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“KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE PRIZE”: THE BACKGROUND
AND EVOLUTION OF THE PROVERB

Abstract: The proverb “Keep your eyes on the prize” achieved popularity as a motto or hortatory slogan in the American civil rights movement of the 1960s. The saying had become common as a refrain in an old spiritual—a favorite “freedom song”—replacing the traditional refrain, “Keep your hand on the plow.” Prior to its widespread use by participants in the civil rights movement, interesting analogs occurred. In the seventeenth century and throughout the nineteenth centuries, it appeared with some frequency as a Christian exhortation. In recent times “Keep your eyes on the prize” has been used more broadly to urge focused effort toward a variety of goals.

Keywords: historical study of proverbs, American proverbs, civil rights movement, religious proverbs, American spirituals, freedom songs

During the 1960s the proverb “Keep your eyes on the prize” became a sort of motto for African Americans on the long and arduous journey toward the recognition of full citizenship and human rights. It has occurred in the writings and oratory of prominent figures in the civil rights movement, for example John Lewis (Mieder 2014, 231-34).¹ Barack Obama himself has uttered the saying (Mieder 2009, 210).² Especially from the allusive title of the famous PBS documentary series, *Eyes on the Prize*, which occupied fourteen hours in two television seasons, 1987 and 1990, and its spinoff books, widely used in high school and college classes, the proverb gained familiarity well beyond the actual participants, black and white, in the civil rights movement itself.³

The full sentence “Keep your eyes on the prize” was featured in a “freedom song” commonly heard during protest marches, sit-ins, freedom rides, and other demonstrations throughout the deep South in the 1960s. The line had been inserted as a refrain in versions of the old spiritual “Gospel Plow,” replacing the tra-

ditional line “Keep your hand on the plow.”⁴ Here are two of the many, varied stanzas:

Paul and Silas bound in jail,
 Had no money for to go their bail.—
 Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.
 Hold on, hold on. Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

Paul and Silas began to shout,
 The jail door opened and they walked on out.
 Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

(Carawan and Carawan 1963, 111)

As for the prior version of the refrain, “Keep your hand on the plow”: That line itself embodies a proverb. For instance, in 1912, a letter-to-the editor of *Everybody’s Magazine*, commending the magazine’s exposé of the influence of big business on the U.S. judiciary, said: “The field which you have undertaken to plow is a very fertile one, and I hope you will keep your hand on the plow” (26:576). In 1920 an article in the magazine *United States Investor* asserted, “Real men are certainly wanted under the existing complex conditions, when it is so necessary to keep your hand on the plow and both feet on the ground” (Lonsdale 1920, 1243). Also in 1920, a book titled *The Gospel of World Brotherhood* counseled, “Keep your hand on the plow, and your eye towards the end of the furrow. Be true, alive, whole-souled” (Clifford 1920, 125). In a 1963 version of Langston Hughes’s play *Tambourines to Glory* the character Birdie, responding to the singing of a hymn, exclaims, “Keep your hand on the plow, Sister Essie. Hold your holt on God!” (Hughes 2004, 314). In the year 2000, according to a Florida newspaper, a Methodist bishop told his congregation, “...[T]he real task is in front of us. Do not allow the devil to rob you of your joy...Keep your hands on the plow, and do not give up” (*Ledger [Lakeland FL]*, 31 May). In 2004 a California newspaper reported, “In their year of walking and talking, she [Joan Erikson] encouraged [Joan] Anderson to ‘welcome each day like a good meal’ and to ‘keep your hands on the plow’—and don’t ever stop pushing . . .” (*Orange County [CA] Register*, 4 Jul.). In 2012 an African newspaper quoted a prominent businessman/clergy-man, “So her [Wilma Munyeza’s] role was always to, ‘keep your head to the ground, and keep your

hands on the plough, don't lose focus. There are things that you need to do, they must be done” (*Financial Gazette [Harare, Zimbabwe]*, 13 Dec.). In 2015 a Canadian newspaper reported a Baptist pastor's advice: “...[A] good farmer will tell you that worrying about things of tomorrow...is useless because there's not a thing you or I can do about it. You just keep your hand on the plow” (*Times & Transcript [Moncton NB]*, 24 Jan.). Wolfgang Mieder has commented on Abigail Adams's use of a version of the related proverb “Put (or Set) your hand to the plow” (Mieder 2005, 83). B. J. Whiting cited a dozen or so instances of that proverb from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and some from earlier times, going back to the tenth century (1977, 196-97; 1968, 263).

