

Two Days that Changed the Nation and—Perhaps—Some of Us

Several years ago at about this time of year I suddenly realized that for some time I had been paying little or no attention to the birthday or legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.. I also realized that I had never heard any related comments from our UU speakers. Now, having said that, I recognize that it's quite possible that I have missed some on days that Mary and I were absent. Nonetheless, I don't remember hearing any related commentary.

Be that as it may, in the future our Fellowship might wish to consider the value of thoughtful and timely commentary on specific key occasions throughout the year. When I wrote the bulk of today's remarks about one year ago I had no idea how our country would become inundated with example after example after example of violence against Blacks.

We gather here this morning hopefully aware of, and committed to, our seven UU principles. Let's remind ourselves of the first two:

- (1) "The inherent worth and dignity of every person."
- (2) "Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations."

This morning, then, let us remember where we have been, personally and as a nation. And—let us consider how we might more actively live those two UU principles.

Two Days that Changed the Nation and—Perhaps—Some of Us

The first day was March 7, 1965 when the nation cried with sorrow and erupted with outrage. Eight days later, March 15, 1965 America cried again – this time with tears of joy and hope and determination. Thus concluded, I believe, one of the most remarkable weeks in our nation's history.

First, let me share a few personal comments as we, as a nation, prepare to reflect tomorrow on the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.. Mary, pregnant with our first child, Kathleen, and I moved to Gulfport, Mississippi on December 28, 1965. I had just completed four years of graduate school in Madison and was a freshly-minted PhD in entomology. Before leaving Madison I had become aware of multiple job opportunities due entirely to a fluke of national circumstances that have no bearing on today's message and Mary, on one occasion when we were discussing job possibilities, had assured me: "Dick, I will move with you anywhere in the world" – pause – "except Mississippi."

Now, imagine me coming home one afternoon to our small apartment and announcing that I had spent some time on the phone talking about what I thought was a very attractive, albeit challenging, job possibility. Recognizing that I had not mentioned the location of this potential job, Mary looked at me with disbelief and finally burst out with, "Surely you don't mean a job in Mississippi?" "Yes," I replied and then hastened to add that the job was not in the Mississippi Delta, the pit of horror for both Blacks and civil rights workers, but in Gulfport, on the Gulf Coast midway between Mobile to the East and New Orleans on the West. My young wife was not pleased!

Now I want to be very clear at this point. Despite misgivings from some UW profs, my selection of a position as a research scientist with the US Forest Service in Mississippi was based almost solely on what I judged—for a number of reasons—to be my best professional opportunity. A distant secondary consideration was that this move would, I believed, provide an unmatched opportunity for social and cultural growth. But I emphasize – that was a distant secondary consideration. We were not Freedom Riders. We were not Civil Rights workers. We were simply a young couple preparing to start both a career and a family. As I look back on those years I recognize that we are different people today because of our sojourn in the South. And even though we left Mississippi in 1974 we still have 3 couples who remain good friends.

Let's spend a few minutes reminding ourselves of some of our nation's history with respect to civil rights. It is true that the practice of enslaving human beings likely existed in the earliest days of recorded history, probably in many countries. However, scholars maintain that the Europeans introduced new elements into the enslavement practice. These new elements included: (1) the sheer inhumanity of the way they practiced the enslavement of Africans; (2) the fact that the West Africans were traded and sold like any other market commodity; and (3) the perpetual and automatic enslavement of Africans' offspring.

Do we recall that our Declaration of Independence in 1776 declared as "self-evident" the truth that "all men are created equal..." Of course, Native Americans and Negro slaves didn't count. Finally, a compromise between Northern and Southern representatives agreed that an enslaved African male would count as 3/5 of a man. Please note...we are talking only about men. When our Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in 1787 there were 55 white men – of whom 22 or 40% were slave-holders. No Africans, other people of color or women of any race were present.

In the same year, 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote "Notes on the State of Virginia." After responding negatively to the question of whether Africans should be incorporated into the state of Virginia as citizens, he said this: "Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the exterminations of the one or the other race." Jefferson believed the Africans were inherently "inferior to the whites in the endowment of body, mind, and imagination." Unfortunately, it seems clear that some of these beliefs are alive and well even today. Jefferson also stated that Africans knew nothing about sentimental love, had no abilities to be artists or sculptors, and could not write poetry.

Do we recall the Dred Scott case? Without going into detail our Supreme Court ruled 7-2 that Africans were granted no rights in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. In fact, they had no rights, period, that whites were bound to respect. That's where our nation was just preceding the civil war.

