

"Our Best Angels"

**By
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About one hundred years after President Abraham Lincoln declared an end to almost a century of slavery, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was thrown into the city jail in Birmingham, Alabama, for leading a demonstration against that city's segregation ordinances. The year was 1963. At the time, Birmingham was the largest American city where blacks and whites were legally divided. It was the nation's most potent symbol of bigotry, but it wasn't the only one. Racial division, ethnic animosity and gender bias were clearly American problems. In the time between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Civil Rights era, America had created two societies, one predominately white and male, the other, essentially, everybody else -- separate, unequal, unfair, undemocratic, un-American. The Civil War had preserved the union, but only the geographic union of the states. One hundred years later, the spiritual, emotional and intellectual union of the people, equal access to political power and economic opportunity, and the application of our most closely held democratic values to everyone regardless of their gender or national origin, had yet to be realized.

While Dr. King sat in jail, a group of white clergy from Birmingham said that they, too, opposed segregation. But they questioned the wisdom of public demonstrations against it. Public displays only incite more hatred and violence, they said. Patience, concerned silence -- that's the best course. Dr. King, in his now famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," said no, the time for American ideals to include everyone was now, more than ever. Public displays, principled stands by people of all races, he said, are imperative to the cause of social justice.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," Dr. King wrote. "Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of light and air, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured."

Later that year, Dr. King would tell the world that he dreamed of living in a nation where people were judged solely by the content of their character. A year later, the Civil Rights Act, and a year after that the Voting Rights Act, swept away the last vestiges of legally enforced segregation. Three years later, an assassin's bullet swept away Dr. King. If history shows us anything, it shows that for everything gained, something is lost.

Today we are able to look at Dr. King's life from the distance of 30 years. "We're not where we want to be," he once said. "And we're not where we're going to be. But we sure are a long way from where we were." As we prepare to commemorate his birth, today seems to be a good time to celebrate his vision and his passion, and the contributions they have made to the advancement of American society and the progress of humanity.

The most obvious examples of Dr. King's impact are the protections against discrimination and the laws erasing legal segregation. Bias and hate in the form of separate and unequal facilities, African-Americans being forced to the backs of buses or refused service at restaurants, women being denied educational and professional opportunities -- these things are slowly disappearing from the American landscape. Today, women and minorities have attained positions that were unheard of just a few years ago, unthinkable before Dr. King. Today, retired General Colin Powell, who rose to become one of our nation's top military leaders and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is one of the most respected public figures in the country -- an impressive achievement, especially when you consider that about 50 years ago even our national defense was segregated. Today,

Madeleine Albright stands to become the first woman Secretary of State, and fourth in line of succession to the presidency of the United States.

These, of course, are just a couple of examples of how far we, as a society, have come. But it's sobering to think that not too long ago, women and minorities, despite their abilities and dedication, were systematically denied the opportunities they have today. But it is also uplifting to think about the thousands upon thousands of women and minorities, people like Dr. King, Rosa Parks and Ralph Abernathy, people who persevered, who scaled the barriers of discrimination, who took enormous risks and made incredible personal sacrifices to create the social environment that makes possible stories like those of Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to the people who began working all those years ago for social justice, for civil rights, for equal opportunity for all. Our country, our communities, indeed the very essence of our humanity, is better today, and promises to be better still tomorrow, because of their efforts.

But we still haven't reached our best. For all of the progress that Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell represent, we know that not everybody can be Secretary of State or Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Life doesn't deal each of us the same measure of skill, determination and luck. But where life falls short, our society, our communities, must step in and deal everyone the same measure of respect and opportunity. When we don't do this, the human cost of our failure is monumental. No, it's worse than that. It's tragic. It's tragic because discrimination robs our communities of the gifts all our citizens bring. It's tragic because oppression exacts an unspeakable toll of pain and suffering on those who endure it. It's tragic because our failure to stop oppression and discrimination bears harsh witness to potential wasted and talents misspent. And that is not what we, as Americans, as human beings, are all about.

