
REMARKS

NOW WE MUST CROSS A SEA: REMARKS ON TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

WALTER EARL FLUKER*

Years ago when I was a graduate student at Boston University, the social historian and senior editor of Ebony magazine, Lerone Bennett, spoke at the annual Martin Luther King Breakfast here in Boston. He told a wonderful story that went something like this:

Once upon a time long ago in a land far away, there lived a brave captain and a courageous crew of women and men who were in search of a new land. Standing on the shores of that land far away and in that time long ago, this brave captain said to his courageous crew,

The new land which we seek is far beyond the horizon, as our fathers and mothers spoke of it. It is the land which was promised to us, a land of freedom and harmony among peoples of the earth; and in order to reach this land we must cross an ocean and a sea. The journey, he said, will be long and difficult and many who start with us will not make it to the shores of the new land. The waters that we must sail are treacherous, storms rage there, the winds are mighty and chilling, fierce bandits and pirates also sail these hazardous waters, and I want you to know that I might not reach this land with you. But if anything should happen to me on the way, you must continue the journey for surely the land awaits us as our forebears promised, a land of freedom and harmony among peoples of the earth.

So it was that from these shores in this land far away and in this time long ago that this brave captain and his courageous crew of women and men set sail for the new land, the land which was promised by their mothers and fathers. And true to the captain's words, the journey was long and difficult, the waters were treacherous, the storms raged, the winds were mighty and chilling; fierce bandits and pirates assailed their small vessel,

* Martin Luther King Professor of Ethical Leadership, Boston University School of Theology; Ph.D., Boston University, M.Div., Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, B.A., Trinity College.

and *many lives* were lost in the dark and cold abyss beneath them. But a small remnant did make it to the shores of the new land. The captain, though wounded in the battle and broken from the long days and even longer nights of the voyage, did make it to the shores with his crew. The small remnant of courageous men and women who had endured the terrible onslaught of the ocean, and the devastating nightmare of battles on the water, shouted in celebration because they had finally made it to the land which they sought, the land which their forebears had promised. But as he lay dying, the captain, with bated breath hardly above a whisper, said to them, "This is not a time for celebration; this is not a time to rest, for the journey does not end here. We have only crossed the ocean, now you must cross a sea."

INTRODUCTION

When I was asked to offer reflections on transformational leadership and the civil rights movement, the November 4th midterm elections had not occurred and so I had a slightly different idea in mind about crossing the sea. But now, the sea before us is very *red* and I think, even more perilous—and unfortunately there will not be a miraculous demonstration of divine intervention like the one in the recent cinematic version of *Exodus*—no plagues, no parting of the waters, no miracles except the commitment of brave women and men who will dare to dig in for the long journey ahead. And have no doubt about it, my friends, it will be long and hazardous; and faint souls should not apply.

Commitment is a complex, though simple word. When I try to help students simplify the language of commitment I draw a simple graphic: *two buttocks seated on a horizontal line*. True commitment means putting some flesh on the line. Transformational leadership in the modern civil rights movement was about a commitment to a vision of democratic living where equality and freedom were not set at odds with one another but sought balance in public policy and law. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was born of this vision and wrought by courageous women and men who were willing to put their bodies on the line. In leadership studies we call this *embodied leadership*; in theology we call it *incarnation*—bodies on the line.

THE BIRTH OF CIVIL RIGHTS LEGISLATION

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did not arise out of an historical vacuum, nor did it come into being because all the *good* people of this country wanted it or cared enough about it to make it happen—it came from committed and courageous citizens who were willing to make the journey to the new land—and to risk suffering and even death to bring about transformation in the legal, moral and spiritual landscape of this nation. After Emancipation and Reconstruction, Congress did not pass a single civil rights act. It was not until 1957, that the Eisenhower Administration established a civil rights section of the Justice Department with a Commission of Civil Rights (even this

