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Evolution of the Human Spirit

I say to you today, my friends, ... even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."...

I have a dream that my ... children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. ...

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, ...

That was some speech, wasn't it? August 28, 1963. From the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, Dr. Martin Luther King spoke to a quarter million. Many considered it the height of the Civil Rights movement. Scholars consider it the best American speech of the 20th century.

I still get goose bumps hearing his words.

Tuesday is Dr. King's birthday.

This morning I'd like to talk about the evolution of the human spirit – particularly in how this manifests in how we relate to one another in the nitty-gritty of human society.

One expression of this evolution is a shift from reptile-like us-and-them thinking to empathy, from seeing the world in terms of self-and-other to recognizing the greater "we."

The Civil Rights movement was one small reflection of this larger shifting in consciousness. We're doing much better than many of us religious liberals and progressives imagine. Dr. King's dream is manifesting, even if imperfectly.

And as the virus of prejudice weakens, it mutates into other forms. As empathy grows, those who cling to us-and-them thinking grow more strident as they frantically point to anyone they can think of to fear: Blacks, Hispanics, gays, immigrants, terrorists, liberals, conservatives, government, poor people, rich people, Muslims, secularists, anybody who is not just like them.

This morning I want to suggest that the human spirit evolves rapidly when we have the calmness of mind to see through the politically driven and media enhanced fear, we have the openness of heart to feel the real suffering that is still around us and we have the gratitude of spirit to embrace the love, caring and empathy flowing through more and more people.

This is what Martin Luther King showed us: he named the hurt, held up a credible vision of inclusivity and showed how to walk from one toward the other for the sake of our children and our children's children.

Inter-Communal Violence

The opposite of empathy in society is inter-communal violence – one community terrorizing another.

Our country has a long history of inter-communal violence. Deadly riots attacked Pilgrims, Puritans, Quakers, Catholics, Mormons, Jews, Germans, Poles, Italians,

Irish and Chinese. Japanese Americans were forced into concentration camps. Native Americans bore genocide as tens of thousands died from disease, hunger and exposure on the “trail of tears.”

But the longest-running, governmental-indulged violence against a group of people was against African Americans: a deadly rampage in New York City in 1741; draft riots and lynching in 1863 (depicted in the 2002 film *Gangs of New York*); thousands killed in the post-civil war South; deadly race riots in the early 20th century.

But in the beginning of the 20th century, lynching and rioting declined. The 1880s and 1890s saw 150 lynchings per year. By the time of the Civil Rights Movement mid-century, they were almost gone.

The last well-known lynching was in 1955 when 14-year-old Emmett Till was kidnapped, beaten, mutilated and killed in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. An all-white jury acquitted his murders in a perfunctory trial.

To be sure, we recall more recent racial incidents. For example, in 1998, three Texas racists beat James Byrd, Jr. senseless and dragged him behind a pickup truck until he hit a culvert and was torn to pieces.

But this was not a lynching. In a lynching, a whole community comes together in a carnival atmosphere as the law looks the other way. This was a hate crime where a few individuals privately targeted a minority. James Byrd’s tragic death was the vicious acts of misfits not the concerted act of a community.

In 1996, the FBI began keeping records of hate crimes. That year there were five hate crime murders. Since then the number has dropped to about one per year.

Any killing is terrible. But put this in context: during this same time, countrywide, there were 17,000 murders per year. In this century, the hate-crime

murder rate had dropped to statistical noise.¹

Non-Lynching Violence

Of course, violence manifests in ways other than lynching and murder.

I grew up in Houston, Texas where my family was involved in desegregating the schools. I knew about prejudice. But not personally from my friends or family friends – we were in liberal circles.

Then I remember camping one summer when I was ten. My family was staying in the Tennessee Smoky Mountains. I got to know a few kids who were staying in a nearby campsite with their parents. One evening, sitting around the campfire, they told stories about putting bacon on the tent of “niggers” to attract bears in the night. I remember the cold fear settling in my chest as they laughed.

I doubt this incident was recorded in anybody’s statistics on racism.

Of course, incidents were recorded. Many of us remember the intimidations, assaults and murders of the Civil Rights era. Technically they were acts of terrorism: “directed at civilians, low in casualties, high in publicity, intended to intimidate, and directed toward a political goal, namely preventing racial desegregation ...”²

But the segregationists, like other terrorists around the world, defeated themselves. Their acts became so depraved that public sympathy turned toward their victims.³

After Dr. King’s assassination in 1968 and the second Civil Rights act that same

¹ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. Penguin Group. Kindle Edition. 2011. pp. 385-386

² Steven Pinker, p. 386.

