

Why We Still Can't Wait

Donnell Walton

In 1894, A.D. Williams took over as pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA. In 1906, Williams, along with W.E.B. DuBois, and AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner formed the Georgia Equal Rights League. The League's charter was to condemn lynching, fight public transit segregation, and address the exclusion of black men from juries and state militia.

In 1917, Williams cofounded the Atlanta branch of the NAACP. From this position, he prodded white leaders to agree to construct new public schools for black children. His son-in-law, Michael, also combining religious and political leadership, became president of the Atlanta NAACP and assistant pastor of Ebenezer. Mike led voter registration marches during the '30s and a movement to equalize black public school teachers' salaries. 1934, inspired by visiting the birthplace of Protestantism in Germany, he changed his name and his son's to Martin Luther King.

MLK Jr. admired his father's politically active ministry. He was, however, reluctant to accept his inherited calling. At age 15 he graduated high school and attended Morehouse College like his father and grandfather. He attended Morehouse where he majored in sociology with the intent of becoming a doctor or lawyer. At Morehouse, MLK was reintroduced to Dr. Benjamin E. Mays. *Reintroduced* since MLK Sr. had taken Martin and his two siblings to Dr. May's lectures since Martin was 7 years old. Benjamin Mays, the president of Morehouse, was known as a Builder of Men. He inspired ordinary high school graduates to everything possible to eliminate segregation and establish close ties with people in other parts of the world, especially Africa. He believed and taught that Christianity should become a force for progressive social change. Another Omega, like MLK Sr., he was instrumental in establishing a freer atmosphere at Morehouse. MLK Jr. recalled that his first frank discussion on race occurred under his purview. He remembered "for the first time in my life, I realized that nobody was afraid." MLK began to feel inspired by Mays' call for "honest men...who are sensitive to the wrongs, the sufferings, the injustices of society and who are willing to accept responsibility for correcting those ills."

Mays taught Martin and his other students not to stand for segregation. "I would not go to a segregated theater to see Jesus Christ, Himself...I would rather go to hell by choice than to stumble into heaven following the crowd." Mays did a lot more than just talk the talk. In 1942 Mays refused to sit at a segregated table on the railroad dining car. He sued Southern Railroad...and won.

Part of MLK's reluctance to become a preacher was that he was not enamored with "emotionalism" of the Black Church. Mays brought such chapel speakers as DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Howard Thurman. Through Mays, King saw that ministry could be intellectually respectable as well as emotionally satisfying. This opened up the way for him to go into the church. In 1947, at the age of 18 King preached his trial sermon and became assistant pastor of his father's church. King then attended Crozer Theological Seminary in PA. Here he attended a speech by Howard University president, Mordecai Johnson, about his trip to India. Johnson took the trip at Mays's behest. The talk inspired King to buy a half dozen books on Gandhi's life and works. In 1951 he left Crozer and entered Boston University to pursue his PhD in Theology. At BU, King was introduced to New England Conservatory of Music student, Coretta Scott by Mary Powell, Mays's niece. On June 18, 1953 the couple was married in Marion, AL.

Meanwhile back down South, in 1955 a 14-year-old Chicago boy, Emmitt Till, was brutally lynched in Mississippi. His mother insisted on an open casket and allowed photographs. This allowed people nationwide to witness the horrors of Southern lynching. On December 1 of that same year, seamstress, Rosa Parks, who a decade earlier had served as secretary of the Montgomery, AL NAACP chapter where she organized voter registration campaigns, ran the local NAACP Youth Council, and challenged bus ordinances so well that a few bus drivers refused to stop for her in the first place, was arrested for refusing to relinquish her seat to a standing white man. On several earlier occasions, Rosa had been evicted for not giving up her seat from buses, but had never been arrested. Just a summer earlier, she attended a training center for social change in Tennessee where they discussed the South and how she and others might participate in the powerful transformation unfolding everywhere.

This time when the police arrived and asked her why didn't she give up her seat, she responded "I didn't think I should have to. Why do you push us around?" The officer's response was perhaps the only one he could give. "I don't know. But the law is the law and you are under arrest." E.D. Nixon was the acknowledged leader of Montgomery's black community. He was the head of the NAACP and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Nixon had organized along with A. Phillip Randolph in the 20's. He was fed up with the Montgomery transit system and was just waiting for a spark around which to plan a boycott. In fact, just a few months earlier another black woman had been physically assaulted for not giving up her seat. The police were called then as well, but mainly because the woman had beaten the bus driver to within an inch of his life. So, this time he bailed out Rosa Parks and commenced the boycott planning.

