

Has the dream been fulfilled?

January 18, 2009

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated at the age of 39. That was some 40 years ago which results in an interesting timeline perspective when one is dead for a longer period of time than when one was alive. The meaning to be drawn from this varies with the generations. For those old enough to have heard King's fiery oratory first hand, and who felt the emotion of the civil rights movement as a palpable part of their own lives, who sang "We Shall Overcome" with faith in that conviction, these people measure the past 40 years with great circumspection.

Those who have simply learned about Dr. King from school books or from stories that reference him as one of the principle players on the field of social change, -a mighty figure in history- somehow lose the power of an historical figure resonating with one's own personal life. It's one thing to study history; another thing entirely to experience it. I was reminded just the other day when a young African American from the U called to invite me to open the ceremony for the 25th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I told him I would be honored, but what was it we were commemorating after 25 years? Since I was going to open the program I needed to know what the anniversary was.

His voice trembled with surprise...or was it anger...or was it disappointment that the man whom he just invited didn't even know what the 25th anniversary was for. "Well, reverend," he said. "It's the 25th anniversary of Dr. King's death."

I paused for a moment, counted from 1968 to 2009 on my fingers, and finally said, "No sir. Dr. King was assassinated 40 years ago, 41 years this April. I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing. So what happened 25 years ago?"

He was now greatly embarrassed and said, "Reverend, that's an excellent question. And as soon as I find the answer I'll let you know."

Obviously for him, 25 years was soooooo long ago that he felt it had to be the anniversary of King's death which also happened soooooo long ago. But he called me the next day and provided the answer: It was the 25th year that the University of Utah was honoring Martin Luther King Day. I thanked him...and then he thanked me. I wasn't quite sure for what, but the tone suggested an appreciation of having an accurate sense of history. He doesn't know how easy it is when you reach a certain age that you have little difficulty differentiating between 25 years ago and 40.

Over time, history plays games with our head. We may get the facts from the past, but often fail to absorb the texture of what life was really like in those eras extending much further back than memory can ever recall. I prefer looking at history as a composite of movements, particularly movements leading to the liberation of people.

The dream we associate with Dr. King actually goes back in time to the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights." From that time on, American history has been an effort to extend democracy to all people. From the amendments to the constitution to the bills facing the Utah legislature today)...American history is the story of fighting for equality and civil rights for all people unequivocally. We hope and pray that this year in Utah, democracy will reach the GLBT community.

The struggle to extend democracy to black Americans during the Post-bellum period, represents one of the more painful eras in American history. There is so much we wish to deny, but can't. In the decades following the Civil War, our nation fell to its lowest point in race relations. Between 1882 and 1927 there were nearly 5000 lynchings in the United States.

Richard Lingemann, senior editor of The Nation Magazine describes the atmosphere of those times: "The wave of mob killings of blacks in the south – by hanging, burning, shooting, and torture, started at the end of Reconstruction. These public murders were carried out with the real purpose of keeping blacks in their place, economically and socially. The practice was supported by leading citizens and became a popular spectacle, a carnival of cruelty that drew excited crowds."

But during those times the progressive movement to fulfill the dream inscribed in the Declaration of Independence - the dream that we were all created equal and thus had certain unalienable rights – included the leadership of a phenomenal black woman named Ida B. Wells.

She stood barely five feet tall yet fearlessly outspoken. Born to slave parents in 1862 in Mississippi, she managed enough education for herself to write a column for the African-American newspaper in Memphis in 1880. SHE CONSISTENTLY CHALLENGED THE RACIST LABELS OF THE WHITE PRESS.

She was the thread linking historic outrage and protest to our more contemporary times. Refusing to move from designated white-only sections on public transportation did not begin with Rosa Parks. It was Ida B. Wells who in 1883 resisted being ejected from a "whites-only" ladies car on the railroad. She sued the Tennessee railroad, but the Tennessee Supreme Court ruled she was no lady, merely a mulatto passenger, separable and unequal whose intension was not to ride comfortably but to harass and litigate.

For Ida Wells, the real stake in her campaign for justice was manifest in her efforts to stop the lynching. Her writing brought this evil to the attention of many Americans who were sound asleep during these decades of terror. She tried to wake up the entire world to the realization that black men were falsely accused of raping white women with lynching as the outcome: A perversion of justice. By 1889 she was writing in New York, and almost got herself lynched by daring to write in one of her columns a most amazing (not exactly subtle) insinuation: "White men who overreach in charges of rape might end up being very damaging to the moral reputation of their women." Don't you like a woman who can turn a phrase?

Generations throughout our history have had prophetic voices trying to wake up our countrymen to realize the dream. If your premise is that justice is intrinsic to the world, then the world can be made more just. Dr. King picked up that thread as the prophet of the 60's. I think Barack Obama has picked up that historic thread for the youth of today, and if having a hip-hop ball on Inauguration Day doesn't seal it, I don't know what can.