³ Steven Pinker, p. 386.

year, opposition to Civil Rights faded, anti-black riots became a distant memory and terrorism against blacks no longer received support from any significant community.

Since the FBI began tracking assaults and intimidations in 1996, less than half of 1% were hate crimes. For all their publicity, hate crimes have become blessedly rare in modern America.

Attitudes

Demoralizing beliefs have also dropped. Sixty years ago the majority of Americans opposed blacks attending white schools, said they'd move out of a neighborhood if a black family moved next door and strongly opposed interracial marriage. By the end of the century, only relatively small percentages still held these views.

Of course, plenty of vicious racism can be found in fringe groups and Internet cesspools. But they are in sharp decline in the mainstream. You may recall, in 2002, the Senate Republican minority leader, Trent Lott, praised the segregationist Strom Thurmond's 1948 presidential bid. This unleashed such a firestorm – even in his own party – that Lott resigned.

Today

Where does this leave us today?

There are still racial feelings and inequities amongst us. But they are in deep decline. There are parallel movements in woman's rights, gay rights, children's rights and animal rights. And these are part of a larger decline in violence for over 10,000 years.

I know this is not a message we're accustomed to hearing. I was resistant to it when I picked up Steven Pinker's book, *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. But he approached history not so much through stories and antidotes as through a dull but rigorous analysis of measurable data like rates of war,

genocide, homicide, wife beating, dueling, use of torture as well as incidents of lynching and hate crimes and attitude surveys.

He goes on for hundreds of pages carefully examining study after study. Cumulatively, it's quite convincing. I've given you just a tiny sampling this morning.

The picture that emerges is an unsteady, uneven but unmistakable decline in violence from armed war to social attitudes. We are becoming more peaceful, empathetic and kind.

Why We Don't Notice

Why aren't we more aware of these historical trends? I think there are a number of reasons.

Trends not Absolutes

1. We tend to notice our health more when we are sick than when we are well.

If we're convinced we are going to Hades in a hand basket, there is plenty of antidotal evidence of man's inhumanity to everybody, even in the best of times. It takes an unromantic, systematic culling of vast amounts of data to see the trends. And they are trends, not absolutes. We still have war, murder, hatred and violence. It's not a perfect world. Just statistically better.

Temporary Reversals

2. There are many examples of temporary reversals in trends.

There was an upsurge in violence in the 1960's and 1970's due to the romanticizing of violence. But in recent decades, it's dropped back into the general historic trend downward.

During the first half of the 20th century, there was a dramatic upturn in war. But in the last 50 years we've seen what's called "the long peace": a historically unprecedented drop in wars, the current conflicts notwithstanding.

Empathy Increases Sensitivity

3. Much of the reduction in violence is due to growth of human empathy. This helps us be kinder and more sensitive toward those around us. But that same empathy elicits a stronger response to the smaller levels of violence we still have.

We were upset by the torture in Abu Ghraib military prison. It was inhumane to say the least. But a few centuries ago, torture was a form of public entertainment. People used to gather to watch people drawn and quartered, have their bodies broken on a wheel, be burned or stoned to death or be locked up in a metal box which had points to pierce them and a horn to amplify their screams so all could hear.

A few centuries ago large battalions of young men were slaughtered on the battlefield in defense of gentlemanly honor. Today we angst over many fewer soldiers killed in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Not so long ago children were worked to death in US factories. Today we worry if the helmets of professional football players provide enough safety.

The increase in empathy means a statistical decrease in violence and an increase in our sensitivity to what remains.

Long Term Trends

4. The statistical trends are measured in terms of generations and centuries. The good news of long-term trends may be little comfort in the face of remaining inequities in own span of years.

Fear of Complacency

5. People like you and me would like us to do more to make the world better. Sometimes we're reluctant to acknowledge progress for fear it will make us complacent. Perhaps we secretly believe we have to feel guilty to do what's right.

Truth Frees

But I would suggest the opposite. I believe the truth makes us free, not shame and guilt. Guilt don't help us empathize with others. Empathy is the larger, more powerful force in the long run.