Nixon called Ralph Abernathy and H. Hubbard, who were the secretary and president of the Baptist Ministers' Alliance. Both agreed without hesitation. Thirdly, Nixon called the newest minister in town, MLK, Jr. "Brother Nixon, let me think about it a while and call me back." When Nixon called King back, it was not third, but nineteenth. "Brother Nixon, you know I been thinking about that and I believe you got something there and I'll go along with it." Nixon replied "I'm glad to hear you say that, Reverend, because I've told everybody to meet at your church this evening."

Nixon was interested in King's participation for two reasons. One, King's Dexter Ave. Baptist Church was conveniently located downtown. And two, since King was new in town he had not yet been compromised in dealing with whites and not weakened in factional disputes with blacks. The Montgomery Improvement Association was formed to organize the bus boycott. In King's time in Montgomery up to this point, he had given no evidence of secular concern. He was finishing his doctoral dissertation. Since civil rights was a growing issue, he delivered several excellent sermons on racial issues, but had made no effort to draw his congregation into social activism. In fact, a month before the boycott, he declined a nomination for the NAACP presidency. King only reluctantly accepted leadership. He would have probably been satisfied with a lesser role in the boycott.

Throughout his life, King showed a side of ambiguity and self-doubt. He never claimed to be an oracle. Burning in him was an unquenchable faith in God, which transcended his fears and vacillation and transmitted to his followers--giving them strength. His inaugural speech as MIA president was a major effort in self examination. In it he combined the social implications of his religious beliefs, Gandhi's nonviolent indirect action, and Thoreau's civil disobedience to lay the framework for a practical program. Troubled by the apparent contradiction of inspiring his listeners to show courage in behalf of a just cause without yielding to un-Christian feelings of resentment and hate he mused, "how could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within

controllable Christian bounds?" The outcome was his directing worship openly to political ends, in direct challenge to the system of segregation. The MIA's conditions for ending the boycott were:

1. courteous treatment of blacks by bus drivers
2. seating on a first-come-first-served basis, blacks back to front, whites front to back
3. employment of black operators on routes through predominantly black neighborhoods

This procedure was already followed in Atlanta, Mobile, and several other places in the South. The Boycott lasted 382 days and ended when the US Supreme Court declared the practices by the bus line unconstitutional.

During these 382 days King was arrested, his house was fire bombed, and he was subjected to personal abuse. King emerged from this crucible as a first class leader. Moreover, leading the successful boycott earned him national prominence. In 1957, he was elected president of the SCLC. The organization stressed black voting rights. In 1960 after a month-long trip to India, he returned to Atlanta to co-pastor, with his father, the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Here he got involved with the student-led lunch counter sit-in movement. When he was arrested at a protest in Atlanta, presidential hopeful, John F. Kennedy, intervened in his released. This contributed to his narrow victory. In 1963, King led the Birmingham civil rights campaign. The televised images of dog and firehouse attacks aroused a national outcry. State obstinacy prompted JFK to introduce major civil rights legislation.

King masterfully combined idea(l)s from the Bible, the Constitution, and other canonical texts to universalize the black protests. On August 28, 1963, King delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech to over a quarter of a million people in Washington DC. This represented the apex of his popularity. King was Time Magazine's Man of the Year for 1963 and won the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1964. This fame targeted him by the FBI's COINELPRO. In 1965, King went back to Alabama to lead a march from Selma to Montgomery to protest the denial of black voting rights in the deep South. State policemen, under Wallace's edict, attacked with tear gas and clubs on the outskirts of Selma. Lyndon B. Johnson reacting by introducing the VOTING RIGHTS ACT of 1965 and granting a court order to allow the march. This victory represented King's last successful civil rights campaign in 1966, King turned his attention from the rural South to the urban North. He organized a major campaign in Chicago against housing discrimination. King met major opposition from Mayor Richard Daley. He allowed the peaceful marchers to be brutally stoned by angry whites. No significant gains were achieved. Dr. King's reputation started to erode.