We might wonder what motivated the prevalent replacement of the line “Keep your hand on the plow” with the now-famous “Keep your eyes on the prize.” Perhaps it was a sense that the image of the plow symbolically bespoke an olden time when the life and aspirations of African Americans were largely rural and agrarian. Furthermore, “Keep your hand on the plow” implies attention to details of one's present existence—possibly with the eyes bent downward—whereas “Keep your eyes on the prize” turned the vision upward, toward the future.

The late Guy Carawan, a white activist and singer, played a prominent role in disseminating and standardizing several of the freedom songs popular during the late 1950s and the 1960s (including the famous “We Shall Overcome”). The first record of the existence of the “eyes on the prize” innovation appeared in 1960, in an article about Carawan in *Sing Out* magazine: “Other songs which have been utilized by the protest movement have been the old spiritual ‘I Shall Not Be Moved,’ ‘This Little Light of Mine,’ and ‘Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,’ a variant of ‘Keep Your Hand on the Plow’” (Silber 1960, 6).

Carawan told of learning the new refrain line from Alice Wine, an African American whom he met in 1956 during a voter-education outreach on Johns Island, South Carolina. Subsequently Mrs. Wine has sometimes been recklessly referred to as the *author* of the spiritual itself, even designated as its copyright owner.⁵ However, an account by Guy Carawan and his collaborator Candie Carawan makes clear that Mrs. Wine, in her insertion of the line, was simply repeating a variant that she had gar-

nered from oral tradition or from other sources. The Carawans reported,

This song has an interesting history. When Guy first spent time on Johns Island and sang a version of “Keep Your Hand on the Plow,” which he had learned from Pete Seeger in the 1950s, Mrs. Wine said, “Oh, I know a different echo to that,” and sang, “Keep your eyes on the prize.” Guy later passed these words on to the young people then involved in the civil rights movement. Those words became the ones sung all across the South...

(Carawan and Carawan 1989, 195)

Later Candie Carawan would recollect of Alice Wine, “When she heard Guy [Carawan] sing ‘Keep Your Hands on the Plow,’ she told him, ‘Young man, I know a different echo to that song. We sing “keep your eyes on the prize”” (Cobb 2008, 325). Clearly Mrs. Wine’s role in the evolution of the song was pivotal, but nowhere, it seems, did she ever claim individual credit for creating, for “authoring” the line “Keep your eyes on the prize.”⁶ She was just doing what singers who belong to an oral tradition do!

In any case, whether deriving specifically from Alice Wine’s performances or from multiple sources, by the mid-1960s the refrain line “Keep your eyes on the prize” had become standard, as the spiritual was sung by civil rights protestors in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and elsewhere. One activist in 1963, Carver Neblett, after a confrontation in Greenwood, Mississippi, poignantly remarked, “I was brought up—all Negroes in the South are—with a fear of jail. But I don’t care about jail now. Sometimes I get lonely there, or frustrated, but I think of our freedom song, ‘Paul and Silas were bound in jail, had no money to go on bail, keep your eyes on the prize, hold on—’” (*New York Herald Tribune*, 3 May 1963).⁷

There were, in fact, proverbial occurrences of the expression “Keep your eyes on the prize” earlier than the widespread use of the line in the freedom song of the 1960s. For instance, on Saturday, 11 October 1958, the *Atlanta Journal*, in its announcement of upcoming religious services for the weekend, listed ten Sunday sermons to be delivered by ten different Jehovah’s Witnesses ministers, no fewer than *seven* of which bore the title “Keep

Your Eyes on the Prize.” We might wonder whether the sermon topics or texts had been prescribed by a central authority of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, except that three of the ten sermons announced in the newspaper had other titles. In 1966 a new official Jehovah’s Witnesses hymnal, revised to feature only hymns authored by members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, included a hymn titled “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” with the refrain “If you keep your eyes on the prize!” (*Singing and Accompanying Yourself* 1966, 126). In light of the troubled history of relations between the Jehovah’s Witnesses and African Americans, it seems doubtful that the hymn was alluding to the freedom song.

