

“Our Promissory Note”

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On August 28, 1963 while in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial after a triumphant march to Washington and before a crowd of two hundred and fifty thousand and before a media audience of millions, Martin Luther King Jr. preached probably the most famous sermon ever preached to the American people: “I Have a Dream”. On that August day, Martin Luther King Jr. told the nation about this dream, a portion of which Les read. In the shadow of Lincoln’s statue, he recalls the Emancipation Proclamation with words reminiscent of Lincoln's own words at Gettysburg. Martin’s dream was part of the American Dream. Between August 1963 at the Lincoln Monument, the 1965 Selma to Montgomery marches, and King’s final day in Memphis on which he support the sanitation workers march for equal and fair pay in the "Poor People's Campaign" to address issues of economic justice, the tenants America’s promissory note was established. Fifty years later how close are we to realizing that cashing the promissory note for the American Dream, the promise that all men would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; legally, socially and economically.

The deaths of African-Americans Trayvon Martin near Tampa, Florida; Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri; Robert Peace, a Yale University graduate and an almost straight-A student in molecular biophysics and biochemistry in Newark, New Jersey; and the near six-year work of Attorney General Eric Holder give us clues to the value of that promissory note. The death in Florida and the subsequent trial of his slayer, tell how much legally that promise is worth. The “stand your ground” laws now in sixteen states tell of a certain fear of violence especially perceived by black men that the legislatures have reacted. These laws make legal the use of deadly force in a public setting by private citizens who fear their safety. This is the situation that my prayer alluded to.

Of the 133 cases in Florida in which the “stand your ground” defense was used, over 50 percent were ruled justifiable by a court. This “stand your ground” defense when used by people both Anglo and of color were deemed justified more than fifty percent of the time. In Florida, the shooting of a black person by a white person is found justifiable 67 percent of the time, while the shooting of a white person by a black person is deemed justifiable just over 51 percent of the time. Another study found that defendants using the “stand your ground” defense who killed a black person were found not guilty 73 percent of the time, while those who killed a white person were found not guilty 59 percent of the time. But the problems with our legal system isn’t just these laws, even with crime at a 25-year low. One of the initiatives to cut the crime rate is the “three strikes and you are out” legislation. In the red hills of Georgia, 98.4 percent of those doing life under these provisions are black.

Another often-flouted solution to crime is capital punishment. One study found that in Georgia a murderer was 4.3 times more likely to receive the death penalty if the

victim was white. Georgia prosecutors sought the death penalty in 70 percent of the cases involving black defendants and white victims, 19 percent with white defendants and black victims and 15 percent when both victim and defendant were black. Clearly Martin's promissory note from the bank of justice remains unpaid.

The perception of fear of black men especially black young men is real in the America mind of our legal system. The death of Michael Brown further attests to that perception among those of some police forces. This perception we saw portrayed in the movie "Crash". The tragedy of Ferguson reflects the relationship police forces with people of color going beyond Ferguson. When I lived on the south side of Chicago during the late 90s, and worked as a chaplain in a hospital system I saw the reluctance of black victims to talk to any police. A black woman chaplain told me of having to have the talk with her bright college-bound son about running from police.

My professor, a black theologian from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania told of his repeated stops by police even when dressed formally with a coat and tie. In a December 1999, a report by the New York State Attorney General found that of the 175,000 stops by NYPD officers from 1998 through 1999, about 84 percent were blacks or Hispanics while less than half the city population, yet during the same time only 13 percent of the stops were of the 43 percent of white New Yorkers. In precincts that were 90 percent white, more than 53 percent of the total stops were blacks or Hispanic. Across the border in New Jersey the story is similar. A study of traffic stops on the New Jersey Turnpike found that 46 percent of those stopped were black, but only 13.5 percent of the cars on road had a black driver or passenger. Further south in Maryland in a study between January 1995 and December 1997, revealed that 70 percent of the stops by the State Police were of the 17.5 percent black drivers. Whoever said affirmative action was dead is wrong; it has just become racial profiling.

The NJ Superintendent of the State Police justified his statistics saying, "mostly minorities traffic in marijuana and cocaine". Federal studies though show that blacks commit drug offenses at a rate proportional to their percent of population. And for the past twenty years, drug use among black youth has been consistently lower per capita than among white youth. A recent General Accounting Office study concluded that black female citizens are nine times more likely than white female citizens to be subjected to x-ray searches by US Customs Officials, yet they are less than half as likely to be carrying contraband. This experience is shared by many black men, even Atty. Gen. Holder, and the offense of driving while black is not just a joke to many people of color. This experience is repeated time and again for Hispanic Americans in areas near our borders.

Earlier this month police in Oklahoma City arrested one of their own for repeated sexual assault on black women. This officer would profile black women living in poorer sections of the city and assault them, because they would not report the incident. After at least a dozen alleged assaults, one woman reported an incident that led to an investigation and the subsequent arrest. Incidents like this point to the basic distrust people of color have with police forces. It will take many more actions to look into police forces by outside agencies to change this distrust.

It isn't only in public safety that presents a credibility gap to the King's American Dream. Blacks are very skeptical of the white health care industry since the Tuskegee Experiment, which ended in 1972, and became public knowledge. Our government-sponsored experiment on black men with syphilis who went untreated for 60 years takes its toll in black distrust of the medical profession. The line of abuses runs to Sickle Cell Disease as well. Identified in 1910, there was no significant research done until the 70's. Because of the hereditary nature of the disease, blacks that carried the gene were told that the problem could affect their children. This was read as an attempt to limit the African American population by white leaders. This paranoid behavior is understandable.