His nonviolent strategy came under renewed attack at violence erupted in urban areas throughout the US. In this climate, the Black Power ideology was gaining purchase. MLK described the slogan as vague and divisive. His influence among blacks lessened. He was alienated by white moderate supporters when he publicly opposed the US presence in Vietnam. Once supportive northern newspapers condemned his linkage between civil rights and the war. In November 1967, King announced the formation of a Poor People's Campaign. Reflecting on the state of racial affairs in light of the recent civil rights legislation, he prodded national leaders to deal with the problem of poverty. He recruited poor people and their allies to DC to lobby for anti-poverty legislation. In "Why We Can't Wait," King outlined a Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged. In 1968, King went to Memphis to become involved with a sanitation workers' strike. He led a march where violence erupted. This event drew further criticism of his antipoverty strategy. King was assassinated the evening after his "Mountain Top" speech. His Poor People's Campaign continued for a few more months before dissipating without achieving its objectives (Close Curtain).

What does this have to do with me...

Let me begin to provide some context for King's Life and Legacy by relating a couple of ways he impacted my life. I went to college at NCSU and graduate school at UM. I went to NCSU with the expressed intent of majoring in electrical engineering. I had only learned what engineering was a year earlier after attending a MITE program at MIT. The MITE program was started in the mid 1970's. I decided to attend graduate school in my senior year of college, after a friend told me of a fellowship program sponsored by AT&T Bell Labs. This prestigious program, of which Dr. Carlton Truesdale is also an alum, was also founded in 1972. So the question is: what was going on thirty some odd years ago.

Richard Milhouse Nixon was the president. He was a staunch conservative who represented an apparent departure from the progressive presidencies that preceded him. Looking more closely at his tenure reveals that he beefed up the EEOC from 359 employees and a \$13.2 MM budget in 1968 to 1640 employees and a \$29.5 MM budget in 1972. He concluded the AT&T EEO Consent Decree which forced AT&T, the nation's largest employer at the time, to pay monetary damages to aggrieved workers, predominately black and female. AT&T also agreed to change their employment practices to achieve employment targets. In this climate, they started on of the most successful scholarship and fellowship programs in history.

Nixon also penned the Philadelphia Plan which desegregated federal contractors and enacted "numerical goals and timetables." This legislation provided the foundation of what came to fall under the rubric of Affirmative Action. Nixon quietly enforced Southern school desegregation. What explains this paradox. I contend that Nixon was inspired by King's "I have a dream" speech. Not the vision of racial nirvana in some indefinite future. But, the part in that very same speech where King states "the whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges." King's words reminded Nixon of the specter of unrest and uprising. Reminded him that there was a violent uprising during every decade of the 1900s. A pattern that continued until the end of the 20th century. The political lesson here is that things depend less on the party that occupies the seat of power than on exerting sufficient pressure to force the hand of government.

What does this have to do with us...

So a few short months ago, we witnessed the crisis that was Katrina and her aftermath. A crisis that was entirely preventable. Any of us who have friends or family in New Orleans knows that the New Orleans Times-Picayune annually punctuated the hurricane's season's arrival with detailed articles on the inadequacy of the levee system. In 2001 FEMA listed a major hurricane in New Orleans as one of the three most likely US disasters. So, Bush's claim that no one could have anticipated this was not only late, but boldly untrue. His administration had slashed funding for the levee project in 2004 in spite of the fact that Louisiana, New Orleans, and the Army Corps of Engineers all emphasizing the imminent danger.

Bush proclaimed that he takes responsibility. Mable and Salvatore Mangano, operators of St. Rita's nursing home in St. Bernard Parish were indicted for negligent homicide after the death of 34 patients whom they failed to evacuate. There will be no consideration of role that the Bush Administration's systematic hostility to government's functions played in precipitating the catastrophe in the first place. This is largely due to Democratic liberals having aided and abetted the Right in shrinking and privatizing public functions over the last 25 years. Paul Krugman pointed out in the NYT that the travesty in NO is the expression of the right's essential contempt for any public institutions, for the very idea of the public.

Going back to Reagan, they've exhibited a thug's approach to government. Reagan opened up HUD to plunder by cronies. They've made a regular practice of appointing department heads who were on record as enemies of the departments and their functions, with a mandate to gut them. Parking utterly unqualified hacks in five of the eight senior-most FEMA posts shows just how flagrant and egregious their contempt for public responsibility is.

