

WHAT IS YOUR LIFE'S BLUEPRINT? (FULL TRANSCRIPT)

On October 26, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia. This speech is commonly known as "WHAT'S YOUR LIFE'S BLUEPRINT?"

Video from The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change (The King Center):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmsAxX84cjQ>

Speaker:

...and help welcome our honored distinguished guest, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King.

Dr. King:

Thank you very kindly. Principal [inaudible], Mr. Williams, Members of the faculty and members of the student body of Barratt Junior High School, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here today, and to have the opportunity of taking a very brief break in a pretty busy schedule in the city of Philadelphia, to share with you the students of Barratt Junior High School. And I want to express my personal appreciation to the principal and the administration for inviting me and for giving me the opportunity to see this very fine and enthusiastic group of students here at Barratt.

I guess I ought to start out with a commercial, and that is tonight we're going to have a great night in the city of Philadelphia at the Spectrum. I know you've heard of that new, impressive structure called the Spectrum, and I know you've heard of Harry Belafonte and Aretha Franklin and Nipsey Russell and Sidney Poitier and all of these other great and outstanding artists. Well, they're going to be here tonight at the Spectrum, and I hope that each of you will go home and tell your parents to be there tonight for this great freedom festival. And I hope you will come also, for it will be a great experience and, by coming, you will be supporting the work of the civil rights movement.

Now that I've gotten the commercial out of the way, I'll move on and say some things that I want to say very briefly. And I'm being very honest; I'm going to be brief because I have other engagements. I don't have a tradition of being brief all the time. You know I'm a Baptist preacher, and we can talk a long time, but I'm going to be really brief today.

I want to ask you a question, and that is: **WHAT IS IN YOUR LIFE'S BLUEPRINT?**

This is the most important and crucial period of your lives. For what you do now and what you decide now at this age may well determine which way your life shall go. And whenever a building is constructed, you usually have an architect who draws a blueprint. And that blueprint serves as the pattern, as the guide, as the model, for those who are to build the building. And a building is not well erected without a good, sound, and solid blueprint.

Now each of you is in the process of building the structure of your lives, and the question is whether you have a proper, a solid, and a sound blueprint. And I want to suggest some of the things that should be in your life's blueprint.

NUMBER 1: PRINCIPLE OF SOMEBODINESS

Number one in your life's blueprint should be: a deep belief in your own dignity, your own worth, and your own somebodiness. Don't allow anybody to make you feel that you are nobody. Always feel that you count. Always feel that you have worth, and always feel that your life has ultimate significance.

Now that means you should not be ashamed of your color. You know, it's very unfortunate that in so many instances, our society has placed a stigma on the Negro's color. You know there are some Negroes who are ashamed of themselves? Don't be ashamed of your color. Don't be ashamed of your biological features. Somehow you must be able to say in your own lives, and really believe it, "I Am Black, But Beautiful!" and believe that in your heart.

And therefore, you need not be lured into purchasing cosmetics advertised to make you lighter; neither do you need to process your hair to make it appear straight. I have good hair, and it is as good as anybody else's in the world. And we've got to believe that. Now in your life's blueprint, be sure that you have a principle of somebodiness.

NUMBER 2: DETERMINATION TO ACHIEVE EXCELLENCE

Secondly, in your life's blueprint, you must have as the basic principle the determination to achieve excellence in your various fields of endeavor. You're going to be deciding, as the days and the years unfold, what you will do in life — what your life's work will be. And once you discover what it will be, set out to do it, and to do it well.

And I say to you, my young friends, that doors are opening to each of you — doors of opportunity are opening to each of you that were not open to your mothers and your fathers — and the great challenge facing you is to be ready to enter these doors as they open.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great essayist, said in a lecture back in 1871 that, "If a man can write a better book or preach a better sermon or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, even if he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door." This hadn't always been true — but it will become increasingly true. And so, I would urge you to study hard, to burn the midnight oil. I would say to you, don't drop out of school. And I understand all of the sociological reasons why we often drop out of school.

But I urge you, in spite of your economic plight, in spite of the situation that you are forced to live so often with intolerable conditions, stay in school. And when you discover what you're going to be in life, set out to do it as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it.

And just don't set out to do a good Negro job but do a good job that anybody could do. Don't set out to be just a good Negro doctor, a good Negro lawyer, a good Negro school teacher, a good Negro preacher, a good Negro barber, a beautician, a good Negro skilled laborer...for if you set out to do that, you have already flunked your matriculation exam for entrance into the University of Integration. Set out to do a good job and do that job so well that the living, the dead, and the unborn couldn't do it any better.

