

Good Livin': Hard Lessons, Big Peace

The Dirty Truth

In my neighborhood the Wednesday trash pickup is almost always delayed a day if a holiday falls on Monday, so I relaxed for a few minutes longer on the Wednesday following the national observance of Dr. King's birthday. When I passed a garbage truck on my way to work that morning, I thought about returning home to put the trash tote on the curb, but I figured the trash would be fine in the cold temperatures. Only about half the residents on my block had put out the trash; like me, they had probably assumed the trash pickup would be on Thursday because of the holiday. I only briefly considered the irony that the town had not adjusted the schedule. When the trash was not picked up again the following week – this time because of the winter storm – the tote, now overflowing with accumulated trash caused me to consider more thoughtfully the irony and dirty truth of the matter.

Most American citizens can recite at least a few basic things about Dr. Martin Luther King. Wherever people fall on the spectrum of knowledge about Dr. King, the narrative associated with his ideas is ingrained in American history. Regardless of age, race, religion, gender or any number of factors that distinguishes us, most people know that he was a man who had a dream. Even a person who only paid attention a tiny bit in school probably knows the dream had something to do with his black children living in harmony with white children. Whether you love, hate or feel indifferently about Dr. King, he was a man who lived an extraordinary life and made sacrifices that resulted in his recognition as an American hero.

My dad was a teacher of African American history, so the speeches of Dr. King shaped every aspect of my upbringing. The lessons he taught me about Dr. King evolved as excerpts from his speeches were played first, on the record player, then the cassette player, then on CDs, and ultimately accessed from an internet cloud that held more information about him than my dad could have ever imagined.

Despite all those lessons, I was still surprised by an exhibit honoring Dr. King at one of the museums we visited when I accompanied Amherst students to Bolzano, Italy in 2017. The room that held the exhibit was a large brightly lit

space filled with trash. Some of the trash was piled high in monuments around the room. Pieces of trash were placed on pillars, carefully arranged around the room. A large picket signs prominently placed throughout the exhibit read, "I AM A MAN." The curation of the trash created a path that told the story of the Sanitation Workers' Strike in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968. Even though the museum tour guide didn't speak much English, she was anxious to tell us the story of the tragedies that lead a union of sanitation workers to ban together and demand that they be treated with dignity. I would be lying if I didn't admit how excited I was that African American history had made its way to Italy, and I was even more excited that the exhibit had serendipitously become a part of our trip. The students were not quite as excited, but they were polite as we listened for familiar phrases about dreams and mountaintops. I did not understand most of what the tour guide was explaining, but the word *dignity* was included in her description of every aspect of the path that culminated in Dr. King's death.

I thought about that exhibit as I tried to reshape a bag of my own trash so that it would fit into the overflowing tote. I'm sure there are dozens of legitimate reasons that my town chose not to observe the national holiday and adjust the scheduled trash pickup, but the reasons don't minimize the irony that Dr. King's dedication to sanitation workers was a direct link to his death. His trip to Memphis was intended to offer support to the sanitation workers who were striking as a means of protesting pitiful wages and horrific working conditions.

His last address in Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968 was given before a crowd of sanitation workers and is, perhaps, one of his most memorable speeches. In the speech he talks about the threats that had been made against him and the danger that was closing in around him. He acknowledged that he had considered not going to Memphis because of the danger, but ultimately, he concluded if he didn't use his influence to help the sanitation workers, their plight would only get worse. In his final words to the weary workers, he asserted, "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, 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." The following day he was killed.

I often wonder what words my dad would borrow from Dr. King to provide a context for moving forward in the America of 2019 that seems plagued with many of the same problems that his generation combated. I think the Italian artist captured the idea that was at the core of Dr. King's ideology: dignity.

During the recent shutdown of the government, the need for dignity was reiterated in the news stories about the 800,000 employees who struggled to support themselves and their loved ones.

Dignity dictates that children remain with their parents, even as immigration laws are argued, rewritten, and reinforced.

Dignity prevents a random traffic stop from escalating into a funeral service.

Our own community could not prevent the tragic death of a homeless man who, by all accounts, refused assistance, but by the same accounts was a quiet, peaceful man. Dignity determined how others treated him, so he ate, walked and sat undisturbed - leaning into his own choices.

Treating others with dignity doesn't mean we have to like or agree with their perspectives. Incorporating dignity into the blueprint of our relationships doesn't even require us to understand (or know) another person's story. If we are willing to insist that dignity be a part of every premise, antidote, formula, map, and hypothesis amid the hills and valleys, mountains, pathways and side streets of our converging beliefs, maybe then, our truths will be a little less dirty.
