struggles, but in our personal relationships as well. The achievements of nonviolence in the 20th century are extremely impressive. In their struggle for independence, the American Civil Rights Movement, the liberation of the Philippines, Poland, Eastern Europe, Russia, and Southern Africa, the end of the Cold War would not have been possible without nonviolent movements in those nations. Yet as impressive as these achievements are, I believe we have only begun to tap the power of

nonviolence and the 21st century can be a time of even more revolutionary change through nonviolence. Twenty-five Nobel prize winners have joined together in calling for making the first 10 years of the new century, a decade, for a culture of peace and nonviolence and this first year of the 21st century has been designated a year of nonviolence training and education. There have been a lot of initiatives by different organizations to meet this challenge, I think this lecture series will address many aspects of nonviolent social change and I urge everyone to attend as many of these programs as you can.

Dr. Lafayette and others are working to get Rhode Island designated the first nonviolent state in the union as part of an effort to promote statewide education in nonviolence. I hope you won't let them down, its very important I think for us in this country that somewhere there is a state that declares itself a nonviolent state and we start one at a time. Rome was not built in a day.

Dr. Lafayette and I and others sincerely believe this nonviolence is the way and I hope before the end of my time here that I can see more of that direction than I see today. I am not discouraged, but I think we have a long way to go.

Coming up soon on September 18 (2000) there will be a nationwide broadcast of a documentary on PBS entitled *A Force More Powerful*, which I understand reveals the phenomenal success of nonviolent movements in the last century. I would encourage all of you to watch this program.

Today I want to challenge all of the young people who care about making America a better nation to use the power of the vote. The ballot is a nonviolent weapon and one of the most important tools we have for peaceful social change. People have sacrificed, suffered, bled and died so you could

vote. You owe it to them and to your children to pick up the ballot and use the power for the good of the nation.

Young people between the ages of 18 and 24 are the second largest voting block after senior citizens and yet the turnout rate for younger voters is almost the lowest for all demographic groups. An awakened, educated, and energized youth vote could make a great difference. Indeed young people could transform America with a surge at the polls this year. Never doubt each of you could have a significant impact on the legislative process even if your legal residence is in another state. In addition to working for a higher voter turnout, you can meet with elected officials and their staff members as citizen lobbyists for urgently needed legislative reforms.

The one thing I want to say about the current campaign is that we the people must insist that debates between the presidential candidates get the widest possible exposure so that every American see and hear the candidates and compare their views and visions for America. And I feel that three debates are not enough, there ought to be at least five so there will be adequate time to address major issues of concern.

I hope that your involvement would help make 2000 the year in which the American people turn out in massive numbers to say no to the politics of polarization and vilification and demand some credible answers for the very real and urgent problems we face as a nation; we've got more than 40 million Americans without health insurance, more than 25 percent of American children living in poverty, yearly tuition at state universities is now averaging more than \$13,000. Since 1995, the 50 states together have spent more on prison construction than on building colleges. We need comprehensive health insurance coverage for every American. We need more funding for AIDS

research, prevention and treatment and protection of America's forests and wetlands. We also need stronger gun control, more funding for prevention of domestic violence and greater federal investment and tuition assistance, job training and childcare. That is to name just a few of the challenges we must address at the polls November 7 (2000). If we want to create a culture of nonviolence, we must address these issues and call on our elected officials to enact needed reforms. Let it begin at the polls on November 7.

In the weeks ahead we must work to elect more men and especially women of character, integrity and courage to every level of representative government. And I emphasize women here because we will don't have enough sisters in government. Until women who are less than 13 percent of the United States Congress achieve parity in politics, we are simply not going to be able to create a culture of nonviolence here in America. And lastly, but certainly not least, we need to make it clear to all candidates that they must take a strong clear and unequivocal position against racism, sexism, homophobia and all forms of bigotry if they expect to earn our votes.

Despite the many dangers and obstacles we face on the road to fulfilling the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. we have more reason for optimism than ever before. So let's go forward from here with a new determination to create a culture that elevates the values of love, nonviolence, and human decency. I believe it is the young people of our nation who have been chosen to lead this revolution. Your generation has been anointed to put an end to poverty and racism, to restore the environment and secure human rights for the people of our world. No matter what academic major or career path you choose, commit yourself to the worldwide struggle against poverty, racism, and violence.

It will make you a more fulfilled person. It will make America a greater nation and create a better world for all humanity. During the last century, nonviolence helped women win the vote in the U.S., it liberated India from the shackles of British colonialism. Nonviolence ended segregation in the United States, delivered voting rights to African Americans and achieved unprecedented racial progress. Nonviolence empowered the solidarity movement in Poland that led to the liberation of Eastern Europe, the crumbling of the Aryan curtain and the Berlin Wall. A nonviolent protest was a critical factor in bringing democracy to the Soviet Union. Nonviolence brought down the entrenched dictatorship in the Philippines and it was a decisive factor in the liberation of Southern Africa from racial colonialism and during the last decade. I have seen liberation movements on television news reports singing *We Shall Overcome* in different languages in the streets of Warsaw, Prague, Moscow, Manila, Beijing and Johannesburg, South Africa to name just a few. And yes though they could slay the dreamer, but no they could never slay the dream.

And in the years ahead, I expect to see a renaissance of nonviolence. I think we saw some of the first stirrings of it in the so-called Battle of Seattle, which was overwhelmingly nonviolent in character. In the years ahead, I expect to see a nonviolent movement lead the way to democracy in China. I expect to see nonviolent movements rise up and give women their full human rights in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. I expect to see nonviolent movements put an end to religious persecution in China and the Sudan. And only nonviolence can stop the spread of militarism and the rape of the environment around the world. But none of this will happen automatically. All of these hopes depend on the commitment of the younger generation to get involved and make a difference. So I close with a call to the youth of

America and everyone who seeks the fulfillment of Martin Luther King Jr's dream for America and for the world.

First I call you to educate yourself about nonviolence. You have a great asset here at URI, Dr. Lafayette and the Center for Nonviolence and Peace Studies. Make a commitment to learn everything you can about nonviolence and then share what you have learned and urge others to do the same. Once you feel you have a good understanding, start thinking about creative ways you can apply that which you learned in addressing current social problems such as defending Affirmative Action, challenging media glorification of sexism and violence, stopping handgun violence and environmental pollution to name just a few issues of concern. I've already spoken about the importance of voting. If you just can't be in your home state on November 7, act now, as soon as you can, to get an absentee ballot. Wherever you are between now and on Election Day, make a point of attending a candidate forum and do your part to get the candidates on record on important issues.

I want to also challenge you to be responsible consumers. College students are a powerful market segment. I am asking you to spend your money with a sense of social responsibility as much as possible. Support those companies, which treat their employees decently, show concern about public safety and environmental pollution and withhold your money from those who don't.

Lastly, I would just ask you to get involved in community service as a way of life and as you get involved in your communities, remember that we are all citizens of the world and as followers of Martin Luther King, Jr. we have an obligation to work for global as well as community justice.

If you will answer this call to commitment, we will be able to launch a new nonviolent movement to put an end to racism, eradicate poverty, and eliminate violence and war. With this faith and this commitment, we will be able to create a world where all people can live together in peace, love, and natural harmony. When this day comes, we will not only be sharing the dream, we will be living the dream.

Thank you and God Bless You.

(Time: 53:30)