

As I said, we were brought over here, my brothers and sisters and I, in 1907. Why did my parents come here? They had heard that the paving stones in America were made of gold, but that was not why they came here--to get rich. They came here so that their children could breathe freer air. Mostly they came here so that their children could have a chance at a chance. I have had that--an equal chance at an equal chance. My children are having it now. May I say that I will not rest content until every American youngster has the same chance that I have had and that my children are having. I do not often get angry, but I must say I do get angry when I find doors of opportunity that are open for some youngsters slammed in the face of others, when I find road blocks on the road to some that do not exist for others.

When some people tell me that this is part of the tragic condition in life, I say to them "No, do not demean the word 'tragedy' that way." I say to them that tragedy is something deep and noble, part of the very constitution of the universe. We will never do away with tragedy. I tell my students that tragedy is going to hit every one of them, just as it hit me. The difference between people is that tragedy destroys some while it deepens others.

Tragedy is part of the constitution of the universe both in the life of individuals and in the life of nations. But there is a difference between the tragic and the pathetic. Pathos is man made, and because it is man made it can be man resolved. Poverty is pathetic, not tragic. Slums are pathetic, not tragic. Religious bigotry is pathetic, not tragic. Racial discrimination is pathetic, not tragic. The lack of access for some Americans, when others have access, is pathetic, not tragic.

I give you a country of possibility, in which we can resolve some of these things. People say to me, "Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future?" I say, "Look, this is not a question of whether I am bullish or bearish on Wall Street. I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist about the future: I am a possibilist."

I believe it is possible for us to fulfill the vision we had originally, of a pluralistic American society in which there were equal chances for all, in which there is no exclusive Americanism, no exclusive religion, no exclusive race, and no exclusiveness of ethnic groups, but in which there is the civic religion I speak of. To say these things are possible does not mean they are guaranteed. I believe we will be able to win the intelligence race against the