

The Shared Dreams Journey - My Reflections

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I would first like to thank God for his continued grace and mercy in my life. I want to thank my pastor, Pastor Trollinger; Rabbi Shira; Captain Abbe and the entire Congregation Kol Ami for what was a life-changing experience for myself and my daughter, Brooke. We were blessed to be included in an interfaith civil rights journey with people of the Jewish faith. We sojourned from Birmingham, Alabama to Montgomery to Selma and then onto Atlanta, Georgia. I want to share with you some of the memories from my journey.

As I walked downstairs to the basement of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, I passed a painting of four little girls beautiful, smiling and representing every shade of our exquisite rainbow of complexions. Downstairs a bit further and a feeling of sadness began to overwhelm me. "September 15, 1963", the tour guide, Barry McNealy said, "here is where they were found... hours after the blast. They were near the women's lounge. It happened between Sunday school and morning worship service." I wondered if they were happily playing in their church basement or having breakfast like Calvary's children so often do at that time. But the thought that would not escape me is... they were in church... a sacred place where all are welcome to worship and share in the goodness of the Lord, a place which welcomes all people through its doors. Four innocent babies were murdered. Their lives taken in a calculated act of terrorism. In the 1960's in the American south, there was no safe place. Not even for a child. Not even at a house of worship. And then I remembered Mother Emmanuel and I remembered that the struggle continues.

Every day of our journey was a revelation. In Birmingham, I learned that there were also two boys slaughtered on that shameful day in American history when the nasty stench of racism corroded the air. We must never forget.

In Selma, our children were blessed to sit at the knee of Ms. Joanne Bland as she shared her story of fighting segregation. A no-nonsense woman who reminded us all that she was the boss, we were in the 'hood and told us, "ya'll don't go out there looking like tourists. If I duck, you duck!" Needless to say, she endeared herself to us by the end of our tour. Ms. Bland lost her mother at a very young age because her mother needed a blood transfusion and the hospital had no black blood. No

black blood. As if there is such a thing. Bigotry killed her mother and Ms. Bland then made justice her fight. She took us to the place where she and Representative John Lewis and Hosea Williams and many others met just before they marched towards the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965, "Bloody Sunday" as it is recalled in history. As they kneeled down on the bridge to pray, they were ordered to move and within moments troopers advanced and they were beaten and it was televised and the world watched as hatred was documented. Their blood was shed as they bravely confronted evil with good. They wanted the right to vote and in 1965, they got it. And over 50 years later, we stood at the foot of that bridge, an interfaith group of people in peace and harmony as we humbly spoke the names of those heroes and sang "We Shall Overcome". No tear gas, no troopers trampling our bodies with horses and beating our heads and limbs with night sticks. We stood on one accord, hopeful and in prayer for the safety and continued prosperity of this great nation. And I remembered our last election and how many were disenfranchised and unable to vote. Our liberties are being threatened today so we must never forget.

What I learned this past week is that racism extends far beyond the horrors that we know, beyond dogs and water hoses, beyond white-robed cowards waiting to crucify a human being because of the hate harbored in his heart for a complete stranger. Racism landed in prison systems and in justice systems. I learned that Alabama has no public defender system which essentially means that there is no representation for the poor. We met a man who was robbed of his freedom and sat in an Alabama jail for 30 years on death row for a crime he did not commit. He told us his story and there was not a dry eye in the room. Attorney Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative worked for 15 years to free Mr. Anthony Ray Hinton and by the grace of God, this man still has joy despite the brutal and unforgiving consequences of systemic racism.

We met rabbis whose families fought the fight and suffered because of their ideals. They supported the struggle. And we are encouraged because we also met people who are still fighting. Civil rights include the rights of every American to live freely. We are a part of a "beloved community" as Dr. King called it. Brothers and sisters are we. Just as African Americans suffered, Jewish people suffered also... unspeakable tragedy. And we are bound together in shared sorrow. Hank Thomas, an original Freedom Rider recounted his story of escaping a bus that was torched

because they were riding to end segregation in public bus stations. Many of the people on those Freedom Rides were Jewish.

After our journey with Congregation Kol Ami, we now have a new Jewish family, Calvary. We united with them as human beings irrespective of what makes us different. We embraced our commonalities and love grew organically because freedom-loving people are beautiful and love is always a tie that binds.

At Temple Emanu-El in Birmingham, we met Rabbi Miller and he told us that some asked Dr. King to wait. They told him that the timing was not good. But he refused because as Dr. King said, “the struggle was to save the soul of America” and because “freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed.”

At the final resting place of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., an eternal flame burns. Perhaps a symbol that we must keep working, keep fighting and keep facing the injustices that befall our brothers and sisters. We are on the precipice of another fight for freedom. It is now our responsibility to make history. Be willing to talk to anyone if it means the possibility of moving towards peace. Form an alliance with someone you think you have nothing at all in common with just as we did this past week. Our nation depends upon it.

I stand here today changed by my experience and feeling that I owe so much to those that came before me. To have shared this journey with children, my prayer is that they remember from whence they came, that they never shrink to make other people comfortable because they truly are the strength of a people. We are the survivors. By God’s grace, we are the chosen few. I hope that they always remember that. Today, I salute our ancestors and I salute every one of you assembled in this room who has stood in the face of hatred, who has prayed for the safety and well-being of protestors and who continues to pray for our babies as they walk the streets as moving targets. Thank you for wrapping them in love. I salute you who have persevered through the ills of the Jim Crow south, who persevered through the Holocaust, who pressed your way in search of freedom and opportunity bravely migrating to New York, unknown territory, because you knew in your hearts that there were people somewhere in this land who didn’t breathe hatred.

If you integrated schools, you fought racism. If you were the first Jewish or black family on your block or in your building, you fought racism. If you demanded that your child finish his or her education, you fought racism. And if you voted, you

fought racism. Only two generations away from the civil rights movement, we acknowledge your fight and we salute you because we know it has not been easy but we can't feel "no ways tired" [sic]. I beg my brothers and sisters to continue to teach our children the rich history of those who came before them. Research the Freedom Riders and Hank Thomas; Representative John Lewis, a living legend; Joanne Bland; Viola Liuzzo and countless others. Learn all that you can. Remind your children every day that they have tremendous strength inside of them because they stand on the shoulders of giants who survived the perils of slavery, racism, bigotry and marginalization.

Children, you have within you everything you need to be great. Walk with pride. Hold your heads up. Keep your backs straight. Keep God first. He will give you the desires of your hearts.

I would like to leave you with an excerpt from my favorite poem by my favorite poet, Dr. Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise".

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

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Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise

We rise. God bless you.

Work Cited

Angelou, Maya. "Still I Rise." And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems. New York: Random House, 1978.