Think about the adolescent who's awakening to the reality that he or she is gay. Think about that adolescent being called "fag" or "queer" at school. Think about how it would feel if your community said to you today that the love you feel for your partner is aberrant, morally dangerous, socially unacceptable. Think about the young Hispanic. Think about what it's like to see your mother work two jobs to buy your new bicycle, then think about what it's like to be called a thief the first time you ride it. Think about the hard-working, tax-paying African-American who is followed around a department store by a security guard only because of the color of his skin. Think about that same African-American not being able to find a decent apartment because he's one of "them." Think about the woman who is groped on the bus, verbally abused at work, assaulted on the way to her car, raped on a date, because she's a sexual object in some man's eyes. Think about the jokes tossed off at parties, jokes that erode the self-esteem of gays, women and minorities as surely and completely as waterfalls erode granite. Think about the barriers and the stigma people face when they have disabilities. Think about these people. They are our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers. They are our neighbors and colleagues, our friends and lovers. Think about what it means in our society to be a minority, to be different. Think about how it feels to be a target -- a target of stares, a target of scorn, a target of spite. Think about how bias and hate continue to live underground, where they have grown deep and varied roots. Think about the pain when hate breaks the surface. Think about bias attacking your family. Think about another's ignorance holding back someone you love, keeping them from living up to their potential, from contributing their talents, from building our communities.

We don't have to look very far to find the breaks in our social fabric. We don't need to go to big cities and see the segregated neighborhoods, or into the inner cities and see the crushing poverty that falls most heavily on African-Americans. We don't have to be reminded of the smoldering ruins of African-American churches or the rubble of Oklahoma City or the riots in St. Petersburg. We really

don't have to look any farther than western Massachusetts to find the pain of divided communities. We have seen cars on our streets, with Massachusetts license plates, with bumper stickers that read "Now More Than Ever" beneath a replica of the battle flag of the Confederacy. We have seen swastikas scrawled on local synagogues and menorahs vandalized. We have seen public officials disgraced for anti-Semitic and racist remarks. We have seen repeated incidents of homophobia. All that, and sadly much, much more, just in western Massachusetts.

We, as a society, stand today at a moment when progress and decline, opportunity and hopelessness, are in desperate conflict. And the outcome is far from clear. How did this happen? How did we, the descendants of wandering immigrants, reach the decision that certain people would be denied the rights, the privileges, the comforts of calling America home? We expect, even demand, responsible behavior from everyone. Yet when it comes to opening our collective heart to embrace and respect people who look different, who have different lifestyles and different beliefs, when it comes to ensuring equal opportunity for all, we are often strangely hesitant, as if we've forgotten that America's greatest strength lay in its promise to embrace all people of all races and all backgrounds. That is America's paradox. America beckons with one hand, then sometimes holds down with the other. Our monuments and documents, our Statue of Liberty, our Pledge of Allegiance, our 200-year-old Constitution -- these things portray us as a welcoming society. They say to the world that we profess to be a nation of good, decent people, a nation where expressions of the highest ideals of love and justice are an inextricable part of our national identity. Where there is oppression in the world, America promises not just a haven, but a home.

That's a hefty promise. Sometimes we live up to it. And, sometimes we don't. And when we don't I wonder why it's so hard to be fair and embrace everyone in spite of our differences.

Some say it's simply human nature, that people naturally gravitate toward others who are most

like themselves and shun those who are perceived to be "too different." Some think it's driven by economic self-interest, that in a highly competitive economy people who might otherwise be friends are seen as threats to our own economic survival or as drains on the common wealth. And some believe discrimination is fueled, in part, by fear -- fear of the unknown, fear of not getting what we think we deserve, fear of losing what we already have. It is this fear that exploits our human weaknesses and brings out the worst in us.

Our days clearly reflect this. We are in a time of transition, with many of us poised to celebrate the blessings of a pluralistic society, and some intent on imposing an obsolete monocultural view of America. Recent political and economic advances by women and minorities have produced a backlash. Affirmative action is under siege in many states and in the national consciousness. Major corporations are paying millions of dollars to settle lawsuits because their top officials cling to ancient, ignorant attitudes. American women, wealthier, more independent, more powerful than ever, are still under constant threat on the streets, at home, at school, at work, even in the military, not from some invading army, but from American men. For everything gained, something is lost.

