

Change Is Gonna Come: MLK in Birmingham and Memphis

As King taught us, making the world a better place requires us to be active citizens.

By Tom Wagner

Spring ... it's been a long time coming. As late as a couple of weeks ago, snow and frigid cold held a secure lock on the landscape. I was reminded of C. S. Lewis' description of Narnia under the curse of the White Witch — “always winter, but never Christmas.” It was a harsher winter than we have endured for several years, even if we dodged more severe weather experienced elsewhere.

While we can't hasten seasonal change, we also dare not sit on our hands waiting for the change to come. So we adapted our routines to the conditions at hand by wearing extra layers of clothing, driving with more caution and putting hand to the shovel or snow blower. Some of us also prepared for the season to come — making garden plans, ordering seeds and even growing some seedlings indoors.

Yet in the midst of winter chores, I find springtime hope in my longtime observations of a small creek bordering our homestead. Ice and snow have long imprisoned the stream, but come the thaw, they will join it. It starts with a small trickle between jagged edges of ice. A few days later, the waters fully reclaim their channel between the snow-covered banks. Rain accelerates the melt, often swelling the stream into flood stage, sweeping dead leaves, limbs and other debris out of the way.

Last year's Civil Rights Era anniversaries, particularly the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington in August, led to a number of conversations, which continue in my ruminations. Most often they started with a reference to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech. I often used this as a cue to introduce into a conversation his “Letter from the Birmingham Jail.”

Chronological proximity of these works may be the most natural reason for me to look at the two side by side (August and April 1963 respectively). Yet popular familiarity with the “Dream” speech pushes me to remind folks of the “Jail” letter — a document which deserves at least equal billing. Both are good examples of “the prophetic voice.”

As one biblical scholar has put it, the function of a prophet in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures was more as “a forthteller than a foreteller.” That doesn't exclude visions of a better future, but it does suggest that we dare not claim prophetic hope without wrestling with unpleasant truths about ourselves and our society in the here and now.

Both the speech and the letter are important, but serve different purposes and grew out of different contexts. While the Dream speech acknowledged the historic debt owed African-Americans (the unpaid promissory note), it is best remembered for the vision of a just, equitable and integrated society. It was a pep talk in the midst of the struggle, delivered among a throng of friends. However, the letter is primarily remembered as an exercise in truth telling.

Months before the March on Washington, King drafted the Jail letter in response to a statement signed by eight prominent white Alabama clergymen, critical of Southern Christian Leadership Conference actions in Birmingham, Ala. King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy had been arrested on Good Friday in 1963 (April 12) for “parading without a permit.” Their critical colleagues were moderates, who at times had supported portions of the Conference’s desegregation agenda. However, their statement called the Birmingham campaign “unwise and untimely.” King and Conference leadership were referred to as “outsiders” and the demonstrations were called “extreme measures.” These moderate clergymen suggested that race issues were best pursued in court and through negotiation. They went as far as to commend the local media and police for handling the demonstrations “calmly.”

King’s reply began as a series of notes scribbled in the margins of a newspaper. This powerful defense of nonviolent action began as a solitary exercise, drawing deeply from his upbringing, formal education and personal experience. The letter was not originally a public document. Rather, it was addressed to a community that King most cared about, people of faith.

By explaining the Birmingham movement, he sought to turn these opponents into allies. The letter was written weeks before the most dramatic episodes involving police dogs and fire hoses had taken place — those images forever seared the Birmingham campaign into our collective memory.

Up to this point, the campaign was floundering. Birmingham authorities so far had kept a tight rein on Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene “Bull” Connor. Demonstrators had been jailed, but bail bond funds were running low. King and Abernathy’s arrest began to turn things around. The letter did not lead to the campaign’s ultimate success. Rather, it was the movement’s success that made the letter a public document over a month after it was composed.



Police dogs attack Walter Gadsden, a black high school student in May 1963. (Bill Hudson/Associated Press)

King first addressed their concern about outside interference. He explained that local civil rights leaders had specifically invited the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to help in Birmingham. He went on to remind them of how the prophet Amos left his home in Judah to address injustice in Israel and the apostle Paul traveled throughout much of the Roman Empire to spread the Christian message. Furthermore, he set the issues at hand in a broader context:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial ‘outside agitator’ idea.”

King's opponents in the clergy had criticized the demonstrations, but failed to recognize the unjust treatment behind the demonstrations. Here, King made the case for direct action and responded to the charge that the campaign was "untimely." He began with a streamlined list of the steps in a nonviolent campaign — fact finding, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action. Deliberation and self-critique were built into the process. The movement actually used a 10 point pledge, which included the promise to refrain from violence in word, deed, and attitude.

