

In Memory and Reflection: A Journey of Racial Injustice and Hope January 19, 2025

Today, I stand in memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the countless civil rights heroes before and after him. With the inspiration from a few other heroes, I hope to weave a story of racial injustice and explore what we, both individually and collectively, can do to rewrite our narratives toward justice.

It's crucial to remember that our stories are rooted in a long history of advocacy for equality in America. This journey began with the fight against slavery and continues through the complex dynamics of rhetoric, policy, and power from the nation's founding to the present.

Dr. Heather Cox Richardson, history professor, and author of the newsletter "Letters from an American", highlights that our Founding Fathers, many of whom were slave owners, expressed ideals of freedom and equality, but their vision of democracy was limited to white, land-owning men. This tension has echoed throughout history, with legacies of slavery and inequality challenging our nation's democratic ideals. Black Americans, Native Americans, and women have often been excluded from the promises of equality. Even as we have made continued progress toward democratic equality, the authoritarian forces continue to work to maintain the hierarchies of race, class and gender.

The 14th Amendment, ratified in 1868, in the wake of the Civil War, became a cornerstone for championing equality, though it has faced many challenges over the years. The Supreme Court handed down a key decision in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education* declaring racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Demonstrations and mounting white reactionary violence exploded in 1955 with the murder of Emmet Till and an all-white jury acquitting their murderers; Rosa Park's refusal to move to the black section of a bus and the black boycott which followed with more violence.

In 1962, President Kennedy put the muscle of the federal government behind the desegregation of the University of Mississippi, with the U.S. Marshalls arriving to stop the riots caused by the white supremacists and protecting James Meredith (another hero) on campus as the first black student during his first year. This caused so much anger with the Southern Democrats that Kennedy felt obliged to travel to Dallas to mend some fences on November 22, 1963. The Dallas Morning newspaper included a flier saying the president was wanted for treason and supporting the "communist-inspired" racial riots. He said to Jacqueline that they were "heading into nut country". They were, and he paid with his life.

In Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in 1963 he began by honoring President Lincoln

"A great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions

of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice... One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."

The Civil Rights movement, exemplified by this historic march gave birth to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Even after the Civil Rights Act forbade discrimination in voting based on race, efforts by civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Council to register black voters met with fierce resistance in southern states such as Alabama. Martin Luther King decided to make Selma, Alabama the focus of the black voter registration campaign. King had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 and his profile helped draw international attention to the events that followed.

On March 7, 1965, John Lewis led an estimated 600 nonviolent civil rights marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma with the intent of walking 54 miles to Montgomery, Alabama to present a petition to Governor George Wallace. They faced violence from the state troopers and deputized white vigilante groups. The troopers began shoving the demonstrators, beating them with nightsticks and firing tear gas, charging the crowd on horseback. Televised images of the brutal attack presented Americans and international audiences with horrifying images of marchers left bloodied and severely injured and roused support for the campaign. The day soon became known as "Bloody Sunday".

Hundreds of ministers, priests, rabbis and social activists soon headed to Selma to join the voting rights march.

On the morning of March 9, a day that would become known as "Turnaround Tuesday", King led about 2,500 marchers out on the Edmund Pettus Bridge and held a short prayer session before turning them around, thereby obeying the court order preventing them from making the full march. He did not venture across to the other side of the bridge. King asked everyone to remain in Selma for another march to take place after the injunction was lifted.

That evening, three white Unitarian Universalist ministers in Selma for the march were attacked on the street and beaten with clubs by four Ku Klux Klan members. Reverend James Reeb from Boston died two days later in the hospital with his wife by his side.

At the end of this drama, Dr. King said

"If the worst in American life lurked in Selma's dark streets, the best of American instincts arose passionately from across the nation to overcome it."

Six days later, on March 15, President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed the nation on television, expressing his support for the Selma protesters and advocating for a new voting rights law.

