

Memphis
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In the light of the dawning of a different America, where looking over your shoulder can better inform you of what America is becoming rather than looking forward to what America can become, perhaps there is no better time for Americans to declare that the words “All Men Are Created Equal” mean something, protects something and encourage us to believe that the diversity among us should have nothing to do with equality and everything to do with strength of character and country.

And for the sake of our American Democracy we must find strength in the words of the song that followed the cadence of so many footsteps along the blacktop roads of the South of the 1960’s, “We Shall Overcome.”

For it is in honor of the sacrifice of others and in better hopes of a more just America that we must declare that **OUR NATION** is at its best when she embraces all of us, protects the least of us and offers her bounty of hope and prosperity to not just some of us.

And we must stand shoulder to shoulder rather than looking over our shoulder and carry the burdens of injustice for those that cannot walk. For it is in the shouldering of the torch of “justice under the law” that led the foot soldiers of yesterday and it can lead us today to offer hope for all those Americans who are living on the outskirts of liberty and justice for all.

Now is the time when all Americans must be willing to depart from the challenges that divide us and strive for the things that unite us. For it is

in the circle of brotherhood and understanding that America can have its finest moments.

And tolerance for others must be more than what we believe, it must be what we live and leading by example is what we must do.

For the todays and all of the tomorrows of our lives, we must lead by example. We must live our lives with inspiration and aspire to make the choices that can lead us to higher ground and can guide us to the understanding and purpose of not just who we are but who – we - can - become.

Let us be vigilant to the great moments in our history were justice trumped the roar of ill winds of injustice and honor the sacrifices of both men and women who suffered in its pursuit.

And through our lives let us encourage others to heed the call to rise, to inspire the nobility that lies in the heart of every American and to see others, feel others and celebrate others, respecting them for who they are.

There are lessons to be learned along the roadways that others have traveled in pursuit of their dreams of enjoying the full measure of equality. There are great moments in history when men, women and children stood their ground to demand the rights that were guaranteed to them. And now is the time that all Americans should fulfill the promise that we pledge each time the American flag goes by.

We cannot abandon the legacy that is left to us. We cannot forsake the memory of those that died for us. And we cannot lose faith that there is the power of “we shall overcome” in each of us. For now is not the time to just stand by when we can all stand up for the hopes and dignity that lives in the hearts of all of us.

While the confederate flags of the past may have come down, they still wave over the politically driven economic and social policies of deprivation that mark the lives of mothers and father so that their children can see their future in their parents' eyes.

There are still roads from the 1960's that run all across America. Places of extreme poverty, dead end streets of opportunity, gun violence, falling down schools and little or no access to health care for mothers and children. And there are still those who ride on the politics of fear and hatred, gaining ground through power rather than leading with humility out of respect for the common man.

Making it right for some while making it wrong for those that live on the outskirts of liberty and justice for all. Promoting a manifesto for democracy that appear reasonable on the outside but steals the dreams of poor mothers and fathers that perhaps their children can one day live the American Dream. Striking at the heart of liberty after it is too late.

These are the challenges that we must face. These are the roads upon when we must travel. And now is the time for each of us to draw a line in the sand on behalf of liberty and justice for all.

While at times, it seems that public policy looks over the shoulder of history, we must remind those that we elect to lead, that opportunity for change lies in the hearts of those that look ahead.

We cannot lay flowers on the memories of Martin Luther King and be satisfied with ourselves. Instead, we must plant seeds of his teachings in the hearts of future generations so that his life's work can lead them to higher ground.

We must stand up and be counted. We must pray for wisdom. We must act with compassion and we must believe that if we are equal in our

God's eyes, then we must stand equal in our lives. It takes courage to see people with our hearts rather than our minds, but it can teach us the lessons of unconditional love.

As professional family mediators, perhaps you know more than others the challenges, the fears and the hopes of starting over. For overcoming the past is very different than living in the past. And forgiving the past in order to claim a new future where we will be held responsible for who we can become is a mountain that can be hard to climb.

I was twelve years old when my father was inaugurated as Governor of Alabama and proclaimed segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever.

I was thirteen when he stood in the schoolhouse door.

I was fifteen when John Lewis, Amelia Boynton and others were attacked on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in March of 1965, the same year that my father failed in an attempt to pass a constitutional amendment that would allow him to run for a second term.

I was sixteen years old when I told my Mother I wanted her to share her time with me rather than run for Governor herself. But the week before I turned 17, I stood beneath a winter sky and heard the roars of thousands as Lurleen Burns Wallace was inaugurated as Governor of Alabama.

On May 7th, 1968, a week before I graduated from High School, my mother died at home in the Alabama Governor's Mansion at the age of 41. Thousands of Alabamians stood in line for hours in the

downtown streets of Montgomery waiting to pay their last respects to my mother and their Governor, as she lay in state in the rotunda of the Alabama Capitol

Following my mother's death, I traveled with the 1968 Wallace Presidential Campaign to stand by my father on rally stages through America's Rust Belt and on to states in New England. I watched and listened as working-class men and women roared their approval at the notions of a more conservative country where true American Patriots would once again be in charge. And I heard the rising choruses of discontent from angry demonstrators that pushed their way inside. Nighttime rallies often became angry mobs of supporters fighting with protesters, heaving chairs at one another and throwing things at us as we stood in front of large banners that read "Stand Up For America" on the stage.