The saying had been used proverbially in earlier contexts: In 1922, a poem titled “On the Square,” by one Charles Van Housen, printed in several different newspapers that year, included this quatrain:

Old sport! In this battle called “living,”
 What matter the praise or the blame?
 Keep your eye on the prize that’s awarded the guys
 Who are true to the rules of the game.
 (*Grand Rapids [MI] Progress* 11, no. 4 [Apr.] 6)

It may be noticed that the use of the singular *eye* in the saying forfeits the attractive rhyme of the plural *eyes* with *prize* (and *guys*).

In 1893, a column in a Christian periodical urged, “Covet earnestly, strive for the mastery, keep your eye on the prize.” (Montagu Butler, “The More Excellent Way,” *The Sunday Magazine* [London: Strahan & Co.] 159)

1884: “Keep your eye on the prize and run fast! Let nothing tempt you to loiter by the way...” (Eliza Fletcher, *A Woman’s Work: Being Memorials of Eliza Fletcher* [Glasgow: MacKinlay] 115)

1875: “*Keep your eyes fixed on the prize*, looking unto Jesus. There He stands at the end of the course.” (A. F. Barfield, “Circumspection,” in *The Study: Helps for Preachers*, 3rd series [London: Dickinson] 604; italics as shown)

1869: “Fix your eyes ever on the prize of your high calling. There are mansions of glory, diadems of beauty, palms of victory, golden harps, and white robes.” (James Large, *Sunday Readings for a Year* [London: William MacIntosh] 81)

1861: “I want you to have correct ideas of the principles of the Gospel, to believe correctly, and keep your eye steadily on the prize.” (President Amasa Lyman, quoted in “Minutes of a General Conference,” *Latter Day Saints Millennial Star* 23 [22 Jun.] 388)

1858: “It is possible to start well and yet fail in obtaining the prize. Do not let it be so with *you*. Look well to your guide-book. Keep your eye on the prize, and you will be sure to obtain it.” (Tressillian P. Shipp, *Sunday School Addresses* [London: Wertheim, MacIntosh, and Hunt] 23-24; italics as shown)

1851: “Let us then look onward. Let us not spend our time either in pondering the gloomy past, and our own unfaithfulness . . . ; but let us keep the eye steadily on the prize, and run the race as if we had just commenced it.” (Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Explanatory and Practical*, vol. 7 [London: Blackie & Son] 233)

1850: “Fix your eye steadily on the prize of your high calling in Jesus Christ...Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might...” (Edward Bather, *Sermons on Old Testament Histories* [London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge] 37)

1849: “He who would so run in the heavenly race to obtain [it?], must keep his eye steadily on the prize set before him.” (“A Single Eye,” *Christian Treasury* [Glasgow: Johnstone and Hunter] 23; crediting *New York Evangelist*)

1838: “Live above the world. ‘Set your affections on things above.’...Keep your eye on the prize—time will soon be over—eternity is near at hand.” (*Concise Memoir of the Rev. T. Sharp, A.M.*, edited by T. V. Curtis [London: T. Allman?, 1838] 37)

1818: “Do not seek it [your reward] in the admiration and applause of men, but solely in the approbation of God. Keep your eye on the prize that is set before you, even all the glory and the felicity of heaven.” (Charles Simeon, “Address to Missionaries Proceeding to West Africa, the Mediterranean, Madras, and Ceylon,” *Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East, Eighteenth Year, 1817-1818* [London] 185)

