

ROME GEORGIA

FEBRUARY 7, 2019

In all of our lives we live in moments that turn to days that make weeks then months of dawns of hope and sunsets of despair, living amidst the sunlight of victories and the grey skies of discontent.

But the moments that will one day matter when we look over the shoulder of our past, are those when we conquered our fears, stood our ground, sacrificed for someone we loved and stood up for the rights of a perfect stranger because it was the right and righteous thing to do.

I was born deep in the Alabama Black Belt, twenty-one miles west of the Georgia state line. My mother, Lurleen Wallace was a housewife, and my father George Wallace, was a lawyer. We lived next to the grammar school in a white wood framed house with a wide front porch that sat in the shade of water oaks and pecan trees. In the light of summer sunsets, my mother would sit in the backyard with her friends while

we played outside. And, on Friday nights my father and I would watch boxing matches on the television and cheer for the underdog.

I lived amidst the crooks and crannies of happiness, lying in the backyards of my childhood looking for faces in the clouds of contentment that floated by. It was a place to shelter from storms of discontent and have hopes for the future. It was where my mother stood by the door or pulled back the curtains in the dark of night to watch for me coming home.

It was a place you could dream of returning to one day, to capture the past, to tell stories to your grandchildren of the way life used to be.

But for the cause of segregation, there were no hugs and kisses, no going away gifts or parties and no opportunities to say goodbye to my childhood when we left our home in Clayton when I was eleven years old. We packed our clothes, turned off the lights and my father locked the kitchen door behind us. If my Mother had told me we were never coming back, perhaps I

would have looked harder or faster at the places we passed by that could have reminded me of what my life had been like.

There was never an inkling of what was to become. From that moment on, our lives were hitched to an ascending star of power where the past didn't matter when there was so much to gain in the days that lay ahead.

When the house in Clayton was destroyed by fire several years later, it was as if it was a warning to never look back. There would be no place to take my sons, to show them what happiness for me had looked like. And, but for the memories, there were no mementos or crinkled up photos to share with them.

I was twelve years old when my father was inaugurated as Governor 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 and beaten 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 for Governor.

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 approval as Lurleen Burns Wallace was inaugurated as 46th Governor of Alabama.

On May 7th, 1968, two weeks 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.

That summer, I traveled with the 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 my Mother once bought for 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 down the window.

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 next 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 of Alabama and sought forgiveness for his past. The African American Community reached out to him, received him in the Dexter Avenue King Baptist Church, forgave him and elected him for his last term as Governor. An act of forgiveness and love.

From segregation to reconciliation; that was my father's personal journey along his own road to Jericho.

George and Lurleen Burns Wallace were the most powerful, beloved and controversial Governor's in all of Alabama history.

For many years, there was no moving on beyond the politics of others. It would become my constant companion for another thirty-one years.

For most of my life, I lived in the shadow of history. My life was measured by who I belonged to rather than who I was, always supporting but never leading, 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 just a simple question that change my life.

In the Spring of 1996, my husband Mark and I took our then eight-year-old son, Burns, 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, the walked to the newly constructed museum that

chronicled his live, 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 school house 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 crossroad in my life and the life of my son, the mantle had passed, and it was up to me to do for my son what my father never did for me.

It was the first step in the journey of building a legacy of my own. I knelt down beside Burns and held 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 I had an obligation to my two sons to raise the call for justice in my lifetime.

Breaking away from a painful past is not always easy but it is always right. And for today and the tomorrows to come, I hope that each of you, all of us, can find opportunities to inspire others, serve others and build legacies of your own. Believing that America is at her 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 now, I speak to you in my own voice and from my own heart for the benefit of truth and for the legacy that I will one day leave to my own two beloved sons,

There is an inherent power in all of us that provides the courage of opportunity to share our individual stories, our beliefs and our dreams.

