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Health and Freedom: Remembering

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Your Life Your Health

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“Did you vote right?” The question startled the one who received it. Her first thought was, “How dare him ask me how I voted!” Upon reflection, she realized he didn’t ask for a name or a person but only for a judgment. She responded, “Yes, I did.” To which her tormentor responded, “So did I; so it is inevitable that the right person will be elected.” This exercise is repeated every time I go to the polls and the response is always the same. I learned early how sacred and private one’s franchise is. In all of his 84 years, my father would never tell me how or for whom he voted, but he always voted.

As July 4th approaches, I have thought about freedom and health. There is clearly a strong link between the two for emotional, economic, educational, employment, environmental and for access to healthcare reasons. To my knowledge there have been no experimental studies which examined these links; I am not sure how you would design such a study. There are, however, observational analyses which have studied the negative effects of the lack of freedom upon individual health.

For health reasons, the most important freedoms are religion, speech, assembly, the press and the right to vote. As we face a major national election, voting correctly (I avoid the term “right” lest it imply partisanship in this article) has never been more important. If you vote right and if I vote right, then once again, the right persons will be elected, will they not?

There are many illustrations of the negative impact of the lack of freedom upon the lives of those whose freedoms have been denied, but few match the history of the lives of Michael “Mickey” Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman. These young men’s names ought to be remembered for the books they wrote, or for the influence they had in the lives of their own children, but, tragically their names, forgotten by most, are remembered by us, because on June 21, 1964, they were murdered just outside of Philadelphia, Mississippi.

While this is a dramatic and thankfully rare health consequence of the lack of a basic freedom, in this case the freedom to vote, the less dramatic and regrettably more common health consequences of the absence of freedom are very much with us. Whether it is the lack of access to routine and preventive healthcare or the lack of affordable pharmaceuticals, these less dramatic consequences nevertheless decrease longevity and well being during life.

It is ironic that residents of a city whose name means “brotherly love” murdered these three young men. It is ironic that they were murdered in a community, which considered itself Christian. It is ironic that they were murdered by people who professed belief in the Bible, but who had effectively forgotten the Gospel admonition, which declares, “He

that says he loves God and hates his brother is a liar.” It is ironic that they were murdered almost 100 years after the passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which forever did away with slavery and provided the basis for the elimination of legally sanctioned racial prejudice in the 1960s.

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 have been portrayed in several popular movies, one of which is *Mississippi Burning*. But for me, the most compelling portrayal of this tragedy is a book, which I read once a year. *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi*, published in 1988 by MacMillan, and written by Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, is a compelling history of a cowardly event. 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.”

These events are a warning to all who would attempt to use the prejudice of their communities for their own personal advantage. 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 noblesse 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.
- We must make certain that every child has access to the same high level of healthcare which our children and grandchildren enjoy.

June 16, 2010 marked forty-six 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 darkness in our community.

As we exercise our franchise and as we enjoy our freedom; as we enjoy the fruits of both in our physical health, we must realize that we will never be fully free nor completely healthy until we contribute to the freedom and health of other. We will never be fully free and completely healthy until we add our voices to the chorus of those who declare of Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman, “Never, ever again.”

Only a few years after this 1964 tragedy, a former British soldier put to music a poem written for him. The nobility of the lyrics which proclaim the willingness of the singer to die for freedom and the sweetness of his profession of love, while in a different context, could have been written to his wife by Mickey Schwerner as he left the safety of his northern home to travel to the South. In *The Last Farewell*, the plaintive melody touches the hearts of all; listen to the lyrics carefully:

“There's a ship lies rigged and ready in the harbor
 Tomorrow for old England she sails
 Far away from your land of endless sunshine To
 my land full of rainy skies and gales
 And I shall be aboard that ship tomorrow Though
 my heart is full of tears at this farewell

“For you are beautiful, and I have loved you dearly
More dearly than the spoken word can tell
For you are beautiful, and I have loved you dearly
More dearly than the spoken word can tell

“I've heard there's a wicked war a-blazing And
the taste of war I know so very well Even now
I see the foreign flag a-raising Their guns on
fire as we sail into hell
I have no fear of death, it brings no sorrow But
how bitter will be this last farewell

“For you are beautiful, and I have loved you dearly
More dearly than the spoken word can tell
For you are beautiful, and I have loved you dearly
More dearly than the spoken word can tell

“Though death and darkness gather all about me My
ship be torn apart upon the seas
I shall smell again the fragrance of these islands In the
heaving waves that brought me once to thee And
should I return home safe again to England
I shall watch the English mist roll through the dale

“For you are beautiful, and I have loved you dearly
More dearly than the spoken word can tell
For you are beautiful, and I have loved you dearly
More dearly than the spoken word can tell.”

Health and freedom are not gained only by living long; often they are gained by sacrifice and death. As we long for health and freedom for all, we must never forget that both have been paid for with the lives of thousands and that both continue to be paid for by those who could sing these lyrics with personal meaning.

As you celebrate July 4th remember those who have died either as an act of personal sacrifice or in an act of villainy. As you remember both and as you act upon those memories, your freedom is secured and your health is improved.