Dr. King in Chicago

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It has been more than 45 years since Dr. King's appearance at Congregation Solel on June 30, 1966 during the "Chicago Freedom Summer." This afternoon, on the eve of the King holiday marking the 83rd anniversary of his birth, I hope to reflect on the historical context of that visit, and the larger significance of Dr. King's life and work.

A convenient frame for considering the context of Dr. King's visit is the enactment of two laws, one in the summer of 1965, the year before King spoke at Solel, and the other in April of 1968, in the immediate aftermath of King's assassination.

On August 6, 1965, with King at his side, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law, the crowning achievement of the civil rights movement it has been called. This was after Montgomery and Selma and Birmingham. After the freedom rides and the sit-ins. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had outlawed segregation in public facilities and discrimination in federal programs.

After all of these came the Voting Rights Act—called a crowning achievement because it assured Southern blacks of the ballot and the opportunity to translate their numbers into political power—at last bringing formal democracy to the South one hundred years after the end of the Civil War in a struggle that had lasted for generations. Blacks who had suffered under the lash of white supremacy and the badge of black inferiority had triumphed over pitiless, seemingly insurmountable odds.

And the principal weapon in their epic victory—at the constant urging of their leader—had been nonviolence.

Reviewing a book about the King years, Garry Wills wrote, "there is no time in our country's history of which we can be more proud." One would have thought that

blacks all over America would have been bursting with pride at this stupendous achievement of their people. But they were not.

In the very month the Voting Rights Act became law, the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles flamed into one of the worst racial conflagrations in our history. It lasted for six days, spread over 45 square miles, and destroyed some 200 million dollars worth of property—34 people were killed, 4,000 arrested. How could two such dramas as the Voting Rights Act and the Watts riot play in the American theater in the same month?

The answer is that America was two theaters, not one. The civil rights struggle was a drama of the South, the Civil Rights movement a Southern movement. The story of black Americans outside the South had an entirely different script.

An old folk song captures the point. "The South doesn't care how close a Negro gets just so he doesn't get too high; the North doesn't care how high he gets just so he doesn't get too close."

For a long time, Southern whites didn't worry about blacks getting too close because Jim Crow prevented them from getting too high. In the North, however, lacking Jim Crow, whites were indeed concerned about blacks getting too close.

The literature about exactly how whites outside the South prevented blacks from getting too close portrays an unremitting struggle, every bit as brutal as the Southern one over white supremacy. Racial epithets, fecal material in blacks' mailboxes and doorways, burning crosses on lawns, slashed tires and broken windshields, beatings, shootings, Molotov cocktails, arson, race riots—all were a part of it.

But insults and vandalism and violence weren't the only weapons.

Racial zoning and the segregationist practices of the real estate industry created a dual housing market. Home owner associations—memorialized in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*—helped to enforce it. So did banks and other lenders who denied loans to blacks trying to move into white neighborhoods. In Chicago the result was the "Black Belt," replicated in black ghettos in big cities all across the country.

As more Southern migrants poured into urban ghettos, the only options for most residents were to double up, triple up, and quadruple up in apartments and homes that were subdivided into ever smaller compartments. With demand

overwhelming, prices in the black market rose compared to prices for whites. Nor did landlords have to spend money on repair and maintenance.

So where and when they could find it, blacks paid more for housing than whites, and for their money got bad shelter in terrible neighborhoods. A description of Chicago's Black Belt refers to "decaying buildings, leaking roofs, doors without hinges, broken windows, unsanitary plumbing and rotting floors."

Hemmed in under steadily worsening conditions, blacks exerted enormous pressure on adjacent neighborhoods, building by building, block by block. Escape from intolerable conditions was the blacks' motivation; floodgates threatening to open was what whites saw.

Under these circumstances, with a readiness to use violence, promptly and viciously, as one of its defining characteristics, the struggle outside the South to prevent blacks from getting too close did, indeed, from the end of Reconstruction through the entirety of the civil rights movement, keep the floodgates mostly closed.

As he viewed the still smoldering embers in Watts, Dr. King came to believe that the plight of millions of black Americans, confined in big city ghettos in the North and West, was as pressing as the travail of Southern blacks. The next major campaign of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he decided, should bring the strategy of nonviolent change to the North.

So in the summer of 1966—the summer of his Solel visit—Martin Luther King came to Chicago to take on a challenge just as daunting and just as fearsome as Jim Crow.

