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# Personal Reflections on Dr. Martin Luther King's Legacy

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## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING'S LEGACY

by Ray Granade

1/2011

At year end, the world's last processor of Kodachrome film, Dwayne's Photo in Parsons, Kansas, processed its last rolls. If, like me, you considered Kodachrome 25 the world's color film standard, you probably noticed.

I was born in the Cradle of the Confederacy in the Heart of Dixie and reared in a small south-Alabama county-seat town of three thousand with a racial divide about 55-45 white. I married a native. My father grew up an hour above Mobile. My mother's parents lived in Montgomery until their 1989 deaths; that city of just over 100,000 with its roughly 60-40 white racial divide was my second home.

Until the mid-1950s, my father occasionally preached at Evergreen's black Baptist church; black pastors never preached in ours. Sundays were strictly segregated, like all other formal social settings. Our movie theater had an outside entrance to the balcony, where blacks sat after buying tickets in the alleyway. Whites had two schools along town's main highway; blacks had two newer ones in "the black section." Black businesses occupied three storefronts—Gant's grocery, a barbershop/beauty salon, and a windowless pool hall—where Cary Street left town's block-long business district. The black undertaker embalmed at the white funeral home but conducted wakes at the deceased's.

Only in retrospect did I recognize this as a halftone world, where everything appeared only in black or white. Soil was black, cotton white, milk white, Coke and coffee black. Few things, like automobiles and people, came in both black and white. Everything also carried moral weight, a message I absorbed at every Sunday service, Wednesday night prayer meeting, and Saturday matinee. Cowboys' white or black hats denoted whether they were good or bad. That halftone depiction simplified relationships in a complex reality becoming ever moreso. Things simply were what they were and, despite flaws, were fine as they were. That was not true in my grandparents' hometown.

Dexter Avenue ascended six blocks of Goat Hill from fountain square east to state capitol. Six blocks south from the fountain, along Perry Street, sat the Governor's Mansion; my grandparents lived around the corner toward town. My younger cousin, Jimmy, and I roamed Montgomery at will, playing at Perry Street Park or following Perry past First Baptist Church to the Carnegie Library or Dexter's stores. Three and a half blocks uphill from that intersection, a block and a half below the capitol, sat Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

When I was nine, twenty-five-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr. became that church's new pastor. At the end of 1955, he began a year-long boycott of segregated Montgomery buses, occasioned by the arrest of Montgomery seamstress and NAACP secretary Rosa Parks. My grandmother employed no domestic, so the boycott lacked direct personal impact. But Montgomery's atmosphere changed. Jimmy and I discovered that King's church did not want young white boys inside its doors; we also found our freedom of movement severely curtailed. Suddenly I learned what it meant to have my comings and goings closely watched and to render an accounting of my time whenever required.

Simultaneously with the boycott, blacks won a legal battle to prohibit the University of Alabama from rejecting an applicant on the basis of race. Autherine Lucy became the first black to enroll. She and the boycott prompted my first thoughts about race relations.

Two years later, in 1958, liberal, NAACP-endorsed Alabama Circuit Judge George Wallace opposed Ku Klux Klan-endorsed John Patterson for Governor and lost decisively. That year's blockbuster, "South Pacific," had us singing "Some Enchanted Evening" but not "You've Got to

Be Carefully Taught”—unless we focused on “You've got to be taught to be afraid/Of people whose eyes are oddly made,” and ignored “And people whose skin is a different shade.” Alabamians didn't protest the movie; its message didn't even register, despite King's efforts to sensitize us.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott made King's name a household one, but not in an Evergreen caught up in the Civil War Centennial after 1960. I discovered independently what I would later read from a Southerner's pen: “The past is never dead. It's not even past.” Evergreen's elaborate pageant depicted brave youth leaving for that war after charcoaling their names on a chimney in the former county seat's preeminent home. My character inscribed his name first.

A year later, Alabama elected demagogue George Wallace as Governor. When asked why he started using race, Wallace replied, “You know, I tried to talk about good roads and good schools and all these things that have been part of my career, and nobody listened.” He took the oath of office in January, 1963, standing on the bronze star marking where Jefferson Davis became Confederate President. Everyone remembered Wallace's last inaugural line: “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!” As a senior, I played a bass drum in his inaugural parade.

I attended college in the north Alabama city reputed to be one of the nation's most segregated. Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth vainly addressed Birmingham inequities, but it lived up to its nickname “Bombingham.” During my lifetime, it had averaged three racially connected dynamite blasts annually. Recent ones had targeted Shuttlesworth's home, twice, and church.

