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**MARY E. KING '62 2011 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS**

**Sunday, May 8, 2011**

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Mary E. King '62, professor of peace and conflict studies at the United Nations-affiliated University for Peace  
May 8, 2011

### Empowering Education: The Power of Youth

Thank you, President Rock Jones. Special thanks to the president of the senior class, Alina Ruzmetova, as I understand that the seniors played a big part in my invitation. It is an honor to be with you.

When I had worldwide responsibility for the Peace Corps in the Carter Administration, I would travel to villages and mountaintops visiting Peace Corps volunteers in 60 countries. Often I'd talk with local people. Once, in Ethiopia on the Horn of Africa, I met a young man who told me that the effects of the Peace Corps had for him been revolutionary. When I asked what he meant, he responded, "The Peace Corps volunteer who was my teacher used to inquire 'what do you think?' No one had ever before asked me what I thought."

If you want to do good, you need learning and skills. You've gotten the basics of an empowering education at Ohio Wesleyan: knowledge of social-justice issues, deep values, the ability to analyze and think for yourself, writing and communications skills, and discipline. You've had a wonderful faculty and close relations with your professors, which, by the way, is far from typical. You've had the opportunity for practical application.

In many universities, students spend four years on social networking, organizing the webs of contacts for future climbing of totem poles, polishing their address books, and planning their financial portfolios. This to me is not empowerment and not likely to bring much fulfillment.

I suggest instead that you bring meaning to your life, make a difference in the world, and strive to bring about concrete change, in crucial areas of human need, such as development, democracy, rights, protection of the environment? Can you do this? Absolutely.

You have as much to offer as I had. Ohio Wesleyan gave me so much.

Miriam Willey in the religion and philosophy department regularly used to ask me my thoughts—a moment of empowerment when the teacher wants to learn from the taught. She also impressed upon me that possessing tolerance is not enough, because tolerance is often controlled hostility.

Professor Butler A. Jones of the sociology department became my friend. I never took a course with him, yet he befriended me. He taught me about attitudinal change, and how it is difficult but not impossible to change attitudes.

Charles Weis, in the English Department, taught me that how one expresses a thought can be almost as important as the idea itself.

Benjamin Spencer, who chaired the English Department, taught me perhaps the greatest lesson of all: Life is fleeting, transitory, vanishing, evanescent.

I left Ohio Wesleyan from the very position that you are in today, to join the civil rights movement. It was thanks to Miriam Willey and B. A. Jones that I was able to make my way into the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “snick”). No yellow-pages listing said phone here to put yourself on the line. I needed the help of these two fine Ohio Wesleyan educators to make this transition to SNCC, which has recently been called by historian Peniel Joseph the most significant organization in post-World War II America. My experiences working at the heart of this epochal movement more than any others define my life.

In Atlanta and Mississippi, my job was to tell the stories that southern white news media and editors routinely ignored. To them, deaths of black people or atrocities against them were not deemed newsworthy. Working with Julian Bond in a tiny office, with one manual typewriter and telephone apiece, we built an alternative media system to break the news. The stakes couldn't have been higher. Getting a reporter to a jail, or covering an arrest, could save lives—including our own.

We used the most advanced technological methods available, but we had nearly nothing in print to teach us how to use nonviolent methods to fight for equal rights. Several professionals, who had spent time in India with participants in the independence struggles on the sub-continent, returned to the United States with personal knowledge and Gandhi's writings. Bringing tangible wisdom from East to West, they shared it by word of mouth in hundreds of workshops or mass meetings in churches. Today, it is much easier to learn nonviolent civil resistance. The works of the scholar Gene Sharp have been translated into nearly forty languages.

Numerous human rights now considered “universal” had first to be fought for through nonviolent struggles. Only later were they codified. In the 20th century, people's movements secured basic human rights for much of the world's population, through women's suffrage, anti-colonial, civil rights, and democracy movements that intentionally rejected the use of violence as the means to an end.

This form of struggle was used to obtain collective bargaining and the right of laborers to organize. Without it we might still have a seven-day work week. It enabled people to defy foreign occupations and coups d'état, and to resist genocide. Most of Denmark's Jews were saved from death by the Nazis because of a national nonviolent mobilization, in which the entire society united as one. Ordinary persons have changed their societies through action methods deliberately chosen because they do not accomplish their goals through harm, injury, or threat of physical assault. Often with meager resources, relying on themselves, they were able to make their situation more just without creating new forms of oppression.

At Ohio Wesleyan, you have developed the courage of your convictions and also acquired discipline. I define discipline as the ability to exert concentrated energy and stick to something until completed. This is more important than you think. President Carter's discipline and moral fortitude enabled him to achieve the Camp David Accords. Just recently, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that these accords have been the cornerstone of Israel's security ever since.

