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Black History: Remembering Great Black Men

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February has been being celebrated as Black History Month since 1926. But, why is this fact an appropriate subject for a column on health? Principally, because bitterness, hatred, prejudice, anger and bigotry affect the physical health as much as they poison the soul of men and women. The improvement of the mental, spiritual and emotional health of a nation will improve the health of the members of that society.

Whether you agree with his politics, or support his candidacy, all Americans should be proud of the fact that an African-American currently has a serious chance of becoming President of the United States. And, it is not only the Democrats who have such a candidate. Many believe that if General Colin Powell had offered himself as a candidate, the Republicans would have nominated him.

But, how can the knowledge of and the celebration of any history and particularly of Black history improve our public health? As we “know people,” even vicariously, through the study of history, we can grow as individuals, as a people and, indeed as a nation. My pilgrimage from the social mores of my youth which included racial prejudice began in Africa, where I served as a summer missionary in 1964. I fell in love with the African people and that love immediately extended to the African-Americans in our country. I realized how deeply the racial strife in our country was when after speaking to a state-wide religious youth group in October, 1964 and addressing the implications of our faith upon civil rights, as a student I was never asked to speak in the state again. I realized anew how hard these issues are to resolve when I spoke to a pro-life rally in that same state thirty years later. When I stated that the racist is blood-brother to the abortionist, there was not the enthusiasm that there was for opposing abortion.

Two incidences in Black History still haunt me. These incidences continue to remind me that we must never forget the sickness of racism, for if we do, we will be doomed to repeat the history which we failed to, or refused to remember.

Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman

The first incident was the murder of Michael “Mickey” Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, young men whose names ought to be remembered for the books they wrote, or for the influence they had in the lives of their own children. Tragically their names, forgotten by most, are remembered because on June 21, 1964, they were murdered just outside of Philadelphia, Mississippi. At the same time that I was in Africa proclaiming that God loves all men and women, some of my fellow southerners were murdering God’s children.

Five days before the murder of these three young men, members of the Mississippi White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan burned the Mount Zion Methodist Church in the all-black community of Longdale near Philadelphia. On July 24th, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited Longdale and spoke what I believe to be the greatest indictment of the contemporary Christian church I have ever heard. He said, “I feel sorry for those who were hurt by this, but I rejoice that there are churches relevant enough that people of ill-will will be willing to burn them. This church was burned because it took a stand.” One of the greatest regrets of my life is that I have never been a member of a church that anyone wanted to burn!

These events were portrayed in the movie *Mississippi Burning*. But for me, the most compelling portrayal of this tragedy is a book, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi*, which was published in 1988 by MacMillan, and written by Seth Cagin and Philip Dray. It is a book, which both shames me as a Southerner and stimulates in me hope that the day will come when all our children are “judged by their character rather than by the color of their skin.”

Forgotten, these murders become meaningless acts of violence; remembered; they become signposts warning all of us that hatred, prejudice, racism and bigotry – all synonyms for the base instincts of men and women—lurk in the shadows of every society. For these shadows to dominate the light only requires, as Edmund Burke aptly said, “for good men and women to do nothing.” For us to say nothing and to do nothing is to yield the field to the shadows, to the darkness, to the evil which only awaits an opportunity to spring out of its cage which is fashioned by alertness and which is locked by public denunciation of evil.

For those who of us who were alive at the time of these murders, but who were busy with our own lives and did little or nothing to turn the tide of evil led by the Klan and white, Southern, religious bigots, remembering may be the only act of true repentance and contrition with which we can expiate our own souls.

Yet, remembering is not enough! We must also act.

- We must make certain there is no vacuum of moral authority in our own circle of influence in which the dark shadows would feel welcome to strain against their cage and their locks.
- We must make certain that everyone in our community knows that no one can take another human life with impunity.
- We must make certain that our personal and public embracing of our brothers and sisters in creation, regardless of race, creed, national origin, color or culture, is so positive and so pronounced that the evil shadows will shrink from the competition.
- We must make certain that everyone in our community knows there are no human beings on whom there is “open season.”
- We must make certain that our acts of charity – our acts of genuine love and kindness, not of arrogant *noblisse oblige* – toward everyone within our community declare that there is no segment of that community without worth, value, dignity and protection.

- We must make certain that everyone's child has the protection of the passion and zeal with which we protect our own child, grandchild or loved one.