legislation met strong resistance from southern Dixiecrats). The vacillating Kennedy Administration finally supported stronger anti-discrimination measures because of the pressure from protests throughout the south, especially the Birmingham campaign of 1963 which was broadcast in the living rooms of this nation as horrified citizens looked on in disbelief at the firehouses, police dogs, billy clubs and broken bodies. As early as 1961, President Kennedy had decided to act and by 1963 he proposed the most comprehensive civil rights legislation to date, saying the United States “will not be fully free until all of its citizens are free.” Civil rights leaders encouraged Kennedy to take the offensive in the passage of a civil rights bill that would set the stage for voting rights and safeguard other long-overdue benefits entitled to citizens of color and many other beneficiaries. They also called upon Kennedy to abolish segregation by executive order, a move which, like the Emancipation Proclamation of Lincoln, would set the legal tone for the moral course of the nation.¹

There is a famous photograph of President Lyndon Baines Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964. Standing around President Johnson is a crowd of senators, congressmen and dignitaries, all jockeying for a photo-op and to witness this historic moment in the long battle for equal opportunity in this nation. Couched in the middle of this horde of leaders is a smiling 35 year-old Martin Luther King, Jr., fresh from the battlefield. He is smiling, yes, but also pensive. He is aware of the broken bodies and shed blood of the many martyrs who gave their lives to this cause so that he and others might witness this moment: martyrs like Medgar Evers (field secretary NAACP, murdered June 12, 1963); Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair (the four little girls who died in the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963); and the three civil rights workers, Michael H. Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James E. Chaney (murdered June 21, 1964, just weeks earlier, and found later in an earthen dam in Philadelphia, Mississippi)—all martyred in the struggle for justice in this country.

The years of 1963 through 1965 were powerful moments that shaped the legal, moral and spiritual landscape of the United States of America forever. Yes, we have crossed an ocean. No one can deny that progress has been made since the passage and signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but there is so much more at stake in the years ahead. For now, we must cross a sea, *a Red Sea*.

¹ STEPHEN B. OATES, LET THE TRUMPET SOUND: THE LIFE OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. 169-70 (1982); see Martin Luther King, Jr., *Equality Now*, NATION, Feb. 1961, at 4; see also *Major Features of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*, DIRKSEN CONG. CTR., http://www.congresslink.org/print_basics_histmats_civilrights64text.htm accessed 11/14/14; RESTORING THE CONSCIENCE OF A NATION: A REPORT ON THE U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS (2009), <http://www.civilrights.org/publications/reports/commission/creating-the-commission.html>, accessed 11/14/14.

LOOKING AHEAD: NOW WE MUST CROSS A SEA

We are indeed at a strange place in our history as a nation and world. Think about it, as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of Civil Rights Act of 1964 and are only months removed from the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, we have witnessed a tidal wave of change in this country—the red states have won the Senate and the House; and with a lame-duck administration in the White House, we are all bracing for bloodbath on immigration, healthcare and a number of other policy initiatives generated by the present administration. We are witnessing moves by the highest court in this land to set back affirmative action for racial and ethnic minorities; a stand-off on immigration; ongoing challenges to Titles VII and IX, LGBT equality, same sex-marriage, and to add insult to injury, the absolutely incredulous miscarriage of justice in stop-and-frisk laws and the disproportionate incarceration and killing of young black and brown men (and women). We need not rehearse the long litany of the failures of justice that have been and will be discussed here and beyond this conference. What is most important for my comments tonight is that going forward we are confronted by something else that is more formidable and dangerous, I think, than the battles waged in 1960s. We are confronted with a challenge that will take all of our efforts, individually and collectively, to confront and transform.

HAUNTED BY A SPIRIT OF MEANNESS

We are haunted by a spirit of meanness (“me-ness”, yes, but, I am interested tonight in “meanness”). Nicolaus Mills, professor of American Studies at Sarah Lawrence College, published a book in 1997, entitled, *The Triumph of Meanness: America’s War Against Its Better Self*,² a product of the cultural and political wars that were raging at the end of the last century. The title of the book speaks volumes about the present state of our national leadership. There is mean-spiritedness in leadership that reaches across the social, religious, economic and political spectrum and touches every facet of our lives.

