

August 28, 2020

Fulfilling our Obligations, and Passing the Torch

“When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.

Rabbi Jacob Prinz, Speech at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963

“I appeal to all of you to get into this great revolution that is sweeping this nation. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution of 1776 is complete. We must get in this revolution and complete the revolution....”

John Lewis, Speech at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963

We in the Black Freedom Movement of the 1950s and 1960s held countless mass meetings in churches and community halls in Black communities throughout the Jim Crow South. On August 28, 1963, for the first and only time, we gathered before the Lincoln Memorial for a mass meeting on a national scale, joined and witnessed by the entire country. We called this mass meeting “The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom”.

No one who was there can ever forget it.

We were there.

With approximately 250,000 in attendance, and tens of millions watching on network TV, the March on Washington was the largest gathering for racial justice, economic equality and human rights ever assembled to date. Martin Luther King, Jr. called it “the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.”

We are surviving members of Dr. King’s inner circle, student activist leaders from the Nashville sit-in movement and Mississippi voting rights campaign and singers who performed from the stage at that historic gathering in Washington. Some of us

worked primarily with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); others were among the leadership of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Dr. Clarence B. Jones, as lawyer for Dr. King, and Courtland Cox, representing SNCC, served on the planning committee for the March with lead organizers Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph.

The March on Washington took place fifty-seven years ago today.

We remember it like yesterday.

We remember Dr. King's iconic speech, as we remember each of those who addressed the crowd: fourteen of the nation's most important religious and moral leaders including eminent Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy; presidents of national civil rights, labor and student organizations.

With the death of our dear friend John Lewis, none of March on Washington speakers are still alive.

We mourn Congressman Lewis and Rev. C.T. Vivian, who died just six weeks ago; we mourn dear friends and mentors who died in the last few years, including Julian Bond, Amelia Boynton, Dorothy Cotton, Vincent Harding, Joseph Lowery, Jack O'Dell and Harris Wofford; we mourn our beloved Martin King, taken from us at the age of 39; and we mourn Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, James Orange, Rosa Parks, Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, Fred Shuttlesworth, Hosea Williams and so many others beloved sisters and brothers in the movement we lost over the intervening decades.

Our numbers are diminishing. Those of us who remain feel a heavy burden of moral responsibility. We remember the old African saying: if the surviving lions don't tell their story, the hunters will be remembered as "heroes".

We feel obligated to accurately recall the true story of our nonviolent movement to transform our country. We affirm the direct lineage from the Black Freedom Movement of the 20th century, in which we were immersed, and the Black Lives Matter Movement and renewed Poor People's Campaign of the 21st century which we profoundly admire, and wholeheartedly endorse and support.

For decades America portrayed the 1963 March on Washington as a symbolic apotheosis of peaceful social change, racial harmony and reconciliation. Yes, the

March was a uniquely powerful demonstration of the struggle for racial justice. But this struggle continues, as systemic racial injustice persists.

We feel a heavy burden of responsibility as together we face this moment of moral reckoning throughout America.

On May 25, we witnessed George Floyd's 8 minute, 46 second suffocation under the knee of a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Just a few days ago, we witnessed police in Kenosha, Wisconsin fire seven shots at close range into the back of Jacob Blake.

At this inflection point in U.S. history, we are duty-bound to honestly recognize our failures as well as our achievements as a nation since Dr. King shared his dream.

"Power concedes nothing without a demand," Frederick Douglass insisted. "It never has, and it never will."

In August 1963, we came to Washington in the spirit of what Dr. King called "the marvelous new militancy" of the young Black activists in sit-ins, freedom rides, boycotts and marches throughout the South.

In the spirit of Frederick Douglass, we came in force to make demands.

Economic justice and a living wage

On August 28, 1963, we marched to demand an end to legally sanctioned segregation. We achieved this demand the following summer with the enactment of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act. Tragically, however, Dr. King's dream of a racially integrated society has been abandoned. Today in 2020 *de facto* segregation in housing and education persists, and there has been no progress in reducing the corruption of white supremacy on the allocation of resources to schools, or the distribution of income and wealth in our society.

