

Adam Clayton Powell  
What's in your Hand (excerpts, 1967)

A.C. Powell was a Baptist minister and politician. He was the first African American to represent the state of New York, serving in Congress for more than 25 years.

Some of you say to me, "Well, I'm not like you: I'm not a congressman." "I haven't got education." "I haven't got work." But you're a human being. And you know what you've got? You've got in your hand the power to use your vote and to use even those few cents you get from welfare to spend them only where you want to spend them! Look at that!

A young slave boy stood one day before the greatest ruler of his day. And God said to Moses, "What's in your hand?" And Moses said, "LORD, only I've got a stick, that's all." He said, "Well, let me use what's in your hand!" And God used that slave boy with a stick in his hand to divide the Red Sea, march through a wilderness, bring water out of rocks, manna from heaven, and bring his people to freedom land! What's in your hand? (Applause) What's in your hand?!

George Washington Carver! Who was so frail that he was traded for a broken down horse as a slave boy... ...and George Washington Carver sitting in the science laboratory at Tuskegee told me, he said, "Dr. Powell," he said, "I just go out into the fields each morning at 5 o'clock, and I let God guide me... ...and I bring back these little things and work them with my laboratory." And that man did more to revolutionize the agricultural science of peanuts, and of cotton, and sweet potatoes than any other human being in the field of agricultural science. What's in your hand? Just let God use you, that's all. What's in your hand?!

"All I've got is a slingshot and the enemies of my people are great and big and more numerous than we are!" "Well, Little David, go down to the brook and pick out a few stones and come on back, and close your eyes if you want to and pull back that slingshot and let it go!" And David killed the biggest enemy, the leader of the giants, against his people, and his people became free, just letting God guide a stone in his hand. And a few years passed, and David is a king. And God says, "What's in your hand?" He said, "I've got a harp in my hand." He said, "Well, David, play on your harp!" And he played, "The Lord is My Shepherd I shall not want. (Applause) ..maketh me to lie down in green pastures... (Applause) ..leadeth me beside still waters... (Applause subsides) Yea, though, I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I'll fear no evil." What's in your hand? What's in your hand?!

Man Hanging on a Cross?! "I've got two nails in my hands! Father! I stretch my hands to thee! No other help I know. If Thou withdraw thyself from me, whither shall I go?" And that man with two nails in his hands split history in half: B.C. and A.D.! And what's in your hands tonight, people of Cambridge? You've got GOD in your hand, and He'll let you win! Because He's on your side, and one with God is always in the majority. So, walk with Him and talk with Him, and work with Him, and stick together, and fight together! And with God's hand in your hand, the victory will be accomplished, here, sooner than you dreamed, sooner than you hoped, sooner than you prayed for, sooner than you imagined. Good night and God bless you.

Excerpted from Letter to My Daughter  
Maya Angelou

There have been people in my life who meant me well, taught me valuable lessons, and others who have meant me ill, and have given me ample notification that my world is not meant to be all peaches and cream.

I have made many mistakes and no doubt will make more before I die. When I have seen pain, when I have found that my ineptness has caused displeasure, I have learned to accept my responsibility and to forgive myself first, then to apologize to anyone injured by my misreckoning. Since I cannot un-live history, and repentance is all I can offer God, I have hopes that my sincere apologies were accepted.

You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them. Try to be a rainbow in someone's cloud. Do not complain. Make every effort to change things you do not like. If you cannot make a change, change the way you have been thinking. You might find a new solution.

Never whine. Whining lets a brute know that a victim is in the neighborhood.

Be certain that you do not die without having done something wonderful for humanity.

I gave birth to one child, a son, but I have thousands of daughters. You are Black and White, Jewish and Muslim, Asian, Spanish-speaking, Native American and Aleut. You are fat and thin and pretty and plain, gay and straight, educated and unlettered, and I am speaking to you all. Here is my offering to you.

Keep the Faith. Many things continue to amaze me, even well into my seventh decade. I'm startled or at least taken aback when people walk up to me and without being questioned inform me that they are Christians. My first response is the question "Already?"

It seems to me that becoming a Christian is a lifelong endeavor. I believe that is also true for one wanting to become a Buddhist, or a Muslim, a Jew, Jainist, or a Taoist. The persons striving to live their religious beliefs know that the idyllic condition cannot be arrived at and held on to eternally. It is in the search itself that one finds the ecstasy.

One of my earliest memories of my grandmother, who was called "Mamma," is a glimpse of that tall, cinnamon-colored woman with a deep, soft voice, standing thousands of feet up in the air with nothing visible beneath her.