I was told in my Chicago time by a black Chicago woman with a master's degree that the hospital where I worked experimented on black babies because they were poor. She was dead serious and only represented what black people fear. As a consequence blacks do not use the medical systems as much as whites. Between 1985 and 1992, tuberculosis among blacks increased 26%. Currently African Americans have the highest overall cancer incidence of any population in the US. African Americans have a higher rate of stroke, cirrhosis and diabetes than any other population. Is it surprising that the worst healthcare systems are located in predominately black sections of major cities? Here too, Martin's dream became a bad check. In 1963 Martin said the "Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity". Yet in 2014 the employment-population ratios for all young men is 54 percent, with whites at 55 percent, young women at 50 percent, blacks and Asians at 40 percent, and Hispanics 47.0 percent. A lot of this disparity is due to education.

In 1954, the Supreme Court issued its famous Brown vs. the Board of Education decision and the Little Rock schools were desegregated. Yet, in 2014, most black students attend majority black schools with a third of black students attending a school that is 90 to 100 percent black. The statistics of black males completing high school within these systems are appalling. Yet, in our great cities like Chicago where I lived for a year and a half, the white population has left to follow the good jobs into the white suburbs, and there is residential segregation. The black poor are living in uniformly disadvantaged neighborhoods. This is true in Chicago, Philadelphia and New York and I suspect is true in Boston as well. Nationwide when school systems become more minority populated, they have less financial support from state legislatures. The most notorious example of civil injustice with public schools is the closings in Chicago and Philadelphia that will mainly affect minority students. In Chicago, over 50 schools closed. In Philadelphia, over 23 schools closed. Sadly, minority students will now be jammed packed into classes in schools outside of their immediate community and denied the personal attention essential to an adequate K-12 education. Clearly, here too the promissory note written on the great vaults of opportunity has not yet been cashed.

The National Center for Educational Statistics did a head count of black men in college, and compared that to the Department of Justice count of inmates. There are 1.4 million black men in college now, compared with 840,000 black men in prison. Much of this is because of the war on drugs and mandatory sentencing where the rate of incarceration among black males is seven times that of white males. Here Attorney General Holder got some support in eliminating these mediatory sentencing from both the right and the left politicians. But clearly here the promissory note has not yet matured. While some figures are better in higher education, there are some disparities, Black males are 5 percent of the college population, and represent about 5.5 percent of the adult population.

So contrary to popular belief, black males aren't under-represented in higher education, but they are under-represented at competitive universities and over-represented at community colleges. The top 10 colleges for enrolling black males consist of three for-profit colleges, four community colleges and three public, four-year institutions. Martin's dream of little black boys and little black girls being able to join hands with white boys and white girls can't occur when we don't live together. Yet, when I lived in Chicago, a young black 13-year-old boy was attacked with ball bats and beat senseless while riding his bike through a white community. These economically depressed areas lack entry-level blue collar jobs- the types of jobs that become economic stepping-stones to those better jobs in better industries. In the area around the University of Chicago the most prevalent entry level jobs that could be had by the black youth that lived there was in the drug trade, this is not the drug trade like CVS, but the illegal drug trade.

I have met young men, teenage boys really, who were the breadwinners for families whose only trade were drugs. Is it no wonder the rumor that the CIA had sold drugs in Los Angeles to keep the black population down had gain such wide acceptance as truth among the black population. Currently, the largest killer of black males between the ages of 15 and 39 is not drugs, nor automobiles, nor heart disease nor cancer, but the common handgun. Many blacks believe that the prevalence guns within black society is a white plot to destroy their young. Surely many leaders of the black community do not see the check that Martin called for being the right to bear arms.

King had a dream that one day even in the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression would be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. Yet, currently in that state the right to vote is being attacked by voter ID laws. There are some other troubling aspects for meetings Martin's dreams, the changes to the welfare system for instance. The uncoupling of the farm subsidy bill from food stamps can only hurt disadvantaged peoples, especially single-parent families. During most of the recent recession, minority Americans have been disadvantaged, both in job opportunities, and welfare aid. Clearly King's challenge to honor the promissory note for single heads of black families has come back for insufficient funds.

In Martin's dream his "four children would one day live in a nation where they would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character". And yet in Texas in 1998, a black man, James Byrd was dragged to his death behind a pickup truck due to color of his skin. Byrd's lynching-by-dragging led to passage of a Texas hate crime law, and to the Federal Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention act, commonly known as the Matthew Shepard Act of 2009 and signed into law by President Obama. While an advance, we have not yet become that oasis Martin dreamt; the promises have not been kept.

Five years after his "I have a dream speech" on April 3, 1968 in the Memphis Masonic Temple Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a speech called "I've been to the mountaintop". Speaking to a black audience whose experience identifies with the Moses myth of the exodus as a myth of liberation for the black people, he talked of visions from this story. He said. "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop...Like everybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know...that we as a people will get to the Promised Land". He didn't see his promised land and probably none of us will see a perfect union, but we have seen some significant changes. Ferguson's attention at a national level is being addressed, slowly but deliberately by peoples of principle of all ethnicities. While the attorney general who supplied much of the pushback against erosions of rights is retiring, his condition of leaving was the confirmation of his successor. These might even get bipartisan approval. Democracy I feel moves forward in steps both progressive and repressive, but the march has always been in one direction. While I see Martin's dream, his promised land and proper funding for his promissory note to date is not marked insufficient funds, but still funding.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world. Amen.