King joined Shuttlesworth's Birmingham efforts the spring before I began college, scant months after Wallace's inauguration. He planned marches to elicit over-reaction from Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor. Connor obliged, turning firehoses and police dogs on marchers and bystanders alike. Marchers dwindled as jails filled. King recruited students into what would be dubbed “The Children's Crusade.” National media, attracted by King's presence, celebrated children's courage as they faced firehoses, dogs, and jail with other marchers and King. May and the crisis ended together, but King's non-violent message had broken down in Birmingham among his own followers.

In June, Wallace briefly “stood in the schoolhouse door” at the University of Alabama to deny admittance to Vivian Malone and James Hood. That August, King led the “March in Washington for Jobs and Freedom” and delivered what would become his most famous speech, one line from which struck me: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

I began school that fall with more than the usual trepidation. In Birmingham, I saw my first mixed-race couple. Birmingham public schools began integrating. Violence continued. Civil rights lawyer Arthur Shores' home was bombed a week before King spoke his dreams in Washington, then again a week after King's speech. The third September Sunday, two weeks after King's speech, another bomb obliterated much of the 16th Street Baptist Church, headquarters of and main staging/rendezvous point for the recently-completed campaign. Four young girls died. For the only time in my life, I felt the need to go, and went, armed.

Two months after the church bombing, I learned from students huddled around a transistor radio at the library's front desk that Oswald had shot Kennedy in Dallas. When Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 the summer after my freshman year, the Justice Department made my favorite Birmingham barbecue place, Ollie's, its test case. Ollie's closed.

I joined the Male Chorus, the only musical ensemble which required no audition. My sophomore spring, three of us—Ted Stephens, Larry Draper, and Owen Lay—were among the 2,000 Alabama National Guardsmen federalized to help guard the fifty miles from Selma to Montgomery. King talked again of equity and equality. Ted, Larry, and Owen told stories from

the march route. More importantly, I read about and watched local police and state troopers use billy clubs and tear gas to repel marchers at Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge on the cold March day known as "Bloody Sunday."

My junior year, a sociology teacher warned our class that King's tactics had brought down a government, implying that ours was endangered. A John Birch Society billboard, sporting the legend "Martin Luther King, Jr. in a Communist training camp in Cuba," obscured the view as one drove from my school past Vulcan's statue and descended Red Mountain to the city proper.

When I left for graduate school in 1967, most of my authority figures had labeled King a Communist and "outside agitator." I had heard stories about the private lives of public figures. I had more questions than answers. But I had lived through the emotional and political high water mark of the civil rights movement on the ground where much of it took place during one of America's most confrontational, polarized, and paranoid eras. My experience changed my worldview from halftone to grayscale. No longer were things cut-and-dried, no longer "just the way they were." And that line from King's speech kept nagging at me.

By my first graduate school spring, the 1968 Presidential race was fully underway. George Wallace ran for the American Independent Party; Bobby Kennedy sought the Democratic nomination. Martin Luther King, Jr. promoted the cause of Memphis sanitation workers. On my birthday, a man who shared my uncle's name shot King. In the widespread riots following King's assassination, someone firebombed the corner grocery by FSU's married student housing. The embers were barely cold before the owner nailed a big "Wallace for President" poster to a charred doorpost. Two months later, Bobby Kennedy was shot. Two months after that, antiwar protesters disrupted the Democratic Convention in Chicago. In November, Richard Nixon became a minority President as Wallace carried Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. Florida State English History teacher Michael B. Pulman introduced me to racial colorblindness.

In the next few years in Arkadelphia, I would hear Bill Terry's stories of marching with King in Alabama and Johnny Ware's about a black teen's Vietnam experience. I would first hear Paul Simon's song "Kodachrome." I would see Wallace shot in Maryland as he ran again for President. And I would later hear him announce that he was a born-again Christian, apologize to black civil rights leaders for his earlier segregationist views (saying that he had once sought power and glory but now realized that he needed to seek love and forgiveness) and admit, fifteen years after his stand in the schoolhouse door, "I was wrong. Those days are over and they ought to be over."

Racism is a differentiating mechanism, one of many that we all use daily to make sense of our world. "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" warns that teachings "before you are six, or seven, or eight," remain with you forever. Just as recovering alcoholics count the time since their last drink, so recovering racists count the time since their last reaction. Martin Luther King Jr.'s was one of many voices that helped me discover an antidote to racism, something that doesn't cure but counteracts its poison. King's legacy, for me, lies in that one line that so struck my ear, though it meant something only in retrospect, and only in chorus with others of similar import. A grayscale worldview has its advantages. But God wishes for us, I believe, a Kodachrome worldview. He wants us to see "those nice bright colors," to borrow Paul Simon's phrase, to recognize and celebrate "red and yellow, black and white." It is not a matter of training, but of choice. We can eschew the racist default, the prejudice of that particular differentiating mechanism. We can choose, to use King's line, to judge by the content of one's character rather than by the color of one's skin.