Speaking of the Middle East, people have long asked "where are the Arab Gandhis and Martin Luther Kings?" Experts claimed that Arabs were not interested in democracy. Yet national nonviolent movements led by young people have since December-January of this year changed the face of North Africa and the Middle East. Some say this Arab Awakening is as historically significant as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, or the fall of the Soviet Union.

See with your own eyes: youth and women's groups are leading the democracy, human rights, and anti-corruption movements of the Islamic world. This includes Africa, where there are more Muslims than in the Arab world. The leader of today's democracy movement in Yemen is a young woman. In the same way that bloggers in Tunisia and Egypt have employed their writing abilities, the writing that I had done at Ohio Wesleyan let me by age 22 in the movement do something important. Don't overlook the significance of your acquired writing skills!

The frequency with which citizen groups turn to civil resistance is increasing, and our comprehension of how it is effective is accelerating. The fact that basic works and case studies by foremost scholars and theoreticians are available for download in dozens of languages partly explains the success of recent democracy movements North Africa and the Mid-East.

When the elections, political parties, parliamentary action, or even lobbying and interest groups of institutionalized politics fail, people can exercise their inherent political power through nonviolent collective actions. Now, for the first time, violent resistance as the world's automatic, default method for challenging grievances and rights-based struggles in the 21st century has a chance to be eclipsed by strategic employment of nonviolent action. It can be a practical substitute for armed struggle and guerrilla warfare, utilized in place of violent strategies, including civil war, rioting, terrorism, and conventional warfare. Your analytical skills let you understand how important these developments are.

Empirical evidence and hard data now show that countries that experience bottom-up, grass-roots nonviolent struggle are more likely to sustain human rights and democracy once established than when violence has been used. Scholars have shown that nonviolent movements succeed more often than violent insurrections.

Perhaps the most remarkable transnational movement of the modern age was the women's suffrage movement in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Yet more remained to be done. In the 1960s, I was a co-author, along with Casey Hayden, of a document called "Sex and Caste," which arose from discussions among women working in the civil rights movement in Mississippi. Movements often morph, shifting their targets from one issue to another as they succeed. Be prepared for transformation! Historians now believe that second-wave feminism was sparked by our "Sex and Caste." Calling it second-wave feminism is a tribute, honoring an earlier wave of women's rights action.

One secret to gratification in life is to choose something much larger than yourself in which to be involved, either full time or as a volunteer. Every Returned Peace Corps Volunteer I've met has told me that he or she gained more from their two years of service than they were able to give. Some fields and professions are highly fulfilling and enriching in a similar way. Over the years, teachers have said to me that they wished there was a civil rights movement that they could join, because they would like some form of activism. Don't you realize, I respond, teaching is a form of activism!

Cast your eyes across the world stage. Women's rights is becoming a central moral issue of the twenty-first century. Gender affects virtually all of human life. Over thirty years, the study of gender has emerged as a critical requirement for building peace. It is now widely understood that the socialization of men and women is crucial to the building of more peaceable societies.

The evidence is solid that the education and status of women stabilizes and uplifts the whole of societies—for men, children, and women. Uplift of women and their increased participation in public policy is now perceived as fundamental to economic growth, health status, reducing poverty, sustaining the environment, and consolidating democracy in societies long bowed down by authoritarianism and tyranny. The data are irrefutable.

Yet formidable social and cultural factors prevent policies and action based on scientific evidence of wide-ranging benefits for everyone from educating women and girls. Perhaps you can be instrumental in working on this. Both men and women are tackling these issues in Africa. Colleagues of mine in the University for Peace Africa Programme are leading the way. They never forget that approximately 1.5 billion women and girls in the world have no rights: they are sold into marriage, in forced marriages, surgically mutilated, and experience many forms of violence, some of it involving systematic trafficking.

"Peacemaker" is not a new word in English. It appears in the King James Bible. The term "building peace" is, however, a new concept, dating to 1978 and the work of the UN in Namibia, in southern Africa. Peace building is like constructing a bridge from conflict to peace, which includes a wide range of actors including international donors; aid agencies; international, regional, and community groups; and grass-roots civil society organizations. Diverse players work to build security through development, gender, repatriation, protecting human rights, and introducing nonviolent modes to resolve current and future conflicts.

More conflicts today are ended by negotiated settlement than by military victories. This quantifiable fact even applies to strategies for addressing terrorism. So found a 2008 Rand Corporation study. Military force was only rarely the primary reason for the end of terrorist groups. Today's younger generations worldwide are showing serious interest in becoming peacemakers, engaged in building peace. They want to change the way their societies operate, to end injustices. They seek freedom and equality.

You can join this worldwide swell of the power of youth. The empowering education you received at Ohio Wesleyan will be your GPS. It will orient you on a road to tangible results for the human race, and fulfillment and gratification for yourself.