June 16, 2008 will mark forty-four years since the evil shadows were welcomed out of their cage in Mississippi. As we remember these martyrs to the freedom of all men and women, we must push back the dark shadows in our community by extending love, kindness and mercy to all men and women, boys and girls. And, we must do it spontaneously, joyfully, consistently, constantly. In that way, we can build in our hearts, families and community, a fitting memorial to these three who had the light of their life snuffed out by the evil darkness. We can let them live again as the light of our lives, enlarged by our remembrance of Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, pushes back the dark shadows, which engulfed them. We can let them live again as we make certain that no one's child is consumed by the hatred which engulfed them.

Steve Biko

The second incident took place thirteen years later in South Africa. My mind echoes with the melancholy but triumphant refrain of the first stanza of a song sung at the funeral of a remarkable young man:

Nkosi Sikelel' I Afrika (God bless Africa)
Malupakm' upondo Iwayo (Raise up her spirit)
Yiva imitandazo yetu (Hear our prayers)
Usi – sikele (And bless us)

I first heard this haunting melody in the movie, *Cry Freedom*, which portrays the life and death of Stephen Biko. The movie, based on Donald Woods' 1978 biography, relates the story of a modern hero, a hero whose story must not be forgotten, and whose life and legacy have lessons for us today.

Donald Woods was Stephen Biko's friend and biographer. He said:

“...Steve Biko was the greatest man I ever met...He was a statesman, in that sense of the word in which it is applied to Abraham Lincoln, having that breath of vision and that wider comprehension of the affairs of men and nations that is conveyed to the listener through more than mere words.” (Biko, Donald Woods, Paddington Press, distributed by Grosset & Dunlap, New York & London, 1978, p.60)

Stephen's message was called “Black Consciousness.” His philosophy rejected the premise of South African society that Blacks were inferior emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. “Black Consciousness” included the rejection of “black” as a designation for evil, and the embracing of “Black” as lovely and desirable. In one humorous, but telling, exchange in *Cry Freedom*, a judge asked Stephen, “Why do you people call yourself black, you're more brown than black?” Denzel Washington, who masterfully portrays

Steve Biko, rejoined, “Why do you call yourself white, you’re more pink than white?” To which the judge responded, “This is true!”

Anyone who understands the biochemistry of skin pigmentation knows the absurdity of making judgments of character on the basis of such a superficial trait. The words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. echo in one’s mind, “I long for the day when my son will be judged by his character rather than by the color of his skin.” The memory of the death of Stephen Biko causes me to hope that another generation of American youth will grow up knowing this great man. As I look upon the face of each African-American child in my office and community, I hope that I am looking into the face of an American Steve Biko.

Nelson Mandela – the Legacy of a great statesman

The Amnesty Commission’s pardon for the men involved in Steve’s death stirred up anger in my heart. The thought that the men who murdered him; robbing the world of a great man; and many of us of the opportunity ever to know him, should and will cause anger. Yet, in his counsel to the Commission, South African President Nelson Mandela demonstrated the wisdom he had learned through the pain of his own life.

Mandela counseled forgiveness. He argued that the evil of prejudice and racism must stop; anger must be replaced with forgiveness. Regrettably, it is those who have been hurt the most, who alone have the capacity to stop the madness. It is those who deserve it the least, who will be the greatest beneficiaries of the end of the madness. If South African society is to be healed, Mandela argued, the murderers of Stephen Biko would have to go free.

It seems so unjust, but then, humans reserve forgiveness and mercy for those whom we think deserve it. To forgive someone who doesn’t even know they need forgiveness, and to forgive them when their only motive is to escape the consequences of their wrong actions, even when they haven’t changed the attitudes which motivated their wrong actions, takes a maturity and a greatness possessed only by great men like Stephen Biko and Nelson Mandela.

Perhaps though, as we remember these great men, those of us who are not great, can act with greatness, as we forgive one another, and as we make sure that we don’t forget Stephen Biko. Perhaps we can only help in small ways, but we must try. One way is to make certain that all of our children know the story of Steve Biko, to make certain that we know that what is portrayed in the movie *Cry Freedom* really happened, and to know that the only hope for its not happening again is for us to harbor no prejudice, no hatred and no anger in our own hearts.

For Black History month read the stories of these five great men. If you cannot find the books, rent or buy the movies. As you experience the anger and fury of injustice, let your soul be expiated by forgiveness. As you share the anger of African-Americans, remember the words and example of Nelson Mandela. If you and I will do this, then Black History month can positively and constructively impact the future for us all.