But I want to return to Memphis, not the Memphis where Ida B. Wells began her writing career, but Memphis 80 years later where Dr. King was heading to march in support of two sanitation workers who had been crushed to death in a mechanical malfunction. Let me make this a bit more graphic: The city of Memphis in 1968, had a rule that that forbade black employees to seek shelter from rain anywhere but in the back of their compressor trucks...with the garbage. It was a mechanical function they say.

En route to Memphis, on Sunday, March 31st 1968 at the NATIONAL CATHEDRAL in Washington, D.C., Dr. King delivered what would be his last sermon. I think it offered a reasonable barometer of how we might

measure our efforts in securing the self-evident truth of equality. How close are we to the Dream we heard outlined at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963?

King's last sermon was called: "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." He drew from two major sources: First, the allegory of Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep before 1776 and woke up 20 years later in a world filled with strange customs and clothes, a whole new vocabulary, and a weird preoccupation with a fellow named George Washington instead of King George III.

Dr. King pleaded for people not to sleep through the world's continuing cries for freedom. That is a familiar pleading as Ida Wells screamed for people to wake up in the late 19th century. Wake up and stay awake is the rallying cry of environmentalists today. It's the rallying cry of the GLBT community. Don't go to sleep when people in this nation are denied justice, denied their human rights and denied their civil rights.

The second source that King drew from in that last sermon was scripture: The Gospel of Luke 16: 19-31. There's nothing quite like it in the entire Bible. Let me give you a snapshot.

Jesus tells the story of Lazarus and the rich man. It's set in the afterlife. A little background: Lazarus was a lame beggar who once pleaded unnoticed outside the extravagant gates of a rich man. They both died, and the rich man looked up from his torment in hell only to see Lazarus the beggar secure in the bosom of the Jewish patriarch, Abraham. What ensues is an argument between Abraham and the rich man calling back and forth between heaven and hell.

The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus with water to cool his burning lips. But Abraham said there was a great chasm fixed between them never to be crossed. It becomes clear in the parable that the rich man was not in hell because he was rich. Abraham was plenty wealthy in his day. The rich man was not in hell because he failed to supply the beggar Lazarus with crumbs. The rich man was in hell because he never recognized Lazarus as a fellow human being. He never even saw him. Even faced with the everlasting verdict of hellfire he spoke only with Abraham and looked past the beggar treating him still in the third person as in "send Lazarus to cool my thirst.

The rich man was not really a nasty sinner. The parable ends with him asking Abraham to send Lazarus back to earth to warn his five brothers about their sin. Have Lazarus tell them to be nice to beggars outside their wall. I don't want them winding up here like me.

In his sermon, Dr. King said – and perhaps we can understand this more clearly from our reading this morning...Dr. King said that the rich man was like a liberal. Despite his own fate, he wanted to help others. But Abraham rebuffed this request from the rich man, telling him that his brothers had ample warning in the Torah. (This then, becomes a debate; two dead guys shouting at each other between heaven and hell). The rich man argues, forget the torah; it would be more effective if my brothers saw someone actually arise from the dead and warn them... Then they'd really get it.

And again Abraham argues, holding firm in his belief that if the brothers don't accept the core teaching of the Torah and the prophets, there's no hope for them.

For Dr. King, the message of that parable is that we must act towards all creation in the spirit of equal souls . The alternative is hell. He then went on to Memphis to stand with the sanitation workers and the family of the two African-Americans who were crushed to their death. And the sign people were holding said: "I am a man," meaning not a piece of garbage to be crushed and ignored.

In these hard economic times, the question we need to raise is whether or not government is looking past the Lazarus outside their gates as they attempt to balance their budgets on the backs of the poor. Social services: From Meals on Wheels, to Children's Health insurance Programs to any dental programs for the poor, to erasing virtually every kind of fundamental human right among those who struggle below the poverty line, it is as though we have not learned the lessons of justice inscribed in the Torah, spoken by the Hebrew prophets.

In fairness, I see one notable exception: Our Salt lake County mayor, Peter Corroon, who has said "NO" to the cuts in human services. He maintains we have a moral obligation to the poor. Indeed we do.

On Tuesday we may well begin writing a new chapter in American history. This is where our hope now lies, and in all my years, I have never seen a nation whose people are so giddy with hope. We are intoxicated with hope, and it's not a matter of his skin color alone. There is now a man of considerable power who has been shouting at us throughout this most lengthy of campaigns, that it's time to wake up. Remain awake through this great revolution. We need your help. For God's sake, don't fall asleep.

If we remain awake, and the spirit of our new president suggests he'll keep us awake, we will gather a whole new social movement that will notice those good people to whom democracy has not yet reached. We will notice Lazarus begging outside the gates of the rich and we will treat him with dignity.

That was Dr. King's last wish. It ignites a hope with which we begin a new presidency. The thread through history that calls for justice has found a new champion, a new prophetic voice, a new start to creating a world of equality. It's time that the self-evident truths be spoken forcibly and unequivocally. That's now Obama's mission. Ours is to wake up, stay awake, for this is a revolution we surely don't want to miss.