

Martin Sheen: Find Something Worth Fighting For (2010)

The American actor and activist [Martin Sheen](#) delivered this speech at [We Day](#) in Vancouver, 2010, to an audience of young people encouraged to take action on local and global issues.

The speech concludes with a poem called Chitto Jetha Bhayashunyo ([Where the mind is without fear](#)) written by Rabindranath Tagore before India's independence which represents Tagore's dream of how the new India should be. Originally in Bengali, the poem was translated into English by Tagore in 1912. [Rabindranath Tagore](#) (1861 – 1941), a Bengali poet, musician, painter, dramatist, thinker, nationalist, and writer, who shaped Bengali literature and music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The transcript is from [Find Something Worth Fighting For: 2010 We Day Speech by Martin Sheen](#). The video is from [the empoweredmerchants Youtube channel](#).

Martin Sheen:

You got the message.

I've been an actor all of my life. In fact I have no conscious memory of ever not being an actor, but while acting is what I do for a living, activism is what I do to stay alive.

And I am often asked how I manage to unite the two and the answer is quite simple; I don't have a clue because it was far less a conscious effort than it was a natural progression.

Of course if you grew up in a poor large immigrant family chances are you're either Irish Catholic or Hispanic and I was

lucky enough to be both, so I had a head start when it came to social justice activism.

Both of my parents were immigrants. My father was Francisco Estevez or as they say in Spain, Estévez. He was born in northern Spain on a little village called Vigo on July the second 1897 the very day the United States declared war on Spain.

My mother was Mary-Ann Phelan. She was born May the 22nd, 1903 on a tiny village in the center of the Irish Republic, Borrisokane, in County Tipperary. They immigrated separately of course to the United States, but they met in Dayton, Ohio and were married in 1924. They had 12 pregnancies, 10 survived, 9 boys and one girl, I was their seventh son – my real name is Ramon.

I stayed in Dayton and then I finished high school and I decided to go to New York to pursue a career on the theater. John Kennedy was in the White House and Pope John 23rd was in the Vatican. We held our breath during the Cuban missiles crisis and we were lifted up by Martin Luther King's dream as civil rights, Vietnam, all came into the national consciousness.

Then suddenly we lost John Kennedy and we still don't know how or why but it seemed as the worst of the sixties was yet to come. 1968 started with the Tet offense of Vietnam and ended with the return of Richard Nixon. In between, we lost both Martin Luther King Junior and Bobby Kennedy, and we lost them just eight weeks apart.

We backed out of the sixties, still broken but clutching the absolute certainty that lost causes were still the only causes worth fighting for, and that non-violence is the only weapon to use to fight with. "Each time someone stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, they stand for a tiny ripple of hope and,

crossing, each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build the current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and injustice.”

Those words were spoken at Cape Town, South Africa, at the university there in 1966 by Robert Francis Kennedy. They are enshrined on his memorial at Arlington National Cemetery as well and they have been a powerful source of inspiration for my generation ever since. The more the world changes, the more it remains the same, I believe, because the three most important needs of every human being on earth are not food, clothing, and shelter as much as the need for freedom, justice, and healing.

It is the gross inequality of food, clothing, and shelter that divides us and the absolute necessity for freedom, justice, and healing that unites us. Clearly we need a more realistic understanding of who we are and why we are here in order to have a honest relationship with each other. Consider the following please, from ‘Earth as a Village’ by Phillips M. Harter, Stanford School of Medicine:

“If we could shrink the earth’s population of over six and a half billion people down to a single village consisting of one hundred people, with all the existing ratios the same, it would look something like this; there would be 57 Asians, 8 Europeans, 21 Africans, and 14 people from the Western hemisphere. There would be 52 women and 48 men. There would be 70 non-whites and 30 whites. There would be 70 non-Christians and 30 Christians.

There would be no doctor, no nurse, no dentist, no hospital or clinic and no school, there would be no safe drinking water, there would be no common language, there would be no electricity and no paved roads, there would be 70 people unable to read or write, there would be 50 people suffering from malnutrition, there would be one person near death and one person near birth. The entire food supply for the village

would depend entirely on outside sources. Six people on that village would possess 59% of the entire world's wealth, and all 6 would be US citizens. There would be one college graduate, one TV, one computer, and the average person on that village would be a 13-year-old Chinese girl."

Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not we are all responsible for each other and the world which is exactly the way it is because, consciously or unconsciously, we have made it so. And while none of us made the any of the rules that govern the universe, we do make all the rules that govern our own hearts, and we are all beneficiaries of those many heroic strangers who've gone before us over the centuries who assure us that the world is still a wonderful and safe place despite our fears, and we're not asked to do great things – we're asked to do all things with great care.

Such an ideal is rare in a culture of so many compromised values and so much cynicism, a culture that all too often knows the price of everything and the value of nothing, and yet there remains a very real and mysterious yearning, deep within every human heart, that compels us to reach outside of ourselves and help others for our own sake.

This yearning is a true manifestation of our true selves, and it can lead to the very first small conscious acts of personal courage which can bring rejection from the crowd and satisfaction from the heart. But this yearning can also be very costly as well. If we're not so we'd be left to question its value, and this, above all; one heart with courage, is a majority.

Over the entire history of the world, every truth started as a blasphemy and no one has ever made a contribution of any real work without self sacrifice, personal sufferings and sometimes, even death.

The Irish tell a story of a man who came to the gates of

heaven and asked to be led in, Saint Peter said "Of course! Just show us your scars!" The man says "I have no scars." Saint Peter says "What a pity! Was there nothing worth fighting for?"

My fondest wish for each and every one of the young people here today is that you will find something in your life worth fighting for, because when you do, you would have discovered a way to unite the will of the spirit to the work of the flesh, and all of humanity would have discovered fire for the second time.

It is my profound wish that the light from that fire will illuminate your path to that place...

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action;

Into that heaven of freedom

Let us all awake.

Thank you.