The choice of Chicago was not happenstance. If Chicago and Boss Richard J. Daley could be brought around, so could other big cities. "It is in Chicago," Dr. King said, "that the grapes of wrath are stored."

On a hot July Sunday, only days after his Solel speech, King addressed some 30,000 of his followers in Soldier Field, then led many of them on a march to the Loop where the Chicago Freedom Movement's demands were taped to a City Hall door, thus marking the start of Dr. King's campaign to dismantle black ghettos and begin open housing.

The campaign was not a success. King was outmaneuvered by Daley and, after a long, violent summer, gained only unenforceable rhetoric in exchange for ending his

open housing marches. And then, a year and a half later, he paid for what he had done, and what he was doing, with his life.

In a matter of days, Congress passed a Fair Housing Law which aimed to end ghettoization and foster integrated living patterns. The new law, which almost certainly would not have been enacted had King not been assassinated, can be viewed as an analogue to the Voting Rights Act.

As the Voting Rights Act culminated the Southern white supremacy struggle, so the Fair Housing Act culminated the aborted open housing struggle in the North—aborted because Dr. King's death deprived SCLC of King's unique leadership and effectively ended its national open housing campaign.

And there you have, in a necessarily abbreviated fashion, the historical context for the moment in 1966 when Dr. Martin Luther King stood at this podium.

Now, some four and a half decades later, with the nation having recently dedicated a national memorial to Dr. King on its Washington Mall, what shall we say of the man and his legacy?

Of the man, we may say, in a word, that for all of his human flaws he was extraordinary. He was only 26 when he took over leadership of the Montgomery bus boycott. Yet in the ensuing few years, he became an orator now numbered among America's greatest and the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

And he captained one of the most inspiring voyages in human history, the achievement of which has been compared in dimension to Gandhi's ending of colonial rule in India. When that voyage ended he did not rest on his laurels but instead embarked on still another voyage, as difficult as the first, in which he soon lost his life.

I remember when Dr. King spoke out against the Vietnam War in the midst of monumental civil rights battles. Oh no, I thought. Why imperil the "purity" of the civil rights struggle with the controversy over Vietnam? But the Vietnam War was not just, and Memphis janitors were not receiving economic justice, and Martin Luther King was a man driven by a vision in which justice was central.

He was indeed a man for his times, and his vision of a brotherhood of justice —like Washington's of a new nation, and Lincoln's of a Union to be preserved—was a vision that transcended his time and speaks still to following generations.

His legacy? That is a different matter.

The vision statement for the King memorial focuses on Dr. King's championing of America's potential for freedom, opportunity, and justice. On the first of these—freedom—Martin Luther King's legacy is one of enormous and lasting achievement. From the darkness—the virtual slavery—of sharecropping and Jim Crow, he enabled millions of Americans to emerge into the sunlight of political freedom. Thousands of black elected officials, now including the President of the United States, are testimony to that part of the King legacy.

Howard Zinn writes that although people's movements show an infinite capacity for recurrence, they have generally been defeated or absorbed or perverted. But historians point to four of them that have succeeded: ending slavery in the British Empire, ending colonialism worldwide, ending apartheid in South Africa, and ending Jim Crow in the American South. As legacies go, it is hard to imagine a better rating.

Not so, however, as to the other two American "potentials" the memorial statement identifies—justice and opportunity.

Take Dr. King's campaign for justice in housing—for open housing and against residential segregation. Here he may be said to have achieved—at the cost of his young life—the enactment of the Fair Housing Act.

But the Act was born with a grievous birth defect—the price paid to Southern segregationists for their affirmative votes was to strip the law of its enforcement provisions. As one historian put it, the Fair Housing Act was like a beautiful bird without wings to fly. Twenty years later, in 1988, the Act was amended to strengthen its enforcement provisions, but it still remains a bird barely able to rise a few feet above ground.

Unlike the Voting Rights Act, which brought the force of the federal government to bear against state and local voting subterfuges, the Housing Act relies principally on victims of discrimination to identify and prosecute the housing subterfuges of landlords, the real estate industry, and local governments.

The result is that more than 40 years after fair housing became the law of the land, we have made little progress in dismantling black ghettos and undoing residential segregation. Housing discrimination and racially segregated living patterns remain imbedded characteristics of American life. The 40 years, says Jonathan Alter in *Newsweek*, have for the movement been a time in the desert, bereft of strong leadership.

