

Freedom still a ‘Dream’

Let 50th anniversary mark fresh starts

By Tom Williams
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When I was a little boy, my mother always shared history with me. History, however, was never “his story” — history was always “my story,” a story in which I participated. I think it was her example that has made me feel welcomed to participate in the life of the community. This particular story is about my small connection to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech and its connections to Thomas



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Merton, who lived the second half of his life at the Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Ky. On March 18, 1958, Merton had his famous epiphany at what is now the corner of Fourth Street and Muhammad Ali Boulevard. Merton saw the people of Louisville “walking around shining like the sun.” On the 40th anniversary of this event, I attended a dedication ceremony in which the historic marker in downtown Louisville was unveiled.

While attending that service, I thought of King and how he, too, transformed a location. King had transformed the Lincoln Memorial with his “I Have a Dream” speech given on Aug. 28, 1963. Because of a visit there with my wife, Sarah, I realized that there was no inscription there recognizing King’s dream.

Many months later, in November 1998, I wrote a letter to then-U.S. Rep. Ann Northup suggesting that a marker be placed where King gave the speech. For me, this was the most important speech of the 20th century, given in the shadow of our greatest president. In my letter, I told how Merton transformed what is now Merton Square in Louisville and how I wanted to bring my “yet unborn” children to the spot of King’s dream to tell them about King and our Kentucky-born president, Abraham Lincoln.

In late 1999 and into 2000, Northup’s office pursued the idea until it was determined congressional legislation would be required. In 2000, a law was passed to install the marker at



The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. waves to supporters from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Aug. 28, 1963, when he delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech. AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Tom Williams, with his son, Lincoln, at the inscription.

the Lincoln Memorial. (In an ironic footnote, the law ordering the inscription was signed by Strom Thurmond, who undertook one of the longest filibusters in congressional history against the Civil Rights Act for which King is so famous.)

As fate would have it, the inscription was prepared to be installed on the 40th anniversary of the speech in August 2003. This was precisely what I had suggested in my letter written in 1998. Our family attended the

MARCH ON WASHINGTON PROGRAM

Who: Louisville Bar Association
What: A program celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech
When: Aug. 28, 1 to 2 p.m.
Where: Louisville Bar Center, 600 W. Main St., Louisville
Details: The program will feature a video replay of King’s speech as well as remarks from Jefferson Circuit Judge Brian C. Edwards and attorney Tom Williams (whose efforts resulted in an inscription at the Lincoln Memorial commemorating the site of King’s speech; see accompanying article). The program is free and open to the public.

event, including our young children, Lilly, who was 4, and Lincoln, who was 2. Nelson, our third child, was not yet born.

I was given an opportunity to speak during the dedication. During my speech, I spoke to Lilly and Lincoln about King and how the civil rights movement was something of a second civil war. A civil war fought largely with non-violence, loving power and courage — not

guns and force. It was an amazing experience for our whole family to have a front-row seat on such a profound part of American history and to share that experience with the likes of Coretta King, her children and John Lewis, the only living speaker from the first March on Washington. Interestingly, the late Yolanda King, the eldest daughter of King, said that all she remembered about the speech is her father’s reference to “my four little children.”

How does this story connect back to Merton and his Louisville epiphany?

I had always assumed that it was an accident that I thought of King during the Merton ceremony in 1998. I had assumed there was no connection between King and Merton during their lives. In 2008, however, I learned that King was planning a retreat with Merton that would have occurred if King had not been assassinated in Memphis, Tenn., in 1968. There was, therefore, a connection between King, this man of faith and action, and Merton, this man of faith and contemplation.

In March 2008, I attended a ceremony for the 50th anniversary

of Merton’s epiphany. During the event, Metro Councilman David Tandy was to unveil the sign naming the location Thomas Merton Square. Those were the plans at least. Instead, the wind blew off the covering for the sign while the Abbott of Gethsemani was blessing the location with a prayer. I told Tandy that this location was blessed by a power higher than the Metro Council.

This is the same yearning I have for the 50th anniversary of King’s dream.

My prayer for the anniversary of the speech is that the wind will blow away the veil that covers King’s dream.

My prayer is that a power higher than Congress will bless the legacy of those who gave the “last full measure of devotion” in the civil rights movement.

My prayer is that the breath and spirit of the movement will enter into our collective hearts and bring us all one day closer to sitting down at King’s beloved “table of brotherhood.”

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GATES: 50 years after march, much work remains to claim King’s ‘Dream’

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might also point to the anti-slavery movement that culminated in the Civil War and the liberation of the slaves with the ratification of the 13th Amendment. Indeed, there had been many other protests, picket lines and parades up until that point in our history, to be sure — some of them, like the suffragist movement, with far-reaching consequences that could redefine the roles of president and first spouse in 2016, with the potential election of our first female president.