On the night of July 26th, the crowd was both large and anxious as protesters unrolled banners and began to chant during a campaign rally on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island. Amidst fits of anger and roars of approval, fights broke out as my father called protesters pointy-headed liberals who wanted to run everything.

After the rally, security guards helped me escape from an angry mob and into my father's car. The dress that my Mother had bought me was covered with black spray paint and ink. A woman came up to the front passenger window and began beating on the glass with a leg from a metal folding chair. And then she was gone, fallen back and away into crowds of fury.

I used to think about the woman who came to the window. I wondered if she had children and I wondered what she would have done to me if I had rolled the window down.

On May 15, 1972, I was in a college classroom when a fellow student told me that my father had been gunned down in a shopping center parking lot in Laurel Maryland. The following day I stood by his side when his Doctors told him he would never walk again.

And for sixteen more years, I watched as he served as Governor and sought forgiveness for what he had done.

But for all that had happened and all that occurred, it was just a simple question that gave me the courage to step away from my life of always supporting but never leading, always learning but never teaching, always loving others but never loving myself, always believing in others but never in me, always in the crowd but never breaking away, believing that my life would be measured by the accomplishments of others, but never by my own.

It was in the spring. The rolling hills between Montgomery and Atlanta were turning green with snatches of color here and there from early blooming wildflowers and occasional daffodils standing in front of abandoned farmhouses and wooded pastures. My husband and I were taking our eight-year old son Burns Kennedy to Atlanta to visit the Martin Luther King National Historic Site and Museum

We sat silent in Dr. King's church and stood solemn at his gravesite. We toured his home, then walked to the newly constructed museum that chronicled his life, including his struggle for equality in Alabama.

As we moved through the exhibits, we turned a corner only to face photographs of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the bombed out Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, fire hoses and dogs in Birmingham and George Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door.

Burns stood silent for a long pause as a look of sadness came over his face. He turned to me and asked, “Why did Paw Paw do those things to other people?”

I realized at that moment I was at a crossroads in my life and the life of my son. The mantle had passed and it was now up to me to do for my son what my father never did for me.

It was the first step in my journey of building a legacy of my own. I knelt down beside Burns and drew him close.

“Paw Paw never told me why he did those things to other people, but I know he was wrong” I said. So maybe it will just have to be up to you and to me to help make things right.”

From that day forward, I knew that I had an obligation to my sons to raise the call for justice in my lifetime.

And today, we must challenge one another to live our lives with inspiration, always aspiring to make the choices that lead us to higher ground, that guides us to understanding and purpose of not just who we are but who we can become.

Working each day to inspire the nobility that lies in the heart of each of us. Finding the power that lives in all of us to reach out, to believe, to support and to stand firm in the belief that all lives count for something.

For that is the message of inspiration that those who have no voice hope for, a moment of self-revelation, an emboldened heart, a rising spirit from the depths of despair.

And that should be in the heart of those who we elect to lead.

While some will climb mountains, there are untold numbers of small hills that we all can master; tokens and gestures, words and deeds that can change a life and change history.

On August 28, 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and spoke to the heart of America. It was one of his finest moments. It was the day he told America that he “had a dream”

In that speech, he said, “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.”

ADD ADD ADD. The story of King and Wallace when Wallace would not meet with him.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March Dr. King’s daughter, Bernice, and I stood arm in arm on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol as thousands of people marched toward us. For that moment in time, Bernice and I became the embodiment of the little black girl and the little white girl holding hands as sisters down in Alabama.

Dr King’s dream had come true. And we served as testaments to the power of reconciliation, of change through understanding and holding out hope for America.

There is no better time than now for us to hold hands, rather than holding down the inherent rights of others. For no one can ever measure the true worth of a mended heart that beats because someone cared.

We cannot expect the next generation of Americans to do something to change the world if we aspire to do nothing to protect liberty and recognize our individual obligations to service.

How can we teach future generations about positive social change if we see injustice and turn our backs? For injustice knows no death. It rises like a dark mist on the horizon, laying low in the hearts of those that are unwilling to accept the notion of unconditional love.

All too often we see public servants who are willing to abandon the obligation of honor and duty that their work commands. In the push and shove of political debate too many of us seek to gain political advantage rather than collective compromise. We must embody the character and the teachings of Dr. King and demonstrate that no one has a corner on the market of the principles of patriotism, compassion and equality.

There are times in our lives when we cannot change the direction of the wind, but there are always opportunities to adjust our sails for a more just America.

And let us pray for the day when we can proclaim that it is through the “peace that comes with understanding” that we should, we must and we shall overcome.

