

The Day I Woke Up

A Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Message



I am white. I was born and raised in the Deep South...a small town in Georgia. Lester Maddox and George Wallace were our heroes. I gave no thought to the fact that the blacks in our community had a separate entrance to our only movie theatre and they were only allowed to sit in the balcony. When I visited the dentist, there were separate waiting rooms for blacks and whites...I thought nothing of it...my conscience was asleep.

When I rode with my mother to take our maid home, we literally crossed the railroad tracks to the other side of town where the "black folks" lived in deplorable

and likely inhumane conditions...I paid no attention. My family, friends and I never hesitated to use the "N-word"...it rolled off our lips with no remorse and no awareness of its offense. All this was considered "normal" ...my conscience was asleep.

When I was a high school freshman, my school began the process of desegregation...it was a tumultuous year to say the least. Fights broke out daily between blacks and whites, the school principal was thrown through a window and police lined our hallways every day for a year. Again, I gave little thought to this...my conscience was asleep.

This was 1972, four years after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and pockets of the South (like my small town) defiantly resisted his vision that his "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." I paid no attention to these words. Whenever Dr. King would appear on our television, we would either throw a pillow at the screen or yell out a racial obscenity before turning it off...this was normal; my conscience was asleep.

And then it happened...

It was 1980 and I was 22 years old. I was taking a Christian Ethics course in seminary...I was studying to be a minister. The professor introduced us to the writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. I remember hearing for the first time that Dr. King was a smart man and had earned a PhD from Boston University in Systematic Theology...all my life, I had been told he was an "uneducated radical"...one eye started to open.

The professor then assigned us to read Dr. King's "Letters from a Birmingham Jail" where Dr. King is responding to eight clergymen who had expressed concern about his actions and they asked him to back-off and wait. Dr. King wrote:

*I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." But when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter... that the amusement park is closed to colored children, and you see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking, "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"... when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "n****r" and your middle name becomes "boy"... when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro...when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodyness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.*

Then my other eye started to open.

The professor concluded with Dr. King's stirring indictment of "weak religion":

"Any religion which professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them, is a dry-as-dust religion."

And then I woke up....everything I thought was right, was wrong. Everything I thought was normal, was not. Everything I thought was just, was unjust. Everything I believed was true, was not true.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. woke me up and I have now devoted my life to his cause, which is the cause of Christ. Today, Pepperdine's International Programs operates on the assumption that hate and prejudice is largely a function of separation and we want to do something about that. Dr. King said it this way:

"Men often hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they cannot communicate; they cannot communicate because they are separated."

Thank you Dr. King, for opening my eyes and waking me up! Happy Birthday!

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