Robert Kennedy - Announces Death of MLK

Senator Robert F. Kennedy was in Indianapolis, the night of April 4, 1968, when he learned that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated in Memphis on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. The police left it up to RFK to tell the gathering crowd, including many African-Americans, that Dr. King was dead.

Speaking extemporaneously to his supporters, Bobby delivered the bad news (which Walter Cronkite had just broadcast on CBS News). At first people were shocked, and their screams of sadness visibly affected him. Then Kennedy - standing on the flatbed of a pick-up truck and wearing an overcoat which had once belonged to his own assassinated brother - calmly spoke from the heart, referencing his favorite poet.



This video, incorporating historical footage, is a clip of that statement. Many historians consider it to be one of

Kennedy's most effective public addresses. It helped to ease tensions in Indianapolis that night, and in the days after (when riots were occurring in other parts of the country).

Hereafter are the words of Bobby's statement (as transcribed by the U.S. National Archives and maintained, among other places, by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum):

> *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.*
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> *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 that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.*
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> *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.*
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> *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."*
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> *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 toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black.*
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> *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.*
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> *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 make gentle the life of this world.*
>
> *Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.*

Although riots broke out in various parts of the country, as a result of Dr. King's death - such as the scenes depicted in these April, 1968 photos taken in Washington, D.C. - Indianapolis remained calm and peaceful. Many law enforcement personnal attributed that fact to Bobby Kennedy's impact on the crowd and the sincere way in which he had addressed the people.

Bobby's quote, in this clip, is from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. He likely read it in a book (*The Greek Way*, by Edith Hamilton) which his sister-in-law, Jackie Kennedy, gave him to help cope with the shocking death of his brother, Jack.

Aeschylus tells us that we gain knowledge through suffering. In *Three Greek Plays*, Edith Hamilton comments on how the famous Greek poet viewed the relationship between suffering and knowledge:

> *No one ever felt the blackness of the evil always here with us more than he* [Aeschylus] *did, and no writing anywhere shows it blacker than the "Agamemnon" does. Nevertheless he did not in the end see it as senseless, signifying nothing. At the very least, he says, this is certain: "Knowledge won through suffering..."* (See *Three Greek Plays*, translated by Edith Hamilton, at page 161.)

RFK, speaking extemporaneously, misquotes Aeschylus on a key point. (Note his pause - at 3:18 into the clip - just before the misquote occurs.) The impact of that misquote (changing "**despite" to "despair**") has since given the poem (and its sentiments) new meaning and greater popularity.

Let's compare the two versions.

1. **Bobby's quote:**

*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.*

2. **Edith Hamilton's actual 1930 translation** (see page 156) **of *Agamemnon*:**

*And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own **despite**, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.*

For further study, and comparison of RFK's quote with Edith Hamilton's translation of the Greek, see "Credits" below.

Dr. King is buried in Atlanta, Georgia on the grounds now owned by the King Center. Two months after he addressed the Indianapolis crowd, Bobby Kennedy was also dead from an assassin's bullet.

Credits:

For further study, note Hamilton's translation, with Greek phrases included:

*And even in our sleep **[d' ény' Ïpnou]** pain that cannot forget **[mnhsipÆmvn pÒnow]**, falls drop by drop **[stãzei]** upon the heart **[prÚ kard€aw]**, and in our own despite **[s°lma semnÚn ≤m°nvn]**, against our will **[ka‹ par' êkontaw]**, comes wisdom to us **[Σlye svfrone›n]** by the awful grace of God **[daimÒnvn d° pou xãriw b€aiow]**.*

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Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1930), page 156.

Credit for comparing the differences in Hamilton's translation and RFK's speech:

“In Our Own Despair”: Robert Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and Aeschylus’ Agamemnon. Delivered at the Classical Association of Canada, Annual Meeting, May 12, 2002, by Christopher S. Morrissey, Department of Humanities, Simon Fraser University.

Video online, courtesy Manny 535's Channel at YouTube.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Robert-Kennedy-Announces-Death-of-MLK

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