Nearly sixty years after the March on Washington, the net worth of a median white family in America remains ten times greater than that of a median Black family in our country. A wealth gap of this magnitude violates the fundamental principle that

everyone is created equal; it can and will be eliminated when an electoral majority deems it morally unacceptable.

We cannot forget that the March on Washington was for *jobs* as well as freedom.

Fifty-seven years ago, we marched to demand a national program of public works, including job training, for the unemployed. Today, when our society suffers from the most severe economic insecurity and mass unemployment since the Great Depression, we renew our demand.

On August 28, 1963, we marched to demand a \$2-per-hour minimum wage across the country, a wage *equivalent to \$17-per-hour today*.

Today, in 2020, the federal minimum wage is a woefully inadequate \$7.25 per hour. This is unacceptable, a return to the “starvation wages” John Lewis rightfully deplored in his speech to the March.

In a time of pandemic, our essential service workers are front-line soldiers, risking their health and lives for the health and lives of others. We call them “heroes,” but this is hypocrisy, because we do not *treat* them as such. At minimum wage, they are forced to take multiple jobs, to push their family well-being to the brink. This is unacceptably dangerous for workers, and their children, and it is unacceptably dangerous for our society as a whole. We must learn from our failure to contain Covid-19 and from the unnecessary deaths of so many people.

We must treat our essential workers with respect and care. The least we can do is make sure that we pay them a decent wage that will bring them out of poverty.

We renew our demand for a national program of public works, and a living wage for all American workers.

Securing and exercising the right to vote

On March 28, 1963, we marched to secure the vote for all Americans. We achieved this demand two years later, with the enactment of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Tragically, however, we have experienced a terrible, relentless backlash.

Seven years ago, the Supreme Court's 5-4 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* eviscerated the most important federal protection Congress had established to protect voting rights in states with a deep history of voter suppression. Immediately, many of states enacted legislation to curtail access to voting and suppress the vote, especially among Black citizens.

We urgently appeal to Congress to restore the full protections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. We demand that access to the ballot for all citizens be guaranteed and expanded for all citizens in every state.

On August 28, 1963, we marched to demand enforcement of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution by reducing congressional representation from States that disenfranchise citizens. We renew the demand that our Constitution be enforced in the face of widespread voter suppression today.

In his electrifying speech fifty-seven years ago, John Lewis deplored racist systems that deprived Black people of their Constitutionally guaranteed right to vote.

“‘One man, one vote’ is the African cry,” he said. “It is ours too. It must be ours!”

He urged all citizens able to exercise their right to vote to remove from office all morally corrupt politicians who “ally themselves with open forms of political, economic, and social exploitation.”

Before Dr. King shared his dream of the future, John Lewis demanded that we wake up to the national nightmare of the present. “We must say: ‘Wake up America! Wake up!’”

Every American has a sacred obligation to honor the memory of countless martyrs who died to protect our voting rights. Citizenship means nothing if we abandon our collective power of the ballot. Voting is our moral and political responsibility as citizens, and it represents the collective power we must exercise to save our country.

In this moment of national emergency, when our democracy is threatened as never before since the end of Reconstruction and the entrenchment of Jim Crow terror throughout the

South, we call on all qualified Americans to exercise your power as citizens to register and vote.

We applaud and support the urgent work of next generation voting rights defenders and organizers including the M4BL Electoral Justice Project, the Black Voters Matter Fund, and the student activists of the Andrew Goodman Foundation. Together these young leaders are fighting to secure our Constitutional rights and mobilize the vote in Black and other communities of color throughout the United States. We honor them, support them, and follow them.

“The marvelous new militancy”

We as a nation remember Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream, as we should. But we must not forget Dr. King’s urgent call to action on that day.

“In a sense we’ve 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 (Yeah), 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 (My Lord), 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. (My Lord) Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.”

In his speech to the March, Dr. King asked us to imagine *redemption* in the most concrete terms.

He emphasized that redemption can only come from organized nonviolent protest attentive to “the fierce urgency of now.” Indeed, he warned us that “[I]t would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.” He meant it literally. “There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights,” he said. “The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.”