It is difficult to convey the nature and depth of this monumental failure without burdening you with statistics. Let me instead give a couple of examples:

Example number one: what's happened to our racial ghettos, such as the one in Watts that sent Dr. King off on his second fateful voyage?

A report issued this past fall by several Washington think tanks gives the answer. Although the populations of the "original" ghettos of Dr. King's day have thinned (while becoming even more impoverished), so many new ghettos have appeared in our metropolitan areas that, overall, our ghettos have not merely persisted but spread. So much for the King goal of dismantling the racial ghetto.

Example number two: based on thousands of tests in dozens of metropolitan areas, the most recent study by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development shows blacks being discriminated against in the rental of housing over one in five times, Hispanics over one in four. So, if you are a black or Hispanic family trying to rent a dwelling, there is more than a 20-25 percent chance that you will suffer discrimination.

One analysis of these figures concludes that in the rental and sale of housing, blacks and Hispanics are discriminated against over three million times a year. And that three-million figure does not include discrimination in mortgage lending, home insurance, and other housing related practices. So much for the King goal of open housing.

This disheartening housing picture speaks not only to justice—the second of the King memorial's freedom, justice, and opportunity triumvirate—but to opportunity as well.

For housing is not merely shelter. In urban America, to live in segregated housing means to live in a segregated neighborhood.

To live in a segregated neighborhood means—almost always—to live in a neighborhood with high poverty, poor schools, and much crime.

And to live in a neighborhood with high poverty, poor schools, and much crime means to live a life with, statistically speaking, a tragically limited trajectory. A study conducted jointly by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser HMO, involving over 17,000 persons, is called the ACE study. ACE stands for adverse childhood experience.

The ACE study shows an astonishing correlation of childhood adversity not only with mental and emotional problems in adulthood, but with "hard" medical conditions such as heart and lung disease, cancer, and diabetes. Indeed, childhood adversity and its lifetime effects on health and well-being are now often cited as America's most important public health issue.

Consider, then, the effect on a child of spending her or his formative years in one of those neighborhoods with high poverty, poor schools, and much crime, facing statistically high risks of an adulthood beset by mental and emotional problems, as well as by heart disease, lung cancer, and the like.

In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin writes to his nephew and namesake that he has been set down in a ghetto, born into a society in which your countrymen "have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives." And so—by our unwillingness to dismantle the racial ghetto and to end housing discrimination—do we today continue to destroy hundreds of thousands of lives.

On justice and opportunity, then, at least in the housing arena, the legacy of Martin Luther King has <u>not</u> been one of achievement.

In other arenas also—take for example, criminal justice—the King vision of a brotherhood of justice has not fared well. In the four decades following Dr. King's death the nation's imprisonment rate more than quintupled, rising from 93 to 491 per 100,000 persons. That 491 figure may be compared with 132 for England, 74 for Germany, and 72 for France.

But the racial disparities in the criminal justice system are as disturbing as its severity. While roughly the same percentages of the adult black and white populations use illegal drugs, blacks are nine times <u>more</u> likely than whites to serve prison sentences for drug crimes.

In 1980 there were over three times as many black men in college and university as in prison and jail. Twenty years later the number of black men in college and university was actually fewer than the number behind bars. I haven't checked the figures recently, but they are undoubtedly worse today.

Indeed, our mass incarceration of young black men has been described as <u>the</u> civil rights issue of our time—as daunting a reign of terror as was official segregation and Jim Crow. One projection is that nearly 40 percent of Alabama's black male

population could soon be permanently barred from voting as a result of felon disenfranchisement laws.

In short, although Dr. King's legacy on civic and political freedom is a glorious and lasting one, the King legacies on justice and opportunity remain to be realized.

In his speech at the dedication of the King memorial, President Obama said that Dr. King somehow gave voice to our deepest dreams and our most lasting ideals. Dr. King's mission, the president said, was not only civil and political equality but economic justice. Not only freeing blacks from the shackles of discrimination but also freeing many Americans from their own prejudices. And freeing Americans of every color from the depredations of poverty.

Martin Luther King's achievement in the arena of civil and political equality has earned him a secure place in the world's pantheon of people's movements.

As for justice and opportunity, and freeing us from our prejudices, in the words of the song from Dr. King's favorite movie, we still have "a long, long way to run."

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