Inspiring our fathers and sons, mothers and daughters to see themselves separate and apart from others and be able to stand and speak because their lives have worth and their voices can count for justice,

**for mercy and can change the world in their lifetime.
Creating pathways that lead to truth and justice.**

Let us be judged each as the other, let us break the shackles of the past. Let us live extraordinary lives that are measured not by where we came from but where we are going. Step from beneath the shadow of self-doubt. And believe that every one of us has the power to change our own lives and then the lives of others.

On August 28th, 1963 D. Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and told America that he had a dream.

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

On March 25, 1965 after walking for three days from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery, Dr. King led 25,000 people into the city and up Dexter Avenue to the

State Capitol to deliver a petition to Governor Wallace requesting that African American Citizens be given the right to vote in the State of Alabama. Governor Wallace refused to meet with Dr. King.

On the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March, Dr. King's daughter, Bernice and Governor Wallace's daughter, Peggy, stood on the steps of the Alabama Capitol and held hands as thousands of people walked up Dexter Avenue toward them.

For that moment in time, Bernice and I became the embodiment of that little black girl and that little white girl holding hands as sisters down in Alabama.

Dr. King's dream had come true.

Bernice and I served as testaments to the power of reconciliation, of change through understanding and unconditional love.

I sometimes wonder how the course of history might have been different, if back in 1965, Dr. King and Governor Wallace had known that one day, that little black girl and that little white girl holding hands as sisters down in Alabama would be their own daughters.

All of us come to this moment, to this place, on the road of our own life's experience. We are diverse, both in our experiences our aspirations and our dreams. But we are united in the common belief that a vision for a more just America is worth the saving.

All of us are unique, all of us have a history and a story that is worth the telling. There is power in who we are and where we come from. Every one of us cannot live on a stage for all to see, but all of us have something to share that makes us unique, the fabric of our lives.

If each of us live a life of purpose and hope, we will never have to think about the cost of a lost opportunity to say the right thing or stand up and be counted.

And in the sunrises of our tomorrows, we must rise up and again, stand shoulder to shoulder to face the challenges that lay ahead.

There is power in all of us to reach out, to support, and stand firm in the belief that all of our lives count for something. For how our children can stand on mountain tops if we do not teach them how to climb.

An opportunity for each of you, an obligation for all of us, to see others, feel others and celebrate others, respecting their humanity for who they are.

Challenge one another to live your lives with inspiration, always aspiring to make the choices that lead you to higher ground, that guides you to understanding and purpose of not just who you are, but who you can become.

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.

For the tomorrows in your lives, I challenge each of you to proclaim that when we say “All Men Are Created Equal” it means something, protects something and encourages us to believe that the diversity among us has less to do with equality and has everything to do with strength of character and country.

For it is in the circle of brotherhood and understanding that America has and can celebrates its finest moments.

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddle masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teaming shore. Send these the homeless, tempest – tossed to me, I lift up my lamp beside the golden door.”

That is the promise of the America that men and women long for, that our sons fight for and what our sense of morality stands for.

It is the American dream that gives rise to heartfelt moments that encourage us to believe that each of us have a personal obligation to live in the present and work each day for the promise of a more just America where life, liberty justice and happiness is not just something you dream of, it is something to live in

There is no better time than now for true American Patriots to stand up for the rights of others and proclaim that the diversity among us is what HAS made and will ALWAYS make America a greater nation where, Black Lives Matter.

Living your lives along roads less traveled can work miracles, both large and small in the lives of others. If you can heal the heart of just one person, by

teaching others that all of us and not just some of us deserve the bounty that comes with a life without fear and broken hearts, then you have lived a life of purpose.

Be better, not bitter. Don't wish for better tomorrows, make better tomorrows happen. Lift up hope for our children, so that when their time comes, they will be stronger because you lived.

There is power in confidence, in feeling loved and respected for who we are and what we believe, it is the reaching out and touching a soul that brings out the humanity in others. Working each day to inspire the nobility that lies in the heart of each of us.

