

Dr. King's Legacy: Then and Now

Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

~ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (excerpt from *I Have a Dream* speech, 1963)

By: Teri Miller Barker



It's been 40 years since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On April 4, 1968, we lost a pivotal icon in the Civil Rights Movement, but his legacy of freedom, justice and racial equality continues. In primary school, I colored pictures of him. In elementary, I read the oversized, richly colored storybooks about his upbringing, and how he peacefully fought and bravely put himself on the front line in pursuit of justice for all. I did a book report on him in high school and, as an adult, I'll always know exactly how many years ago we lost a true leader because it's how many years old I am at the time. As we observe the 40th anniversary of his death, I think of how unfortunate it is for me to have no memories or connections to the selfless man who gave his life to enhance the quality of life for others for generations to come. And although our paths never crossed, I've reaped the benefits of his sacrifice. He was only 39 years old, but made such a profound statement and impact on our society before he was tragically snatched away.

Recently, I had a discussion with an older relative of mine who was very disappointed with people in my generation and under. In his opinion, we're unappreciative and really don't have a clue about the civil rights struggle. He says we take privileges and freedoms for granted, and have no regard, respect, or remembrance of the people who were mistreated, beaten and even killed for their protests and attempts to upgrade us from second class citizens to ones of equal standing with our white counterparts. I had to respectfully let him know that you can't hate on people just because they were born after the height of the struggle, and furthermore, the struggle ain't over! Trust me, we have to deal with injustice and inequality too, but on a more covert level, which makes it harder to "fight." We can't picket and protest for a sister who claims she was more qualified than the white person who got the promotion she applied for. We can't get together and sing "We Shall Overcome" every time one of our own gets more jail time than someone white who committed the same offense. So, the struggle continues. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ensured rights and freedoms for Colored people, but we all know that laws and acts cannot legislate the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of people who want to believe they are superior. As long as we're a minority, there will always be people who are doing their best to remind us of it.

Experience with the civil rights struggle, or lack thereof, has had positive and negative effects on the 40-and-under generations. It's been positive in the sense that we haven't had to fight for

basic, civil liberties. We haven't been hosed down, attacked by police dogs, or incarcerated because we protested for equal treatment, nor were we born or old enough to see live coverage of such events broadcast on television. Old Jim Crow never forced us to sip warm water from the Colored fountain, or use a separate door to enter and exit public facilities, and we've never done day work in white folks' houses. If we sat on the back of the bus, it was because it was our choice of seating.

We have been spoiled, or blessed, depending on how you view it. But there are some downsides to not having gone through the fire. As Frederick Douglas is often quoted as saying, "Without struggle, there's no progress." Which explains why, from a civil rights standpoint, we haven't been instrumental in effecting change on a monumental scale like previous generations. If anything, we've made backward strides because we're not as unified as the generations that can relate to the struggle. A lot of us are comfortable in our daily grinds of life. Many have had so much success that they question if Affirmative Action is even necessary. To them, all I can say is we mustn't forget where we came from. I was brought up in an era where "Black is beautiful," and "I'm Black and I'm proud." I remember like it was yesterday when Reverend Jesse Jackson got on national television and encouraged each of us to believe in ourselves and chant his mantra, "I am somebody." That did wonders for our self- and race-esteem.

It's been 40 years since the tragic day this world lost an influential, charismatic, Baptist minister who had a vision much like that of Moses, who God used to free the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. helped free African Americans from oppression and segregation, and we still have love and respect for the dreamer and the legacy he left behind, but we're not as passionate about the "dream." Yes, we have our individual hopes and dreams, and accomplish great things, but what are we striving for as a race?

There are people, just like my dear relative, who feel that the 40-and-under generations don't have the strength and resolve, or the sense of unity that their forefathers and mothers had. I can't really debate the issue because we haven't been faced with the same obstacles. In our defense, however, I will say that we live in a different political climate, and have been somewhat protected from the harsh, blatant forms of inequality, but not totally exempt from having experienced racism. We haven't had to unite in emotional demonstrations to show that we want equal treatment because most of our civil rights struggles are being fought and handled on an individual basis.

"The sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality." Dr. King, one of the greatest orator's in American history, said those words in his "*I Have a Dream*" speech in 1963. That was forty-five years ago, so it doesn't matter if you were born before, during, or after the Civil Rights Movement, we still have quite a distance to go before we reach his vision of autumn.

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