

Ask students to write about freedom, using as many metaphors as they can.

Metaphor

flames of withering injustice
the long night of captivity
the tranquilizing drug of gradualism
the manacles of segregation
the desolate valley of segregation
a lonely island of poverty in a vast ocean of material prosperity
the quicksands of racial injustice
the summer of discontent
the autumn of freedom

Dr. King filled his speech with metaphor, connecting with millions of people through their faculties of poetic inspiration. With metaphor, he could communicate the intensity of the “flames of withering injustice.” Even though we know that injustice is not made of flames and does not cause people to wither, by describing justice in terms of withering flames, Dr. King could, in a way, be more accurate than he could with ordinary prose, because the metaphor helps communicate the suffering that injustice inflicts on its victims.

He brought additional clarity to his subject with metaphor, describing racial segregation as a “desolate valley,” and racial injustice as “quicksands.” If we pause to think about segregation as a desolate valley, we become aware of the enormous waste of human potential and opportunity that segregation inflicted—on all Americans. In the desolate valley of American segregation, no American, White or Black, lived in a truly free country. No American could say that rights were equal, or that everyone could vote, or that their political process was democratic. It was indeed a desolate valley.

Among the primary themes of Dr. King’s speech was the theme of economic discrimination, the mandatory poverty imposed upon Black Americans in ways both obvious and subtle. The speech is filled with references to this “lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of prosperity,” to the “check” that must be cashed, that the bank of justice can not be bankrupt. Dr. King says that the nation can not return to “business as usual,” and deplors the “slums and ghettos of our northern cities,” emphasizing not only the dire economic slavery of Black Americans, but also that discrimination was a curse not only in the South but in the North as well.

What do you think Dr. King meant by “the tranquilizing drug of gradualism”?