There are moments in all of our lives when the future can become more important than the past, where "I shall overcome" becomes "I have overcome."

Stand firm for freedom when all others pass away, be courageous and proclaim victories of your own, rise up for yourselves and for your dignity so that one day, right down here in Georgia, your daughters and sons will have the courage to stand up and speak out for you, because of you and in honor of you.

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

Having tolerance for all Americans and members of a greater world, must be more than what we believe, it must be what we live and leading by example is what we must do.

Tolerance does not always mean agreement, but tolerance does require understanding, compassion and unconditional love for one another.

Now is the time to stand up for our nation. Ask for compassion, act with compassion and pray for a democracy that believes that if we are equal in God's eyes, then we must stand equal in our lives.

Be courageous and have courage to see people with your hearts rather than your minds for it can teach us the lessons of conditional love.

There will be times in our lives, when we cannot change the direction of the wind, but there will always

be opportunities in our lives to adjust our sails for a more Just America.

The mothers, daughters, fathers and sons of the Civil Rights Movement believed that justice would come, and they prayed for the day when the fair winds of freedom and following seas would carry them to the shores of a life without fear and a heart of purpose.

Their hopes, their dreams and their service made them giants of their generation. Their determination should inspire us to find our own moments of opportunity that can lead to hop, rather than to roadways of shattered dreams that always lead back to where we started.

Their courage should harness the power in each of us to stand firm in the belief that all lives count for something, for there is dignity in demanding that all of our lives deserve the full measure of justice and mercy under the law.

And their stories should inspire others to believe that even in the midst of despair lies the power to overcome. For it was through their own lives that the

heroes of the civil rights movement came to understand that what you stand for in your life is not as important as what you do in your life and it is the act of doing that unleashes the power of your spirit.

In their honor, let us remain true to the better part of our individual humanity where empathy, morality and love reside.

As a child I rode on the wings of the politics of hate and fear as it carried me away from my childhood and conquered my dream of a simple life. But through it all, I never lost faith in the hope that one day my life would count for something.

And today, you must rise to challenge one another to stand your ground, reach for a higher star, stand firm when all others fade away, be courageous, proclaim a victory of your own and know that your life will not have been lived in vain.

And for all of your tomorrows, I hope that each of you can live your life among moments of who you are rather than who you belong to. I encourage you to

stand up rather than stand by for liberty and justice for all.

We cannot allow our past to become a roadmap to our future. We cannot forget the legacy left to us. But we can keep our eyes on the horizons of tomorrow, for that is where, one day, people will look back at our lives to remember who we were.

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

In closing, I want to share an exchange of letters between myself and Kerry Kennedy, the daughter of the late Senator Robert Kennedy.

June 6, 2018

Dear Kerry,

Last month, on May 7th, there was a ceremony of remembrance at the Alabama State Capitol in recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of my mother, Governor Lurleen Burns Wallace at the age of forty-one.

Following her death, your father wrote a heartfelt letter of condolence to our family. In less than a month later, your father was gone as well and America would never be the same.

Three months in 1968, April, May and June, a mother and two fathers were gone in the prime of their lives, leaving three daughters, Bernice, Peggy and Kerry, behind to find one another in a new generation where love and reconciliation was no longer just a dream, it was a reality. A hoped-for moment of three daughters believing that a mother and two fathers would be smiling on us, “job well done.”

While history records the great public moments, memories and legacies our parents left behind, I would like to think that perhaps in some measure the coming together of their three daughters out of love and respect for the other in a much different world would also make them proud.

Please know that today, you and your family will be in my prayers as you gather to honor the memory of your

father. How proud he would be of all that you have stood for and accomplished in your life.

All my love,

Peggy

Dear Peggy,

I am touched by your beautiful words and heartened by your courage. I didn't know about my father's letter to you when your mother died, and I thank you for sharing that with me. You, my friend, continue to inspire. I am so very profoundly happy to know you, Mark and your boys.

I send all my love,

Kerry