And the truth is we aren't perfect, but humanity is generally headed in the right direction. We can celebrate our collective successes. This will encourage us to deal with the remaining inequities and injustices. To not acknowledge the evolution of the human spirit can drop us into compassion fatigue and lethargy. To embrace our evolution can raise us higher.

Martin Luther King declared, "I have a dream." And we are living that dream. We aren't perfect. But his dream lives in us. It is manifesting through all of us. We should be encouraged.

And like Dr. King, we should continue to dream of the next higher possibility and be guided.

Utopia

So are we headed for utopia?

No. I don't think so for at least four reasons:

Sensitivity

1. Empathy is the foundation of ethical behavior. But as I've mentioned, empathy makes us more sensitive. Things may get better without feeling better.

Uneven Evolution

2. The evolution of the human spirit is uneven.

Last year on this Sunday I spoke about my recent travels in Canaan: Israel and the West Bank. The ethnocentrism there gave my heart the same chill I felt hearing people brag about racist pranks when I was a child.

And there are many places in worse difficulty. No matter what the average

level of enlightenment, there will always be people more highly evolved and people who behave more primitively

As I said earlier, those who cling to us-and-them thinking are becoming more strident and combative as they shrink in number. The utopian dream of us all happily in the same groove is unlikely.

Mutation

3. While over the course of several generations we may reduce one kind of injustice, the human capacity for fear, greed and ignorance can mutate into new forms.

The most recent form is the distortion of our economic system. People have always stolen wealth from others. But in the last 30 years we've seen the whole economic system hijacked. Some people are draining money out of the economy without producing any real wealth to put back into it. They aren't lynching people, throwing rocks, sending hate mail or blowing up houses. They are just stealing from the common wealth. It has an indirect though devastating cumulative effect on the rest of us.

Roger and I have both spoken about this at various times. We'll come back to this issue on other Sundays because it is very pressing.

Value of Suffering

4. We need suffering in order to evolve.

We don't come to church initially because your lives are hunky-dory and we're looking for ways to pass a little time. Hurt or yearning draws us to develop our higher potentials.

To reiterate what I said earlier, it helps us evolve to see, feel and know intimately the pain and inequity around us *if*, at the same time, we see, feel and know intimately the love, generosity and kindness imbued in us.

Both at the same time: dark and light, hatred and love, meanness and generosity.

To know pain without love is discouraging. To know love and not pain is to lose touch with aspects of reality. To feel both at the same time provides the richness that helps us deepen and evolve.

This is what Martin Luther King embodied. One of the reasons he touched us so deeply was his ability to eloquently and unequivocally name the suffering around us. And at the same time he articulated a real dream of a better land and a strategy for moving toward it.

If he'd had just the dream and rose above the suffering, he would not have touched us. If he had just dwelled on how awful it was without putting forth a higher vision and tangible ways to walk in that direction, he would not have touched us.

But he did both.

In fact, the night before he was killed, he spoke about this to a crowd at the Masonic temple in Memphis. The speech closes:

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really 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. 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 tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

He saw the difficulty and the dream. He conveyed them both in ways that felt real and credible. And at the same time he knew that the larger movement of the human spirit is not about you or me individually. It's about all of us together. It's about the world we leave for our children. It's about the love we leave behind. That's what's most important.

Embody

Rather than talk about this more, let's embody it ourselves.

First were going to do a Tibetan practice we've done before called "Tong Lin." With the in breath we draw in the pain and suffering, the stress and strive of our lives and the world around us. We draw it all into our heart.

And with the out breath we send out love, light and healing.

We'll do this in silence for a few minutes.

Then we'll sing an African American spiritual: "There is more love somewhere."

And we'll sing it two ways at once. "There is more love somewhere,"

acknowledges the pain and suffering we feel, see and know and the yearning for greater peace.

The phrase "There is more love right here," acknowledges the love and healing in our midst today.

So we're doing to sing it both ways, shifting back and forth from "somewhere" to "right here" to "somewhere."

"There is more love *somewhere*. There is more love *right here*. I'm gonna keep on 'til I find it. There is more love *somewhere*."

We'll hold both the yearning and the realization, the hurt and the healing.

But first, we'll do some tong lin: breathing in the darkness and breathing out the light.

...

Closing Words

May our vision be clear, may our footing be steady, may our minds be at peace and may the journey itself be our home.