Every single one of those nineteenth-century instances of our proverb—and others that I have on file—whether with the plural *eyes* or the less euphonious singular *eye*, occur in the context of Christian devotion or instruction. We might ask, therefore, whether the proverb could be paraphrasing or alluding to a pas-

sage of Scripture. The answer is *yes*, perhaps. We turn to Paul’s letter to the Philippians, written while Paul was in prison—though not in the company of Silas. In chapter 3, verses 13-14, Paul wrote, “. . . This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before. / I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (KJV). Hovering in the background are probably other Pauline references to life as a *race*: “. . . [L]et us run with patience the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1); “Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain” (1 Corinthians 9:24). Obviously, the identity of the “prize” for St. Paul was less secular than the prize of gaining civil rights and human respect for all people on earth.

In the seventeenth century, as in the nineteenth, the proverb occurred in specifically religious contexts. In 1698 John Bunyan, the famous allegorist and itinerant Baptist preacher, in his treatise *The Heavenly Foot-Man*, exhorted, “*Keep thine Eye upon the Prize*, be sure that thy Eyes be continually upon the profit thou art like to get. The reason why Men are so apt to faint in their Race for Heaven, it lyeth chiefly in either of these two things. *First*, they do not seriously consider the worth of the *Prize*...” (Bunyan 1986, 167; italics as shown). In a sermon published in 1687, an English preacher declared of the faithful man, “Heaven is a place of his Citizenship and Privaledges...That is the Mark his Eye is fixed on, the Prize he aims at in his Christian Course” (Faldo 1687, sig. D5^v). In 1633 another divine reflected, “All that wee can doe, is to serve God whiles wee live: and all that wee can wish, is to raigne with God when we die. O then let us fixe our eyes on the prize, and gather up our feete to the race” (Adams 1633, sig. 6N5^r).

It seems, then, that the proverb “Keep your eyes on the prize” is actually *older* than “Keep your hand on the plow,” the saying that it replaced in the American spiritual when it became a freedom song in the 1960s.

Curiously, there appears a dearth of instances of the proverb in the eighteenth century and again in the first half of the twentieth century.

Since the wide dissemination of the saying as a slogan or motto during the 1960s and 1970s, it has sometimes broken free

of its specific reference to winning the prize of human rights or, for that matter, the prize of spiritual salvation. In 1989 the Canadian boxer Egerton Marcus opined, “Money is a good thing to have, yes. But first of all, you have to keep your eyes on the prize. And the prize is to win the championship” (*Toronto Star*, 11 Apr.). In 1996, at the end of his rousing victory speech after winning the Republican primary election in New Hampshire, Pat Buchanan urged his supporters, “Keep your eyes on the prize!”—the prize being his own election as president of the U.S. (Gaither 1996, 13). In 2002, a London newspaper reported, “Politicians on both sides of the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland were given a blunt warning by Bill Clinton yesterday to ‘keep your eyes on the prize’ and stand by the Good Friday agreement” (*The Guardian*, 2 Oct.). Clinton spoke in Scotland four years later: “I hope to say to everybody, in the friendliest terms, keep your eyes on the prize. I think devolution has been great for Scotland...” (*The [Glasgow] Herald*, 22 May 2006). Ex-president Clinton would certainly have been aware of the importance of the proverb in the American civil rights movement, but would the citizens of Great Britain whom he addressed? In 2011, an essayist in the journal *American Libraries* wrote, “Everybody wonders how best to advocate for libraries amid dwindling resources and Tea Party politics. How about looking like you give a darn! Keep your eyes on the prize—the patrons!” (Manley 2011, 64). Just recently a basketball player in the state of North Carolina mused, on the eve of the NCAA tournament, “Nobody’s satisfied yet...Basically, it’s just trying to keep your eyes on the prize” (*Star-News [Wilmington NC]*, 5 Mar. 2016).

So: the saying “Keep your eyes on the prize” is a proverb. From earlier uses, nearly all religious ones, it was revived by its insertion into an old spiritual when the spiritual became a freedom song near the beginning of the 1960s. Today the proverb sometimes still carries its association with the civil rights movement, though most of my own students in the early twenty-first century report that for them it has no such specific resonance. Now, it is just a proverb.