Now a few dreadful reminders of more recent origin that were front and center for Mary and me in 1965. In August of 1955 fourteen-year old Emmett Till from Chicago was visiting an uncle in Money, Mississippi when he allegedly touched and whistled at a white woman in a store. Till, just 14 years old, was kidnapped from his uncle's home and made the victim of one of the most brutal murders in the annals of civil rights history. He was shot in the head and his face so

disfigured by the murderers that he was unrecognizable. When his body was returned home to Chicago, Till's mother, Mamie Bradley, rejected the advice that she have a closed-casket funeral. She opted to have it open because she wanted the whole world to see what racist whites had done to her son. Till's (self-confessed) murderers went to trial but were never convicted.

Now it is 1963, two years before we moved to Mississippi. In the early morning of June 12, just after President JFK's nationally televised Civil Rights address, Medgar Evers pulled into his driveway after returning from a meeting with NAACP lawyers. As he stepped out of his car he was shot in the back of the head. He stumbled 30 feet before collapsing. He was taken to a local hospital in Hattiesburg, Mississippi where he was initially refused entry because of his color! When it was explained who he was, he was admitted but he died 50 minutes later. Imagine both events—both the shooting and the hospital's refusal of admittance! We can provide a brief personal footnote to this event. Shortly after moving to Gulfport, my boss and his wife invited us to join them at a local restaurant. My boss and I went to the bar. Mary and my boss's wife remained at the table. The wife proceeded to condemn the NY Times as nothing but a pack of lies. She explicitly referred to the killing of Medgar Evers as portrayed on the Times' front page as a bunch of malicious lies. After all, the local Gulfport paper had published only a brief account of the death and had buried it deep within the paper. The Gulfport account was, of course, the true account - in her view.

One year later in 1964 Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman (both white Northerners) and James Chaney (a black Mississippian) went to Philadelphia, Mississippi to investigate the burning of a black church. They drove there on a Sunday morning, June 21, 1964, and disappeared. Their mutilated bodies were found on August 4 stuffed in an earthen dam. While searching for the three youths, the authorities found the bodies of seven other blacks who had disappeared .

Now it is 1965—the year we moved to Mississippi. On March 7, 1965, civil rights activists, demonstrating for voting rights, were savagely attacked by Alabama state troopers and vigilantes as they tried to cross Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge (named for a KKK Grand Dragon). That day became known as "Bloody Sunday." The images from Selma horrified the world and March 7 became Day 1 of the two days I am suggesting permanently changed our nation.

That night, ABC News interrupted the network's Sunday night movie, "Judgment at Nuremberg," to show the nation what had happened. The raw footage had no narration and ran for 15 minutes. Viewers, estimated at 48 million, were stunned by the sight of peaceful demonstrators being beaten and tear-gassed. Others who saw news photos of the tragedy had similar reactions—horror, shame, and an overwhelming desire to do something. Thousands headed for Selma. Those who could not go south demonstrated in their own communities, from Maine to Hawaii.

Washington was besieged by demonstrators calling for a voting rights act. They obstructed traffic and paraded night and day near the White House, their chanting and singing interrupting the sleep of the President and the First Family. President Johnson was sympathetic to their demands. In fact, following his instructions, a voting rights bill was being drafted—but in secret. He hesitated to announce it because he had just signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 the previous July, and believed that Congress was not yet ready to pass another major civil rights law.

Bloody Sunday changed everything. Clergymen, congressmen and senators harassed the president, everyone demanding an answer to the same question: "Why has it taken so long for you to send a voting rights bill to the Congress?" The pressure became too great. The President decided that he must quickly send a bill to Congress. But first, he should address the American people in a speech before a joint session of the House and Senate. Nobody knew it then, but historians agree that it would turn out to be the greatest speech of his presidency, one that still resonates 50 years later.

Exactly a week later, by 6:30 p.m., a consensus had formed. Johnson would speak to a joint session of Congress and the nation from the House chamber at 9:00 p.m. the following night. Now this scenario almost defies belief. First, no presidential address ever gets written in 24 hours. Twenty-four days—unlikely—but theoretically possible. But never 24 hours. That's impossible! Second, here we have a President from the South with the image of peaceful US citizens being beaten and tear-gassed, and behind all this looms the man whose legacy we honor tomorrow, Martin Luther King. Third, and finally, the President knows that what he is about to do will, for decades, change the political landscape of the nation. He is about to hand the South—all of it—to the opposing Republican party. I doubt any other single presidential action, short of declaring war, has had such a profound and lasting effect on our nation.

The next 24 hours is full of drama. At 7:00 p.m., two hours before he was to speak, the President and his most trusted speech-writer, Richard Goodwin, were still working on the speech. Only half the speech had been loaded into the teleprompter. Johnson would have to read much of the address from a black, loose-leaf notebook.

