

## A EULOGY TO DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.



BY ROBERT F. KENNEDY

*On April 4, 1968, hundreds of African Americans gathered for what they thought would be an exciting political event. A presidential candidate, Robert Kennedy, was coming to speak to them. Before he was to deliver his speech, however, Kennedy was informed that Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated earlier that day. He nevertheless went to the rally, where he found the people upbeat in anticipation of his appearance. Realizing that they were unaware of the tragic event, he began his speech with the following words.*

I have bad news for you, for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight.

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort.

In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black—considering the evidence there evidently is that there were white people who were responsible—you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization—black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred toward one another.

Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace

### Reading for Information

Has a teacher, a coach, a politician, or a community leader ever given a speech that inspired you? If so, he or she may have used some of the **rhetorical techniques**—ways of using language persuasively—that Kennedy used in this address.

#### PERSUASIVE RHETORIC

Kennedy sensed that there might be an intense reaction to the news of the assassination. In his speech, he used certain rhetorical techniques to persuade the crowd to remain calm.

**YOUR TURN** Use the questions and activities below to help you explore Kennedy's persuasive techniques.

1 The **ethical appeal** is a persuasive technique in which the speaker appeals to the audience's sense of right, justice, and virtue. For example, Kennedy says:

"We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization—black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred . . . Or we can make an effort . . . to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed . . . with an effort to understand with compassion and love."

Kennedy is appealing to the audience's sense of ethics in order to persuade them to his point of view. What does Kennedy say in the next paragraph that may reveal how he identifies with the situation?

that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.

For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote, "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice towards those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black.

So I shall ask you tonight to return home, to say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King, that's true, but more importantly to say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love—a prayer for understanding and that compassion of which I spoke.

We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times. We've had difficult times in the past. We will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence; it is not the end of lawlessness; it is not the end of disorder.

But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings who abide in our land.

Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and to make gentle the life of this world.

Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.

**2 Repetition** of words or phrases is a rhetorical device used to emphasize concepts or ideas. An example is Kennedy's repetition of the phrase "what we need in the United States is not." How effective do you think this device is? Identify at least two additional examples of repetition in the speech.

**3 Parallelism** is a form of repetition in which similar grammatical structures are used to emphasize ideas or concepts. For example, Kennedy's "We can do well in this country. . . We will . . . We've had . . . We will . . ." shows the use of parallelism. Parallel sentence structures also create a rhythm that helps to call attention to the point being made. Find two additional examples of parallelism in the speech, and explain how they emphasized Kennedy's ideas.

## Inquiry & Research

**Activity Link:** "Montgomery Boycott," p. 124

With a partner, go back through Kennedy's speech, and point out passages that you find particularly moving. How do you think Kennedy's audience might have reacted to these passages?