Our days are uncertain. Our days are edgy. Our days are volatile. Our days call on us to seek that place in our hearts and in our minds where the best of our human spirit quietly resides, waiting for a chance to breath the open air and live in the warm light of our communities.

About one hundred years before Martin Luther King wrote his letter from jail, Abraham Lincoln, in his first inaugural address, showed us a path to that place. The year was 1861. Pleading for a higher sense of love and justice to cool the fever of the coming Civil War, the President said: "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union

when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Our better angels. . .

You might not know the name Keeshia Thomas, but perhaps you should. She may never stand alongside the giants in the struggle for social justice. She may never occupy the same ground as Dr. King or President Lincoln, but perhaps she should. Not because of the heroic sweep of her deed, but because of its heroic smallness, its powerful significance, its singular humanity.

One day last June, Keeshia Thomas, an eighteen-year-old African-American woman, went to a Ku Klux Klan rally in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She went to look into the eyes of hate, into the eyes of the cowards in white hoods.

She saw a man at this rally, a white man, wearing a Confederate flag T-shirt, the same image that appears on bumper stickers here in western Mass. The two confronted each other, verbally at first, then a crowd gathered and the crowd became a mob. Someone struck the white man and the mob, mindless now, smelling blood, joined in, beating him to the ground, kicking him, tormenting him, venting upon him hundreds of years of human rage, seeking the same type of mob justice that whites had dealt blacks for generations. The ugliest pages of our history were on the ground that day in Ann Arbor, dressed in a Confederate flag T-shirt. And an ugly mob tried to rip them out.

All except Keeshia Thomas. Eighteen-years-old, no match for a mob, Keeshia pushed through the blows and fell on the man to protect him with her body. Did she love him? Perhaps, but in some basic human way. Did she believe the mob stood for justice, that maiming or killing this one hater would somehow right the wrongs, known and unknown, that have shamed American history? No, she clearly did not. Did she somehow overcome her fear and anger and risk everything she had, her life included, to uphold a higher sense of love and justice? Absolutely.

I've often wondered what went through Keeshia Thomas' mind in the split second she made her

decision. I've often wondered if she hesitated, thinking first to lose herself in the mob's safe anonymity by doing nothing, or even joining in the beating. I've often wondered if she acted spontaneously, the power of her better angel being so great that anything else was impossible. I've often wondered what I would have done in a similar circumstance.

I realize it's a heavy burden to place on anyone, especially an eighteen-year-old, but I believe Keeshia Thomas holds an important secret. There is a profound mystery to be solved by knowing her mind. To stand, to speak, to defend, or to hide, to shrink, to turn away. Action or acquiescence -- this was her choice, this is our choice. Nothing less than the direction and quality of our common future lies in knowing what happens in the delicate space between thought and action, where conscience, our better angel, lives or dies.

We are blessed in this area with many people who possess a higher conscience, a greater capacity for compassion and a higher sense of social justice. For every driver with an offensive bumper sticker, for every vandal with a can of paint, there are many, many more with the courage of Dr. King, President Lincoln and Keeshia Thomas.

Frances Crowe of Northampton, former director of the American Friends Service Committee. She has laid her conscience on the line for everything from A to Z, from anti-war movements to xenophobia. Well, that's almost A to Z. Dr. Patricia Romney of Amherst, who helps employers create safe working environments that value diversity. Andrea Ayvazian, the Protestant Chaplain at Mount Holyoke College, who helps build community support networks for people facing oppression. Ervin Staub, a psychology professor at UMass and Holocaust survivor, who teaches that communication and cooperation are as essential for our survival as food and air. Bailey Jackson, dean of the UMass School of Education, who says that America should not be a color blind society, but a society that sees the differences of its people and embraces the strength of that diversity. Northwestern District Attorney