If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures. Sweep streets like Beethoven composed music. Sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera,

and sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, “Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.

If you can’t be a pine on the top of the hill, be a scrub in the valley — but be the best little scrub by the side of the rill; Be a bush if you can’t be a tree. If you can’t be a highway, then just be a trail; if you can’t be the sun, be a star; it isn’t by size that you win, or you fail—be the best of whatever you are!

We always... we already have some noble examples of Black men and Black women who demonstrated to us that human nature cannot be cataloged. They, in their own lives, have walked through long, plunged against cloud-filled nights of affliction, new and blazing stars of inspiration.

And so, from an old slave cabin of Virginia’s hills, Booker T Washington rose up to be one of America’s great leaders. He lit a torch in Alabama and darkness fled in that setting. Yes, you should know this because it’s in your own city.

From a poverty-stricken area of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Marian Anderson rose up to be the world’s greatest contralto so that a Toscanini could say that a voice like this comes only once in a century, and Sibelius of Finland could say my roof is too low for such a voice.

From the Red Hills of Gordon County, Georgia, and the arms of a mother who could neither read nor write, Roland Hayes rose up to be one of the world’s great singers and carried his melodious voice into the palaces and mansions of kings and queens.

From crippling circumstances, there came a George Washington Carver to carve for himself an imperishable niche in the annals of science.

There was a star in the diplomatic sky, and then came Ralph Bunche, the grandson of a slave preacher, and he reached up and grabbed it and allowed it to shine in his life with all of its scintillating beauty.

There was a star in the athletic sky. And then came Jackie Robinson in his day and Willie Mays in his day with their powerful bats and their calm spirits. Then came Jesse Owens with his fleet and dashing feet. Then came Joe Lewis and Muhammad Ali with their [adjudicated] fists.

All of them came to tell us that we can be somebody and to justify the conviction of the poet:

Fleecy locks and black complexion cannot forfeit nature’s claim. Skin may differ, but affection dwells in black and white the same. If I were so tall as to reach the pole or to grasp the ocean at a span, I must be measured by my soul. The mind is the standard of the man.

NUMBER 3: COMMITMENT TO THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

And finally, in your life’s blueprint must be a commitment to the eternal principles of beauty, love, and justice. Don’t allow anybody to pull you so low as to make you hate them. Don’t allow anybody to cause you to lose your self-respect to the point that you do not struggle for justice. However young you are, you have a responsibility to seek to make your nation a better nation in which to live. You have a responsibility to seek to make life better for everybody.

And so, you must be involved in the struggle for freedom and justice. Now in this struggle for freedom and justice, there are many constructive things that we all can do and that we all must do. And we must not give ourselves to those things which will not solve our problems. You've heard the word "nonviolent," and you've heard the word "violent." I happen to believe in nonviolence.

We've struggled with this method with young people and adults alike all over the South. And we have won some significant victories. And we've got to struggle with it all over the North because the problems are as serious in the North as they are in the South. But I believe as we struggle with these problems, we've got to struggle with them with a method that can be militant but at the same time does not destroy life or property.

And so, our slogan must not be "Burn, baby, burn," it must be "Build, baby, build." "Organize, baby, organize." Yes, our slogan must be "Learn, baby, learn" so that we can "earn, baby, earn."

And with a powerful commitment, I believe that we can transform dark yesterdays of injustice into bright tomorrows of justice and humanity. Let us keep going toward the goal of selfhood, toward the realization of the dream of brotherhood, and toward the realization of the dream of understanding and goodwill. Let nobody stop us.

I close by quoting once more the man that the young lady quoted, that magnificent black bard who is now passed on, Langston Hughes. One day, he wrote a poem entitled, "Mother to Son." The mother didn't always have her grammar right, but she uttered words of great symbolic profundity.

Well, son, I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor— Bare.

But all the time

I've been a'climbin' on,

And reachin' landin's,

And turnin' corners,

And sometimes goin' in the dark,

Where there ain't been no light.

So boy, don't you turn back;

Don't you sit down on the steps,

'Cause you finds it's kinder hard;

Don't you fall now—

For I've still goin', honey,

I've still climbin',

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

But we must keep moving. We must keep going. If you can't fly, run. If you can't run, walk. If you can't walk, crawl, but by all means, keep moving!"