

Remembering MLK Then and Now

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – January 20, 2013

On a sun-filled day in the summer of 1964, an excited boy of 4-1/2 dances around massive marble columns flanking the top step of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. Scattered below, tourists mix and mingle on the concrete expanse between the memorial and the reflecting pool stretching to the Washington Monument in the distance.

Through life, I've carried vague memories of that long ago family vacation in our nation's capital. The scene is vivid now only thanks to home movies I captured to DVD a few years ago.

Gazing back through unveiled time at my distant childhood, that scene strikes me more than anything unearthed in the long-lost footage filmed by my parents and grandparents. Looking anew on that tranquil scene, it's difficult to imagine that less than 12 months earlier the memorial and the reflecting pool were engulfed by a sea of humanity marching on Washington to demand equal rights. From those steps the prior August, a 34-year-old black minister from Atlanta told those marchers and the world: "I have a dream today..."

The rest is history, as they say; but, whose history? I'm confronted by stark contrasts between the blissful innocence of my youth and scenes from that same historic spot on August 28, 1963. My childhood in white suburban Atlanta played out largely in isolation from the tumult and turmoil ripping through the southland around us.

I learned of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 at a church event. I remember a man whispering to my father news of the shooting in Memphis that evening. I recall the funeral procession on television as Dr. King's casket was carried in a wagon drawn by donkeys from Ebenezer Baptist Church to Morehouse College. The rest is a blur. It was an emotional time. But, given what I know as an adult, I suspect the emotion gripping those in my world was fear.

My parents were good people who never hated anyone, as were my grandparents. I was raised by peace-loving folks who gave me their best through examples of love for one another, respect for all, and service to those in need. But, they were not the kind who set out to change the world. We never really talked about civil rights, but I suspect they were torn like many southern whites in the 1960s. It was clear something was wrong with our world. As Dr. King declared, America truly had failed to fulfill her promise that all men are created equal and that each was due the same rights. But some things just seemed too big to change, too woven into society's fabric for anyone to overcome.

And yet, among the marchers were whites who also sang "We shall overcome..."

I have always believed in equality, fairness, and justice. I can never understand the gross indifference that enabled slavery, nor fathom the hatred that perpetuated a segregated south. I admired the legacy of Dr. King as a man who died to change that; but, I saw his legacy as black history, not mine.

When my wife became Mayor in 2008, one of her first duties was to give greetings from the City of Covington at the annual MLK ceremony at Newton High School. Helping research her comments, I watched the full “I Have a Dream” speech for probably the first time.

For all I thought I knew of history, I was unprepared for the emotions that came. I wept. Studying Dr. King’s words from that day and many others, I came to understand his legacy is my legacy. That history is everyone’s history. To live in a world where character -- not skin color – matters is not just a dream for his children, it’s a dream for all of us. To die a violent death seeking a peaceful path to justice was not just a sacrifice for black Americans; it was sacrifice for all of us.

For the first time in five years, I’ll miss the MLK service today at 3 pm at Newton County High School. I’m sad about that, for it renews in me each time a deep sense of what unwavering hope feels like, along with awe for the strength of those who endured.

Go today if you can. Take with you every burden you feel when contemplating the times in which we live. Carry those concerns until that moment, in closing the service, when you empty your hands, cross them over your chest, grasp the hands of your neighbors, and sing “We shall overcome.”

Those words are the shared destiny before us and the legacy we can leave behind.

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