Whenever she confronted a challenge, Mamma would clasp her hands behind her back, look up as if she could will herself into the heavens, and draw herself up to her full six-foot height. She would tell her family in particular, and the world in general, "I don't know how to find the things we need, but I will step out on the word of God. I am trying to be a Christian and I will just step out on the word of God." Immediately I could see her flung into space, moons at her feet and stars at her head, comets swirling around her shoulders. Naturally, since she was over six feet tall, and stood out on the word of God, she was a giant in heaven. It wasn't difficult for me to see Mamma as powerful, because she had the word of God beneath her feet. Thinking of my

grandmother years later, I wrote a gospel song that has been sung rousingly by the Mississippi Mass choir.

"You said to lean on your arm  
And I am leaning  
You said to trust in your love  
And I am trusting  
You said to call on your name  
And I am calling  
I'm stepping out on your word."

Whenever I began to question whether God exists, I looked up to the sky and surely there, right there, between the sun and moon, stands my grandmother, singing a long meter hymn, a song somewhere between a moan and a lullaby and I know faith is the evidence of things unseen.

**But If Not** (abridged)  
Martin Luther King Jr. (1967)

"I'm instructing you to see that everybody bows before this golden image." But there were three young men around there. One's name was Shadrach, the other one's name was Meshach, and the other name was Abednego. And they answered--and I read it from the scripture--and said to the king

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this manner [sic].

"If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king.

"But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." [1]

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And I'm coming to my conclusion now. And I want to say to you this morning, my friends, that somewhere along the way you should discover something that's so dear, so precious to you, that is so eternally worthwhile, that you will never give it up. You ought to discover some principle, you ought to have some great faith that grips you so much that you will never give it up. Somehow you go on and say "I know that the God that I worship is able to deliver me, but if not, I'm going on anyhow, I'm going to stand up for it anyway."

What does this mean? It means, in the final analysis, you do right not to avoid hell. If you're doing right merely to keep from going to something that traditional theology has called hell then you aren't doing right. If you do right merely to go to a condition that theologians have called heaven, you aren't doing right. If you are doing right to avoid pain and to achieve happiness and pleasure, then you aren't doing right. Ultimately you must do right because it's right to do right. And you got to say "But if not."

You must love ultimately because it's lovely to love. You must be just because it's right to be just. You must be honest because it's right to be honest. This is what this text is saying more than anything else. And finally, you must do it because it has gripped you so much that you are willing to die for it if necessary. And I say to you this morning, that if you have never found something so dear and so precious to you that you will die for it, then you aren't fit to live.

You may be 38 years old as I happen to be, and one day some great opportunity stands before you and calls upon you to stand up for some great principle, some great issue, some great cause--and you refuse to do it because you are afraid; you refuse to do it because you want to live longer; you're afraid that you will lose your job, or you're afraid that you will be criticized or that you will lose your popularity or you're afraid that somebody will stab you or shoot at you or bomb your house, and so you refuse to take the stand.

Well you may go on and live until you are 90, but you're just as dead at 38 as you would be at 90! And the cessation of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. You died when you refused to stand up for right, you died when you refused to stand up for truth, you died when you refused to stand up for justice. These boys stand before us today, and I thank God for them, for they had found something. The fiery furnace

couldn't stop them from believing. They said "Throw us into the fiery furnace." But you know the interesting thing is, the Bible talks about a miracle. Because they had faith enough to say "But if not," God *was* with them as an eternal companion.

### A WORD TO MY CHRISTIAN SISTERS (ca. 1861)

Julia A.J. Foote, b. 1823, Schenectady, NY; both parents former slaves.  
Itinerant preacher and first ordained female Deacon in the AME Zion Church.

Dear sisters in Christ, are any of you also without understanding and slow of heart to believe, as were the disciples? Although they had seen their Master do many mighty works, yet, with change of place or circumstances, they would go back upon the old ground of carnal reasoning and unbelieving fears. The darkness and ignorance of our natures are such, that, even after we have embraced the Saviour and received his teaching, we are ready to stumble at the plainest truths! Blind unbelief is always sure to err; it can neither trace God nor trust him. Unbelief is ever alive to distrust and fear. So long as this evil root has a place in us, our fears cannot be removed nor our hopes confirmed.

Not till the day of Pentecost did Christ's chosen ones see clearly, or have their understandings opened; and nothing short of a full baptism of the Spirit will dispel our unbelief. Without this, we are but babes – all our lives are often carried away by our carnal natures and kept in bondage; whereas, if we are wholly saved and live under the full sanctifying influence of the Holy Ghost, we cannot be tossed about with every wind, but, like an iron pillar or a house built upon a rock, prove immovable. Our minds will then be fully illuminated, our hearts purified, and our souls filled with the pure love of God, bringing forth fruit to his glory.

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