Betsy Scheibel, and her predecessor Judd Carhart, who initiated a Civil Rights Advisory Committee to proactively address the issue of hate crimes. The people in the Greenfield area who early last year created the Franklin County Discrimination Prevention Project. The towns of Amherst and Greenfield that have established local human rights commissions. The community leaders who met in Northampton last week to talk about forming similar commissions in Hampshire County. Those at Smith College, who formed a human chain around the campus last November to protest homophobic and racist incidents there, and those at Pelham Elementary School who make it a point to teach about civility and mutual respect. The many people from western Massachusetts who have helped rebuild a church in Barnwell, South Carolina, that was destroyed by arson last spring. These are among the people that come to mind when I think about what it means to be a member of a caring, compassionate community. These are among the people Dr. King might call our drum majors for justice. If history shows us anything, it also shows that for everything lost, something is gained. And what's gained is a better community, a better society, a better expression of humanity's promise.

But the people I just named, and the scores of others I know and didn't name, and the hundreds more I don't know -- people who are brave enough to take principled stands in the face of injustice -- I think they would all agree with me when I say it's still not enough. We must be even bolder. It's not enough anymore to feel the touch of our better angels. We have to go beyond that to find our best angels. We don't have to lead marches, or be elected to public office, or fend off angry mobs to make a difference. Showing respect to people with different backgrounds than our own, listening to people with different perspectives than our own, extending our hand to help a person we never saw before or may never see again, a person who may never be able to return the favor, smiling and saying hello to people we pass on the street -- each action, no matter how big or how small, gives one more turn to the key that will unlock the chains of oppression. If we could take a moment everyday to get to know someone, to

show them we accept them unconditionally because of who they are, instead of avoiding them because of what they are. If we could expand our circle of civility by one more person each day, then soon, very soon, discrimination and oppression would become footnotes in our history, not endlessly recurring themes. We will get there. And we'll get there faster once the fight is joined by all people of good conscience, including those who have the advantage of not knowing what it's like to be a target. Let's enlist strangers as allies in the cause for social justice. Let's encourage others to talk about bias and hatred even when there is no monstrous event to fire our moral outrage. Let's remember that our government is of, by and for the people, not something that is inflicted upon a resistant populace. Let's work with our civic leaders at all levels, with our teachers at all grades and with our friends at all hours to remind them that what Margaret Mead said is true, that a group of committed citizens is the only thing that has ever changed the world.

How long will it take? Who can say? What we can say is that the people who suffer the pain of oppression can't wait another day. Our communities that forfeit the invaluable contributions of those citizens can't wait another day. Today, let's recommit ourselves to breaking the cycle of discrimination. Today, let's insist that our generation will not allow fear and hatred, mistrust and cynicism, to be our legacy. Today, tomorrow and everyday, let's show hope for our future by continuing to build on the significant progress we've made, to take the rules and the laws that rightly tell us discrimination is wrong, and reconstruct our communities, one by one, step by step, on the firm foundation of justice and equity. Today, let's promise to do whatever is needed so that our children, when they are adults, will be better than we are -- not just better off, but better.

You know, the humanity of small children comes naturally. They aren't put off by skin color. They aren't bothered by differences in religion or ethnic origin. They don't cringe when they see two men or two women holding hands in a display of genuine affection. They're not suspicious of the

government. In fact, they think politicians are pretty neat. They're not like most adults. Somewhere along the line, as we get older, the playground becomes turf, playmates become competitors, innocence becomes jaded. Sure children fight over toys. Of course they misbehave. And, yes, sometimes they are mean to each other. But conscious discrimination and oppression are things they learn from adults. Children see the variety in people and welcome those differences as ingredients of life, essential to the miracle of being alive. Most of the time, all they see is another little person, just like them. And in the cosmic scheme of things we're all just little people, trying to get along. They are our best angels. And they have a lot to teach us. Their future depends on our ability to live up to the example they set for us. And we need to start doing that now, more than ever.

Defeating oppression and eliminating the pain it causes isn't easy; worthwhile endeavors rarely are. Let's leave here recommitted to the principles for which The Rev. Dr. King gave his life. We owe it to him, and to ourselves, to give our children the chance to live in communities enriched by our diversity, strengthened by our compassion and dignified by our humanity.