Notes

¹ Mieder (380) cites Lewis’s book (with Michael D’Orso) *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) 274; and Lewis’s book (with Brenda Jones) *Across That Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change* (New York: Hyperion, 2012) 106.

² The ultimate source, traceable from the collection of quotations that Mieder cites, is a speech that Obama gave in early 2004, when he was an Illinois state legislator; it was printed, under the title “Obama on Marriage,” in the online *Windy City Times*, which is styled “the voice of Chicago’s Gay, Lesbian, Bi, Trans, and Queer Community” (www.windycitymediagroup.com/windy-citytimes.php; accessed 28 Oct. 2016): “We must be careful to keep our eyes on the prize—equal rights for every American. We must continue to fight for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act.”

³ There were three spinoff books: Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (New York: Viking, 1987); Clayborne Carson, et al., editors, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years: A Reader and Guide* (New York: Penguin, 1987); Clayborne Carson, et al., editors, *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1991).

⁴ Texts of the spiritual “Gospel Plow” appear in these early collections: Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927) 474; Newman L. White, *American Negro Folk-Songs* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1928) 115; Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (London: Oxford UP, 1932), 2:292; John Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Our Singing Country* (New York: Macmillan, 1941) 44-45. Versions of the spiritual that retain the line “Keep Your Hand(s) on the Plow” have continued to be sung and recorded.

⁵ For instance, Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser’s compilation *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1989) marks its version of the song “Copyright © 1965 by Alice Wine,” and the compilers comment, “[I]n the mid-fifties Alice Wine of South Carolina *thought of the new last line*” (110, italics added). Bilal R. Muhammad, in *The African American Odyssey* (Bloomington IN: AuthorHouse, 2011) baldly declared, “. . . [T]he lyrics to this version were written by civil rights activists [sic] Alice Wine in 1956” (24). Likewise Dorian Lynskey, in *33 Revolutions per Minute: A History of Protest Songs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011): “Alice Wine . . . rewrote the old gospel hymn ‘Keep Your Hand on the Plow’ as ‘Keep Your Eyes on the Prize’” (41). Certainly, *writing* did not play any role in the creation or early evolution of the song! I can discover no evidence of the song’s having been copyrighted by (or in the name of) Alice Wine.

⁶ Most explicitly, the Wikipedia article “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize” (anonymous, of course) quotes “email from Candie Carawan to Johns Island Schoolhouse Museum, February 15, 2013, re. Tree of Life Exhibit”:

There is one thing we would like to correct on the panel of Alice Wine at the Progressive Club. It is not accurate to say that she is credited with writing the lyrics to “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize.” She is credited with passing the phrase “eyes on the prize” to Guy

who then incorporated it into the song. When Guy worked with Mrs. Clark in the Citizenship program on Johns Island, he used songs in the classes. One of the songs was “Keep Your Hand on the Plow, Hold On” which he knew from the Labor Movement. Mrs. Wine took him aside and said “We know a different echo to that song—keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.” Guy loved that and began to use it as he traveled around the South and met with groups at Highlander. Later on Mrs. Wine found it hard to believe that she had made such an impact on the song. (accessed 5 Oct. 2016)

My attempts to get confirmation from the Johns Island Schoolhouse Museum have not availed. In curious contrast to information in the Carawans’ accounts, Pete Seeger—Guy Carawan’s close friend—speaking on the 1965 phonograph album *WNEW: Story of Selma* (Smithsonian/Folkways 05595, track 1: “Hold On [Keep Your Eyes on the Prize: Freedom Voices with Pete Seeger]”), credited the new line to “a woman in Georgia”!

⁷ The same quotation appeared two weeks later in an (unsigned) article that probably addressed a mainly different readership: “Police Halt ‘Memorial’ Walk for Slain Postman,” *Jet* 24, no. 4 (16 May 1963) 4-5.

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