Dr. King made it clear that our movement depended on the “marvelous new militancy” of the nonviolent student activists in the Black community: tens of thousands of young people engaged in lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro, Nashville and cities throughout the South; the young people risking their lives on the Freedom Rides in South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi; the young people who came together to form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the youth of Birmingham who filled Bull Connor’s jails and desegregated the most racist city in the Jim Crow south.

Above all, Dr. King praised the young activists for their steadfast courage and unwavering commitment to disciplined nonviolence on the front lines of the struggle against racist violence directed against them, and he lauded the increasingly multi-racial nature of their nonviolent direct-action campaigns.

“We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. (My Lord) Again and again (No, no), we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. (My Lord) The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people (Hmm), 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 [sustained applause], and they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

And fifty-seven years ago, Dr. King called us to protest racist violence perpetrated by officers of the state, and to keep protesting until Black people no longer experience extrajudicial beatings and killings by the police.

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...”

Black Lives Matter

Today, in 2020, the killings of Tanisha Anderson, Ahmaud Arbery, Philando Castile, Dominique Clayton, George Floyd, Eric Garner, Botham Jean, Atatiana Jefferson, Eric Reason, Breonna Taylor and countless others demonstrate the tragic reality that Black Americans remain the victim of unspeakable horrors of police brutality.

When will it stop?

Today, Jacob Blake lies in a hospital room in Kenosha, Wisconsin, paralyzed from a severed spinal cord.

Why does such wanton police brutality continue to happen, over and over, against Black people?

What kind of country are we?

We remember Rabbi Jacob Prinz's haunting words, by the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. "A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder." And Rabbi Prinz issued a moral plea: "America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America."

Enough is enough.

No, we cannot be satisfied today. And we must turn to our young activists for leadership to steer us to the Beloved Community Dr. King envisioned.

Even at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, young BLM leaders achieved results far beyond what Dr. King and the civil rights movement of the 1960s were able to accomplish: bringing somewhere between 15 million to 26 million Americans of all races and generations into the streets for the largest nonviolent protest movement in the history of the United States.

Systemic racism is brutal violence. We cannot be satisfied until all forms of systemic racism are finally eliminated in our country. We turn to the young activists of the Black Lives Matter movement to lead us there, through the greatest power the world has ever seen: the power of organized, transformative nonviolence.

March for our Lives – to end the national epidemic of gun violence

We must nonviolently put an end to the institutionalization of killing. This requires us to purge our society from our unholy and deadly addiction to guns.

The greatest public health emergency in our nation is the catastrophic rate of homicide caused by the proliferation, accessibility and routine use of firearms.

With four percent of the world's population, Americans own approximately 46% of the entire global stock of 857 million civilian firearms. There are more than 393 million civilian-owned firearms in the United States -- enough for every man, woman and child to own one and still have 67 million guns left over.

These numbers are obscene.

We stand with the American College of Surgeons, the American Association for the Surgery of Trauma, and more than forty other medical and injury prevention organizations that have urged our government to adopt a comprehensive public health and medical approach to address the gun violence epidemic in our country.

Like the Covid-19 pandemic, the gun violence epidemic has disproportionately ravaged low-income Black and other communities of color.

We cannot be satisfied until the grave public health crisis of gun violence ceases to decimate families, neighborhoods and communities throughout the United States.

Again, we honor the marvelous new militancy of nonviolent activism, young people who have been courageously fighting the gun lobby to secure a world where they no longer must live in fear of being killed by guns. Survivors of the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida launched the extraordinary March for Our Lives movement, which continues to mobilize millions of students throughout the United States. Thousands of engaged churches, community and health organizations, and gun control advocacy groups hold prayer vigils and peaceful protest marches to awaken the moral conscience of America, neighborhood by neighborhood, until we take comprehensive action to stop gun proliferation at the national level. We praise and defer to their leadership as we move forward together to build a future without the scourge of gun violence.

Nonviolent direct action to stop climate and environmental catastrophe

In 1967, when Dr. King wrote his final book (*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*), no one understood how unchecked global warming would generate

climate chaos and threaten the survival of our species. We had no idea how the devastating consequences of greenhouse gas accumulation, and the toxic harms of chemical poisoning and industrial pollution, would disproportionately harm Black and other communities of color in the United States and the global South.