A burst of applause greeted a sober-faced Johnson as he made his way to the rostrum, not pausing, as was his custom, to shake hands, say a word to old friends, or touch their shoulders. As Vice President Hubert Humphrey looked on, Speaker of the House John McCormack introduced the President. There was more applause. Johnson nodded and looked out at his audience. No doubt he was aware that some of his former colleagues were missing. The Virginia and Mississippi delegations, as well as other southerners, had decided to boycott the President's speech.

With the crack of McCormack's gavel, people sat, and there was a moment of silence as Johnson looked down at his notebook and looked up. "What followed," noted TIME magazine's correspondent, "was...so startling, so moving, that few who saw it or heard it will ever forget it."

Slowly, deliberately, he began: "I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy. I urge every member of both parties, Americans of all religions and of all colors, from every section of this country, to join me in that cause...There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem...And we ought not, and we cannot, and we must not wait before we get a bill. We have already waited 100 years and more and the time for waiting is gone. So I ask you to join me in working long hours and nights and weekends, if necessary to pass this bill. And I don't make that request lightly, for, from the window where I sit, with the problems of our country, I recognize that from outside this chamber is the outraged conscience of a nation, the grave concern of many nations and the harsh judgment of history on our acts."

The Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Brooklyn Democrat Emanuel Celler, leapt to his feet to lead what became a 30 second standing ovation. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana, usually shy and retiring, was “Shaking with emotion,” Newsweek reported, and had tears in his eyes....

The President paused, and then, slowly, distinctly, he uttered the words never before said by an American president: “And...we...shall...overcome.” For a moment there was only stunned silence, as it dawned on all who listened that President Lyndon Johnson, a son of the South, had just evoked the anthem of the civil rights movement. Then the room erupted in applause. Almost everyone rose – “save the Southerners (‘Goddamn’, one cursed) and Senator Everett Dirksen,” of Illinois. Johnson glared at Dirksen and paused until the television cameras focused on the senator who then rose, joining the others who were giving Johnson a standing ovation.

In the galleries, Negroes and Whites wept unabashedly. In Selma, Alabama, the movement’s leaders had gathered at the home of Sullivan Jackson, the city’s sole black dentist, to watch President Johnson deliver his speech. When he uttered those three incredible words, “We shall overcome,” King’s lieutenants were shocked, then they cried out, “Can you believe he said that?” John Lewis looked over at King and saw him wipe tears from his cheek.

He departed the House chamber “a changed man,” TIME later observed, “...certain that he had launched the US inexorably toward a new purpose.” March 15, 1965, the date of President Johnson’s magnificent address to Congress and the nation, is Day 2 of the two days I am suggesting permanently changed our nation.

As Johnson and his party returned to the White House the switchboards were jammed with calls, mostly favorable. One reached him in the upstairs sitting room. “That was Dick Russell” Johnson told Goodwin, Moyers, and the others. Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, Johnson’s mentor and longtime opponent of civil rights, told the President that while he had not converted him, he thought the speech “the best” ever given by an American president. One Southerner was able to change; another could not. Congress passed the bipartisan voting rights bill overwhelmingly and the President signed it into law in an elaborate ceremony in the Capitol’s Statuary Hall, five months later, August 6, 1965.

One final family reflection. Some time later, Mary was attending a meeting of Methodist ladies at the Gulfport Methodist Church where we had become close friends with the pastor and his wife. After a discussion of racial issues and generational differences, one elderly lady turned to Mary and said, “Mary, I will never believe as you do but I hope my grandchildren will.”

The legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Lyndon Johnson’s historic speech still speaks to an America torn by racial discord, mistrust, and hatred. Although we have a Black President—unimaginable in 1965—we still refuse to grant all citizens equal access to the voting booth. Police brutality against Blacks is becoming an almost daily event. Black men and boys shot by police—often in the back. Blacks dying in police custody. But police aren’t the only culprits. Do we remember the nine men and women who were murdered in the Charleston African Methodist Episcopal Church by a deranged white supremacist who had been welcomed into their prayer group? Do any of us remember how the mother of Martin Luther King died, six

years after her son had been assassinated? She, too was shot. Shot in church while seated at the church organ just after she had finished playing the Lord's Prayer.

LBJ rose magnificently to the opportunity the Selma tragedy presented. Martin Luther King died in his passionate pursuit of freedom for all citizens. And we? How about us? We officially honor King's memory tomorrow. We should effectively honor his memory every day of our lives. How? By what we do. By how we live. May the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. remain with us today, tomorrow, and forever.