Meanness walks the streets of our inner cities lying waste to the lives of an entire generation of poor and unprotected youth. *Meanness* plays out in media productions, television programming, and the music industry. *Meanness* dictates our public policy in the resurrection cold calloused disregard for the least of these. Even as we gather on the anniversary of the Civil Rights Act, the pendulum has swung to the right, to the far, far right and is manifest in the extreme acts of gun-toting right wing secessionists, shouts from the hallowed chambers of Congress during a Presidential address by South Carolina Congressman Joe Wilson; vicious claims of socialism and government takeover by a small, but well-funded, vocal minority who can do no better than hurl epithets and assaults steeped in race and nationalism. Our universities and colleges are increasingly becoming sites of meanness. Racial micro-

² NICOLAUS MILLS, *THE TRIUMPH OF MEANNESS: AMERICA’S WAR AGAINST ITS BETTER SELF* (1997)

aggression, sexual violence, white privilege and power are the buzz feed on campuses around the country.

This spirit of meanness is rooted in the relentless struggle for recognition—what the ancient Greeks called *megalothymia*—the need to be honored, the need to stand out as a symbol of prowess and power, to demand by *height* what one fails to achieve by *depth*, to wrest from the other what one thinks is absent in oneself, and to find security in the submission of the other. It is an ethic of sorts that seeks liberty nor justice, tolerance nor compromise, but raw power and domination of the other. The spirit of meanness is most manifest in the dysfunctional, dangerous and self-destructive speech and actions of our national leaders.

At first glance, such an ethic of mean-spiritedness seems *insane*. Why would one assume that his or her *identity, liberty, and prosperity* are based on the bondage of the other? What sense does it make to put down, disrespect, and to see the other tremble? There is something in human being, nonetheless, that thrives on this sinister need. Isaiah Berlin says that it is in all of us, he called it “the crooked timber of humanity.”³ He quotes Immanuel Kant, “Out of timber so crooked as that from which humanity is made nothing entirely straight can be built.”

The nineteenth-century South African writer Olive Schreiner says that once she dreamed that God took her soul to hell. Upon arrival she was astounded by its beauty and exclaimed, “I like this place.” And God said, “Really!” As she proceeded further she noticed beautiful women everywhere in long flowing robes draping their graceful bodies and tasting fruit from the trees. She noticed, however, that they never ate the fruit, but only touched it softly with their mouths and left it hanging on the tree. She asked God why they were only touching the fruit with their mouths but not eating it. God replied that they were really poisoning the fruit. She said to God, “Why are they doing that?” God said, “That another may not eat.” She said, “But if they poison all them, none dare eat; what do they gain?” God said, “Nothing.” She said, “Are they not afraid they themselves may bite where another has bitten?” God said, “They are afraid. In hell, all [people] are afraid.”

She went a little further and noticed a group of men busily at work. She said, “I should like to go and work with them. Hell must be a very fruitful place, the grass is so green.” God said, “Nothing grows in the garden they are making.” She examined the workers more carefully and noticed they were working among the bushes digging holes, but set nothing in them; and when they were a way off they would hide in the bushes watching. She noticed that as each walked he set his foot down carefully looking where he stepped. She said to God, “What are they doing?” God said, “Making pitfalls into which their fellows will fall.” “Why, “How will he rise?” God answered, “He will not rise.” And she saw their eyes gleam from behind the bushes. “Are these men

³ ISIAH BERLIN, *THE CROOKED TIMBER OF HUMANITY: CHAPTERS IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS* (2d ed. 2013).

sane?" she asked. God answered, "*They are not sane; there is no sane person in hell.*"⁴

CROSSING THE SEA: WHAT WE CAN DO!