Though King didn't specifically name Mahatma Gandhi in the letter, it is well known that Gandhian thought had a strong influence on the American Civil Rights Movement since the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956. Gandhi, in turn, had drawn on western sources in developing his philosophy of nonviolent resistance, satyagraha. He especially used Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Henry David Thoreau's On Civil Disobedience, and the later writings of Leo Tolstoy.

King's exposure to Gandhian nonviolence came filtered primarily through contact with people like Bayard Rustin, a Quaker and key adviser for a pacifist organization called the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Both King's reference to movement discipline and his later explanation of negotiation as the goal of direct action are easily traced to Gandhi's earlier work.

King's brief history of failed negotiations and postponed actions also indicated that the Birmingham campaign was not a kneejerk reaction. Civil rights leaders had been in conversation with the local business community as early as August of 1962 concerning the removal of "Whites only" signs. Business leaders quickly agreed to these terms at the time because the Southern Christian Leadership Conference would hold its annual convention in Birmingham the following month, and they feared bad publicity. Only a few stores actually followed through on the promises and in many cases white community leaders pressured complying businesses into returning to past practices.

By January 1963, when the backsliding was clear, nonviolence workshops were held and plans for demonstrations and an economic boycott during the Easter shopping season were made. Actions were postponed at least twice so as not to interfere with local elections in March and to avoid the run-off election that followed.

Again, King broadened his focus to the longer stream of African-American experience under slavery and "Jim Crow" laws to remind the critics that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." Indeed at this point he made his most impassioned argument:

"Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging dark of segregation to say, 'Wait.' But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious

bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: ‘Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?’; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading ‘white’ and ‘colored’; when your first name becomes ‘nigger,’ your middle name becomes ‘boy’ (however old you are) and your last name becomes ‘John,’ and your wife and mother are never given the respected title ‘Mrs.’; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you go forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’ then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.”

King’s white colleagues had also questioned the movement’s willingness to break the law. Here King called on the theologians, St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas in discerning the difference between just and unjust laws. Unjust laws degrade human dignity. Unjust laws are laws that one group inflicts on another group without being subject to that law itself. It is law enacted without the consent of a group, because it has been denied access to the ballot box.

Sometimes even legitimate laws are twisted to serve unjust ends, as when authorities use parade permits to block First Amendment rights. Perhaps the greatest respect for the rule of law is shown by those willing to break unjust laws and willingly accept the consequences. This is the heart of civil disobedience.

King questioned those who labeled the movement’s nonviolent tactics as “extreme.” In one sense, this was a middle path between doing nothing and using brute force. From another angle, the label “extremist” placed members of the movement in good company of honored biblical and American historical figures. King’s intention was that his opponents not become debris in the current of history, but join forces with the flow of justice. As the prophet Amos wrote, Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream: Amos 5:24.

A more recent conversation brought King’s final speech into my meditations. Five years after Birmingham, he was in Memphis, Tenn. to help sanitation workers who were on strike. There had been victories along the way, especially the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. King had broadened his scope of concern from racial discrimination to include war and economic justice. Only a year earlier, on April 4, 1967, in a Sermon at Riverside Church in New York City, King made his most public statement in opposition to the Vietnam War.

By April 1968, there had been a long history of death threats and FBI harassment. Indeed, King’s flight from Atlanta to Memphis, Tenn. in the early hours of April 3 had been delayed for extra safety checks, in spite of the fact that the plane had been under guard all night. While many have wondered whether King had premonitions of his death, his mood may have resulted from sheer exhaustion.

He started the speech saying if he were given the opportunity to choose to live in any moment in history he would choose the second half of 20th century, because humanity faced the choice

between nonviolence and nonexistence. He spent a portion of the speech reminiscing about an attempted assassination at a book signing in the fall of 1958. A woman had stabbed him in the chest with a letter opener. The surgeon who removed it said he might have died if he had even sneezed, because the tip was so close to his heart.

He used that story as a jumping-off point to remember successful civil rights campaigns from that time until 1968. Had he sneezed, he would have missed the lunch counter sit-ins, the Albany, Ga. campaign; the Birmingham, Ala. campaign; the March on Washington; the Selma, Ala. campaign and Memphis, Tenn.

The speech climaxed with hope drawn from Moses' view from Mount Nebo. The children of Israel were experiencing a transition of leadership. Moses laid hands on Joshua to lead a new generation across the Jordan River. But before his death, Moses was allowed to see the Promised Land.

“ ... I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land,” King famously said.

This image is a vision of hope in times of uncertainty, but more importantly, an invitation to each new generation to join forces with the thaw. There is work yet to do. We can either become debris in the flood, or help move the current of change forward.

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