We cannot be satisfied until we have transformed our society from an economic system dependent upon the relentless extraction and burning of fossil fuels to a post-carbon system based upon the generation of clean energy, available to everyone, and the restoration of societies that have been ravaged by global warming and toxic harm.

Once again, we turn for leadership to the marvelous new militancy of nonviolent activism.

Young activists including Greta Thunberg speak truth to power all over the world. In the United States, youth have been at the front lines of peaceful mass protests involving millions of Americans of all ages and races across the economic spectrum of our society.

We strongly support the Sunrise Movement, Global Climate Strike, 350.org, the Climate Action Network, the Climate Reality Project, Interfaith Power and Light, and all of the organized efforts to mobilize nonviolent direct action to prevent climate catastrophe and restore the health of our communities and our planet.

We praise and defer to their leadership as we move forward to build a future in which human civilization can survive and all dimensions of our humanity sustained.

Our obligation on this day

To honor the memory of our beloved Martin King, we can never be satisfied until we have overcome racism, poverty and racism. We can never be satisfied until we achieve the Beloved Community in our country and throughout the world. We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Honoring Dr. King, we are humbled on this day.

With admiration and gratitude, we pass his torch to the activist youth in the Black Lives Matter, March for our Lives, and climate justice movements.

We know that their marvelous new nonviolent militancy will lead us to the Promised Land.

Our obligation on this day is to follow their leadership.

We urge all Americans to join our courageous nonviolent young activists in the hard work of building a just and free society in which we shall overcome.

Wake up, America! Wake up!

Signatories

Joan Baez, activist and singer

Ms. Baez performed at the March, including leading the crowd in "We Shall Overcome." In the following years, she joined Dr. King in protests against racial injustice and the War in Vietnam.

Harry Belafonte, activist and singer

Mr. Belafonte organized the celebrity delegation to attract the largest possible national TV audience to the March. He worked closely with Dr. King and Dr. Clarence Jones in support of the Black Freedom Movement throughout the 1960s.

Xernona Clayton, Founder, President and CEO of the Trumpet Awards Foundation

Civil rights leader and close friend and confidant to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ms. Clayton received the SCLC's inaugural Coretta Scott King Award.

Courtland Cox, Director, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Legacy Project

With John Lewis, Mr. Cox represented SNCC on the March planning committee. He later joined Stokely Carmichael registering Black voters in Lowndes County, Alabama, and he became SNCC Program Director.

Dr. Clarence B. Jones, Director, USF Institute for Nonviolence and Social Justice

As legal counsel and strategic advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. Jones represented Martin Luther King, Jr. on the March planning committee. Dr. Jones frequently assisted Dr. King as draft speechwriter, and he wrote the first seven paragraphs of Dr. King's iconic "I Have a Dream" speech at the March.

Dr. Bernard Lafayette, Jr., Founding Director, URI Center for Nonviolence and Peace Studies
From his early days as a Freedom Rider and sit-in leader in Nashville, Dr. Lafayette was a leading student activist with SNCC and organizer with Dr. King's SCLC.

Reverend Dr. James M. Lawson, Jr., Founder, The James Lawson Institute
More than any other individual, Rev. Lawson brought the theory and practice of Gandhian nonviolence to the Black Freedom Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. He was the Movement's leading teacher and trainer of disciplined, transformational nonviolence for Dr. King's SCLC as well as for hundreds of student activists, including SNCC leaders.

Janet Moses, M.D.

As SNCC field secretary in Alabama and Mississippi, Dr. Moses was a leading activist in voter registration drives in some of the most racist and violent counties in Alabama and Mississippi.

Robert (Bob) Moses, President, The Algebra Project

Immediately before the March, Mr. Moses led young SNCC demonstrators in protest against the Justice Department's tacit alliance with Dixiecrat segregationists. Following the March, he led the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project; with Fannie Lou Hamer, he helped to create the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Ambassador Andrew Young

Early in the Movement, with Dorothy Cotton, Amb. Young directed the SCLC's Citizenship Education Program. As a close confidant to Dr. King, Amb. Young helped lead the SCLC campaigns in Birmingham (1963), St. Augustine (1964), Selma (1965), Chicago and Atlanta (1966), and he served as SCLC Executive Director.