This is a great season for a new look at what constitutes committed, courageous and transformative leadership that teaches that there are branches of grace and hope that might grow even from the crooked timber of humanity. How do we combat this spirit of fear, insanity and meanness? Do we make it illegal and lock it down? Do we *sequester* mean people in some form or the other until their debt is paid to society and demand that they perform their duties to those who have been damaged by their dangerous incivility to the satisfaction of the court?

I wonder whether there might be a way to save us after all, to accept the crooked timber that is in all of us and yet live in ways that anticipate a good society characterized by justice. I think there is still a place in the public conversation for courageous, justice-seeking compassion. It seems old and out-of-sync, but it might be the only antidote for what ails us. When Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders came talking about a beloved community, many of us dismissed them as naïve and simple, but now I think we were the real innocents.

The challenge before us will require precisely the kind of rigorous analytic and constructive engagement with the Civil Rights Act and the larger complexities of our legal system that this conference is about. But that will not be all that is necessary—there is a need in our communities, in our world to come to grips with that element in human beings that law alone cannot affect, that law by itself cannot legislate—the *non-enforceable demand*. Law can regulate behavior, it can tutor the human heart and help to create an environment that sustains some form of justice, but law cannot stop people from hating and killing one another. In order to do that, we need something else. Martin Luther King, Jr. called it *excessive altruism*. Excessive altruism goes beyond deontological decrees. It seeks not only to fulfill what is perceived as one's duty or that which is in compliance with law; it goes "the second mile." It is a "purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative" act which arises out of genuine concern for the neighbor.⁵ Therefore, it cannot be enforced by external decrees, but must be motivated by unenforceable, self-imposed, inner sanctions. The distinction between enforceable and unenforceable obligations is complex, but suffices to say here, that enforceable obligations refer to moral demands (rules, laws, statutes) that are imposed from without, while unenforceable obligations refer to the inner sanctions of persons that are self-imposed. This was the logic of King's

⁴ Olive Schriener, *The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed*, in *A TRACK TO THE WATER'S EDGE* 64-66 (Howard Thurman ed., 1973).

⁵ MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *STRIDE TOWARDS FREEDOM: THE MONTGOMERY STORY* 86 (1987).

argument that grounded his leadership against the limits of desegregation as an enforceable demand and integration as an unenforceable demand. He maintained that

Desegregation will break down the legal barriers and bring men (and women) together physically, but something must touch the hearts and souls of men so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right.⁶

The ultimate solution to the problem of community lies in the human willingness to be bound by the unenforceable obligation of the law that is within. King often used the story of the Good Samaritan to illustrate this point. The Good Samaritan, who rescued a stranger who had been beaten and left for dead on the side of the Jericho Road, was moved beyond charity to action. He showed compassion for the stranger even at the risk of his own safety. But King takes the story beyond an individual act of compassion to address the larger structural concerns of justice as fairness. He called for a “revolution of values.” In his April 6, 1967, speech at Riverside Church titled “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” he declared,

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.⁷

CONCLUSION

In closing, leaders in this century are called to be more than charitable actors who respond to the needs of individuals; they must be willing to stand at the intersection where worlds collide and create communities of justice and compassion. It was excessive altruism, or I’d like to say, justice-seeking compassion, that led Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman to Philadelphia, Mississippi; that motivated Medgar Evers to give his life and so many others throughout the south who made possible the Civil Rights Act of 1964. They crossed the ocean, now we must cross a sea. And this, my friends, will take commitment—flesh in the game and bodies on the line; courage that is faith and faith that is courage; justice that seeks compassion; and a hope that from

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Ethical Demands for Integration*, in *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS AND SPEECHES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.* 124 (James M. Washington ed., 1991).

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Time to Break Silence*, in *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE*, *supra* note 6, at 231.

the crooked timber of humanity we might grow something beautiful and transformative in this world. *The sea and our crews await us . . . let's get busy!*