But because of what radio and television were able to transmit in late August 1963, the March on Washington was witnessed by far more Americans than any previous demonstration, and from the deep vaults of American history, now flung open with a few taps on a touchscreen, images and sounds from that day are easily sampled as part of the stream of signal events that define our nation’s memory.

That these images are black-and-white and crackle only enhances their mystique — and thus their power to move and inspire our awe at “the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force,” as King said during his speech. And so we are left to wonder: What was it like to be there? What could they see, smell and hear that we today cannot, beyond the camera’s frame?

We know the temperature in Washington reached a high of

82, but how “sweltering” and packed-in were the throngs gathered around the Reflecting Pool? And how did King’s voice carry, both up-close and as far away as the Washington Monument? What was said in the Oval Office, as President John F. Kennedy and his attorney general, brother Robert Kennedy, watched along with the rest of the nation on TV?

And with such numbers — 250,000 to 300,000 people squeezed together, many of them with signs, buttons and folded white hats — how did it remain so peaceful and calm, with the sounds of respectful clapping, a murmur here and there, the call and response of the invigorated and engaged crowd serving as backdrop and frame for King’s stirring words and enhancing their power, just like a black church during a very special sermon?

The March on Washington is not only part of our commonplace book of American history. A signal chapter, it changed the physical and spiritual landscape of our country, beginning with the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 within the next 24 months.

Because of them, the march and the other “searing” images of the civil rights movement — Emmett Till’s mutilated body; Bull Connor’s snarling dogs; King’s poignant “Letter From the Birmingham Jail,” the murder of our innocents, those beautiful “Four Little Girls” — there is now a black man in the White House, who, on the eve

of his first inaugural, returned to the scene of the march to take in the full weight of the history he was about to make; who, in October 2011, helped dedicate a memorial to King a short walk from Lincoln’s at 1964 Independence Ave.; and who will again speak at the anniversary of the march at the Lincoln Memorial later this month.

We are living through challenging times with a mix of pride at what we have accomplished and despair at the facts that tell us that, despite the formal smashing of “the manacles of segregation,” as King called them, too many black men, women and children 50 years on from the march still dwell “on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity,” while others are “still languishing in the corners of American society” feeling like “exile(s) in (their) own land.”

» As of last month, the unemployment rate among African-Americans was more than 13 percent, almost double the national average.

» The same is true of the poverty rate: More than 27 percent of black Americans dwell in poverty, compared with the nation’s average of 15.

» The poverty rate among African-American children is especially alarming, as it was in 1968, the year of the King assassination — both at more than 30 percent.

» The black male prison population remains the highest of any demographic — 38 per-

cent of all inmates, state and federal — despite the fact that blacks make up only 13 percent of the U.S. population.

Those are hard numbers, numbers that the March on Washington explicitly sought to change, along with eradicating de jure segregation, and while we have come so far, and crossed many more rivers, we have so much more work to do to realize the “dream” that King so beautifully and so memorably articulated at the culmination of his speech.

The memory of the march today, like any family event, is filled with more emotions than fact: anticipation, nostalgia, reverence, worship, disappointment, exaggeration, wistfulness, poignancy and pride. It was all these things then, too, because as King evidenced in his speech, the protesters who gathered in August 1963 were very conscious of place, of where they had traveled and where they hoped to go, and of the fact that, while there had been other nonviolent mass gatherings — from Detroit, in June of that summer, where King had delivered an earlier version of his “Dream” speech, to Los Angeles — this was Washington, D.C., the capital of the nation, the perfect setting for measuring progress since emancipation.

In the distance stood monuments to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, reminders of the “bad check” that had been written out to our enslaved ancestors at the founding and, for their descendants,

was still marked “insufficient funds.” Behind King, seated and imposing, was the Great Emancipator himself, Lincoln, whose memorial had become that “hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now” and a reminder that in the 100 years since emancipation, little measurable progress had been made, in practical terms, for those attempting to replace the badges of slavery with the rights of citizenship; with equal access to opportunity and place; with “brotherhood,” the elimination of “police brutality” and a decent-paying, respectable job.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was the emotional summit of the civil rights movement. Fifty years on, let it inspire you, just as it did all of us who heard it live, whether on the Mall or in our living rooms. Let it challenge you to continue pursuing the arc of change that King and his devoted followers risked and sacrificed their lives to effect, so that this generation of African-Americans and the chronically poor would be the first in our country’s long history of race relations to have equal access to the promise of America. Let it be your opportunity to “let freedom ring.”

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