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Black History Month: I Have a Dream

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Your Life Your Health

The Examiner

February 15, 2018

Several years ago, as I stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., I recalled the haunting words of Dion Dimucci's 1968 song eulogizing Abraham Lincoln, John and Bobby Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This simple song stirs a mournful longing and lament for these fallen leaders. The words Abraham, Martin, and John have been resonating through my soul as we celebrate "Black History Month. The lyrics are:

"Has anybody here seen my old friend Abraham? Can you tell me where he's gone? He freed a lot of people, But it seems the good they die young. You know, I just looked around and he's gone.

"Anybody here seen my old friend John? Can you tell me where he's gone? He freed a lot of people, But it seems the good they die young. I just looked around and he's gone.

"Anybody here seen my old friend Martin? Can you tell me where he's gone? He freed a lot of people, But it seems the good they die young. I just looked 'round and he's gone.

"Didn't you love the things that they stood for? Didn't they try to find some good for you and me? And we'll be free Some day soon, and it's a-gonna be one day ...

"Anybody here seen my old friend Bobby? Can you tell me where he's gone? I thought I saw him walkin' up over the hill, With Abraham, Martin and John."

You do not have to be a political liberal to share the lament of this classic. I hear the refrain: 'Didn't you love the things they stood for?' I did and I do.

One man wrote the following words about Dr. King; they could be our words, but he penned them more eloquently:

"This astounding man, whose name is inextricably woven in the fabric of history with the cause of civil rights, would have been celebrating his eighty ninth birthday if he were alive today. He was born at noon at the home of his parents on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta. He was an exceptional and intellectually gifted child who entered Morehouse College at the tender age of fifteen where he received a B.A. in sociology. He ultimately earned his Ph.D. in theology from Boston University in 1955 and was subsequently awarded twenty honorary doctorates from colleges and universities in the United States and several foreign countries. In 1964, at age thirty-five, he became the youngest man, the second American, and the third black man to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

"He was one of those rare people whose grand intellect was equaled by his passionate spirituality. He was ordained into the ministry at age nineteen and this dimension of his life is where he found his true identity. His faith in Christ and ministerial calling eclipsed all his education, notoriety and accolades. Faith gave him the strength to accomplish the unthinkable in the face of extreme and unrelenting adversity. He said, 'I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may.'"

Seldom is a person's life captured in a single event. Seldom do the words of a single presentation condense, crystallize and capture the essence of a person. Lincoln's was in "The Gettysburg Address." Jonathan Edward's was in his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." John Kennedy's was in his First Inaugural Address, when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." If it is possible, Dr. King's life's essence was captured in his "I have a dream" speech.

Thrust into the national spotlight in Birmingham, Alabama; where he was arrested and jailed, Dr. King organized a massive march on Washington, DC, on August 28, 1963. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he evoked the name of Lincoln in his "I Have a Dream" speech, which is credited with mobilizing supporters of desegregation and prompted the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The next year, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. On that day, in that speech, he said:

"I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

"Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

"But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

"In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

"It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.' But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check — a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

"It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning. Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

"But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.

"We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not

allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. They have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

"As we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, 'When will you be satisfied?' We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied, as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating 'For Whites Only.' We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

"I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

"Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

"I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

"I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom

and justice.

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. (emphasis added)

"I have a dream today.

"I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

"I have a dream today.

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

"This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

"This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, 'My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.'

"And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!

"Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!

"Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California!

"But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia!

"Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!

"Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

"And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"

Having read Dr. King's sermon, listen to that speech in his voice, and then, make those words your voice as you daily practice the measuring of a person by their character, rather than by the color of their skin. And sing in your heart Dion's words from 1968:

"Anybody here seen my old friend Martin?

"Can you tell me where he's gone?

"He freed a lot of people,

"But it seems the good they die young.

"I just looked 'round and he's gone.

"Didn't you love the things that they stood for?

"Didn't they try to find some good for you and me?

"And we'll be free

"Some day soon, and it's a-gonna be one day .."

Let him be seen in you. I see him everyday in the hearts and lives of men and women of good will who refuse bigotry and hatred and chose freedom, joy and love..I see him in those who love their brothers and sisters as themselves.