The fact that Bush, Michael Brown of FEMA, and Homeland Security secretary, Michael Chertoff, did absolutely nothing for three days was probably not the result of active malice. Their basic worldview prevents them from recognizing the people who were imperiled on the Gulf Coast as forms of life equivalent to their own. They genuinely don't believe that government can or should play an active role in protecting the general public in any way, other than by funding the police or invading another country.

Faced with this reality, we have to be vigilant in not overly concerning ourselves with race. Race provides a safely predictable alternative to pressing a substantive critique of the sources of the New Orleans tragedy and its likely outcomes. Currently, here in the US, race is the most familiar language of inequality or injustice. Income, wealth, and access to material resources, including a safety net of social connections was a better predictor than race of who evacuated the city before the hurricane, who was able to survive the storm, and who was warehoused in the Superdome or convention center or stuck without food and water on overpasses, and whose interest will be factored into the reconstruction of the city, not to mention who will even be able to return.

New Orleans is predominantly black and largely poor. But, race, or even racism, is still not adequate to explain the patterns of inequality. I am not claiming that system inequalities in the US are not significantly racial(ized). The evidence of racial disparities is far too great for any honest or sane person to deny. They largely emerge from a history of discrimination and racial injustice.

As a political strategy, exposing racism is wrongheaded. It is the political equivalent of an appendix: a useless artifact of an earlier evolutionary moment that's usually harmless, but can flare up and cause trouble. The language of race is simply too imprecise to describe effectively even how patterns of injustice and inequality are racialized in a post Jim Crow world. The world in which MLK lived.

Racism can cover everything from individual prejudice and bigotry, unself-conscious perception of racial stereotypes, concerted group action to exclude or subordinate, or the results of ostensibly neutral market forces. Racism can be a one word description and explanation of patterns of unequal distribution of income and wealth, services and opportunities, police brutality, a stockbroker's inability to catch a cab, neighborhood dislocation and gentrification, unfair criticism of black or Latino athletes, or being denied admission to a boutique.

Exposing racism can be therapeutic and make people feel good--like proclaiming to be a patriot. The category is so amorphous that it doesn't explain anything--it is in fact an alternative to an explanation-- a summary or concluding statement rather than a preliminary to a concrete argument. Many liberals gravitate to the language of racism not simply because it makes them feel righteous, but because it doesn't carry any political weight beyond telling people not to be racist. It often serves as the exact opposite to a call to action. "Racism is our national disease," and similar bromides imply that racism is a natural condition. It implies that most whites inevitably and immutably opposes blacks and therefore can't be expected to align with them around common political objectives.

Democrats contend that the only way to win elections is to reject a social justice agenda that is stigmatized by association with blacks and appeal to upper-income white constituencies concerned exclusively with issues like abortion rights and the deficit. Upper status liberals, black and white, are more likely to have relatively secure, rewarding jobs, access to health care, adequate housing, and prospects for providing their kids' education. Therefore, they tend to have a higher tolerance threshold for political compromises in the name of electing the pro-corporate Democrat du jour.

Acknowledging racism, and of course being pro-choice, is one of the few ways many of them can differentiate themselves from their Republican co-workers and relatives. Returning to the appendix analogy, insisting of understanding inequality in racial terms is a vestige of an earlier political style. The race line persists partly out of habit and partly because it connects with the material benefits of those who would be race relations technicians. For roughly a generation it seemed reasonable to expect that defining inequalities in racial terms would provoke some, however small, remedial response from the federal government. These were the times in which MLK, and even Nixon, lived. But, this is no longer the case and has not been for quite some time. Such a government no longer exists. Just as MLK faced the injustices of his day armed with faith, intelligence, and courage, we must be faithful, intelligent and courageous.

What we must do, to pursue justice for displaced, impoverished New Orleanians as well as for the society as a whole, is emphasize that their plight is a more extreme, condensed version of the precarious position of millions of Americans today, as more and more lose health care, bankruptcy protection, secure employment, affordable housing, civil liberties, and access to education. And their plight will be the future of many, many more people in this country if we don't stop the bipartisan consensus from reducing government to a tool of corporations and investors alone.

And this, brothers and sisters, is why we **still** can't wait.
Thank you.

Epilogue 2006 ...Groundbreaking on King Memorial in DC...

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