“There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem,” Johnson said, “Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.”

As the world watched, under the protection of federalized National Guard troops, the protesters reached their destination after three days, arriving in Montgomery.

There, King delivered his famous “How Long, Not Long” speech ending with the Battle Hymn of the Republic”:

“I know you are asking today, “How long will it take?...How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?”...How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge was a symbol of crossing the bridge to the never-ending quest for freedom. The bridge is now a national historic landmark and there have been attempts to change the name from Edmund Pettus, a Grand Dragon KKK, to John Lewis. The march and King’s leadership highlighted the struggles Black voters faced and led to the enactment of the Voting Rights Act.

1968 was marked by widespread riots, political turmoil, and civil unrest. Martin Luther King’s assassination, following his opposition to the Vietnam War, further heightened racial tensions. The assassination of Robert Kennedy, preceded the highly contentious 1968 Democratic Convention, which was fraught with protests over the Vietnam peace talks, and the aggressive police tactics of Chicago’s Mayor Richard J. Daley.

The fight for justice persisted, with efforts for racial equality, anti-war activism and women’s rights becoming deeply interconnected.

My Personal Story

A few years after the transformative events of the 1960s, I graduated from college, eager yet uncertain about the path ahead. My journey began in Kansas City, where I found employment in a law office dedicated to civil rights. The lawyer who hired me welcomed my passion for making change, and I quickly immersed myself in a variety of roles, including coordinating efforts for the American Civil Liberties Union and advocating for prison reform.

Our office addressed social justice issues, including protecting inmates from inhumane conditions, representing the falsely accused, and supporting conscientious objectors.. One of the most notable achievements was successfully litigating to desegregate Kansas City Public Schools, a victory born from the precedent set by Brown v. Board of Education. Despite the legal triumph, the battle against segregation continued, as many white families fled to suburban areas and crossed state lines to avoid integrated schools.

Armed with my early successes and new insights into how to effect change, I transitioned from the law office to county government, joining at a pivotal time when the Charter form of government was being implemented. The aim was to dismantle the remnants of Kansas City's corrupt political legacy by establishing a system of checks and balances across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. As Assistant to the County Executive, I played an integral role in this transformative era.

I also engaged in progressive political campaigns at various levels, one of the most memorable being Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign. I had the privilege of meeting Carter several times. My boss met with Jimmy at the beginning of his Presidential bid when his polls showed him at 1%, but he knew that he would win. As President, Carter appointed more women, Black Americans, and Jewish Americans to official positions and judgeships than all 38 of his predecessors combined."

Kansas City had both a symbolic and real racial dividing line, embodied in Troost Avenue. My home stood two blocks west of Troost, firmly on the "white" side. One fateful night, my house burned down, rendering me "unhoused." In this challenging time, I moved in with a friend who resided two blocks east of Troost, in the "black" neighborhood. He was a white man dedicated to renovating homes in this area with his brothers. We became partners. My role was to create stained glass windows for the homes and engage actively with the neighborhood association that spanned both sides of Troost.

Fast forward five years to November 22nd, on a night set aside for a joint birthday dinner at my boss's home. My partner, Jay, was not social and did not join us. He spent most of his free time with his brothers working on the homes and helping older neighbors make repairs. As the evening progressed, the doorbell rang, summoning me to an unimaginable reality—Jay's brother delivered the devastating news that Jay had been murdered during a robbery at one of the homes he owned. I was engulfed in numbness, eventually leading to a quest for understanding. We later set up a fund to help the elderly in the neighborhood in Jay's name.

This heart-wrenching experience gave me a front-row seat into the complex arena of racial inequality. It spurred my reflection on why we were the "haves" and the burglars the "have-nots." A century's worth of discrimination, coupled with a lack of education and opportunities, had cornered many into dire circumstances. As Brene Brown poignantly observes, "It's not honest to deny that many of us are afforded privileges based on who we are and what we look like."

Shortly after, I left my job at the county and served as Director of the Area Agency on Aging, in charge of assuring that all elderly in the area received what they needed to live a quality life. I was eventually recruited for a similar role in a five-county area in another state. They hired me because they were looking for a woman with experience in politics and aging services. I arrived in this new community with a naïve desire for "saving the world."—and with the zeal to do everything I could to strengthen aging services, especially for lower-income neighborhoods.

Listening to the African American leaders, I learned there were many services needed for elders to live well. As I went from senior center to senior center in the five-county area, I also discovered that a true needs assessment had never been done.

We secured a federal grant to improve services for the black community; brought together Master's level students at the college to conduct the first community needs assessment. I was careful to inform my "political bosses"--overseeing my performance behind the scenes-- of every move I made. However, one day one of them took me to lunch and handed me a card listing my supposed "**wrongs.**" Funny, I thought that they were my "**rights.**" Ironically just as the results of the community needs assessment were delivered in boxes to my office, I was fired and the results were probably burned soon after. In the beginning, I didn't understand that they hired me because I was a woman with political experience who they assumed would acquiesce to the politicians' desires for the status quo...they didn't want to show that there were needs in their well-run counties.

One of my new heroes is now Adam Kahane, author of the book *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change*. He has for the last 20+ years worked around the world on many tough and vital challenges: food security, health care, economic development, peacemaking and climate change. He shares that the two methods most frequently employed to solve our toughest social problems are "Power, the desire to achieve one's purpose, and Love, the urge to unite with others."

This often recited quote of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is at the foundation of Kahane's belief in social change: "Power without love is reckless and abusive" and "love without power is sentimental and anemic."

King continues: "Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

But how do you combine them? In Kahane's words, "When either dominates, we will stagger and stumble. Only when they are in balance can we walk successfully and find resolution to complex social challenges." King's life can be understood as walking a narrow path between the two. King believed that Negro Americans often were seeking their goals through love devoid of power and white Americans sought their goals through power devoid of love and conscience.

Despite the setbacks in my life, I returned to Kansas City, learning valuable lessons about the complexities of enacting change, emphasizing the need to listen carefully, build coalitions and persist. If the time were now I would add: blending my own power and commitment with the spirit of love.

As Brene Brown tells us:

“When we deny our stories and disengage from tough emotions, they don’t go away; instead, they own us, they define us. Our job is not to deny the story, but to defy the ending., Yes. This is what happened. This is my truth.”

Perhaps telling this story for the first time will lead my story to a brave new ending.

CONCLUSION—forwarding to the current time

Marches and rallies for racial justice have taken on a new dimension. Today, our cell phones serve as crucial witnesses to instances of police brutality, capturing moments that were once difficult to prove. Social media platforms amplify these recordings, spreading awareness and rallying support worldwide. The public now has visual evidence that fuels the call for justice. The death of George Floyd became a catalyst, uniting people of all races across the globe in protests and sparking a national reckoning. The Black Lives Matter movement grew into an increasingly multiracial coalition, while also upholding Martin Luther King Jr.'s belief in peaceful protest, continuing the legacy of nonviolent resistance in the pursuit of equality.

Finally, John Lewis, another hero, who led civil rights from the 60s, and served 17 terms as Congressman from Georgia until he died in 2020, tells us:

"We have come a long way in America because of Martin Luther King, Jr. He led a disciplined, nonviolent revolution under the rule of law, a revolution of values, a revolution of ideas. We've come a long way, but we still have a distance to go before all of our citizens embrace the idea of a truly interracial democracy, what I like to call the Beloved Community, a nation at peace with itself." ~

And I leave us with President Biden’s final words in his farewell address:

“I still believe in the idea for which this nation stands. A nation where the strengths of our institutions and the character of our people matter and must endure. “

“Now it’s your turn to stand guard. May you all be the keeper of the flame. May you keep the faith.”