

Civil righting the wrongs

I wasn't at the massive civil rights march on Washington on August 28, 1963 but along with millions of other Americans I was riveted to news broadcasts of the event. For black Americans, this was a seminal event in their struggle for equality. After marches throughout the south, lunch counter demonstrations, 'occupying' seating on busses, the removal of segregated water faucets, toilets, etc., black America was building to a crescendo and would soon move to champion the Civil Rights Act (of 1964) and later, the Voting Rights Act (of 1965). The 200,000+ people who attended the rally on our Nation's Mall were, understandably, ecstatic. Most of the rest of us were, too, as this rally seemed to indicate that the black community was no longer a sub-community of America, but that we were really all 'in this together.' In short, it was an exclamation mark on our national path towards racial equality.

Since then, their movement has built coalitions and not only brought in many black organizations but also non-black ones into the fold. That's the good news. The passage of the Civil rights Act was also good news. Affirmative Action (to give an advantage to black students) and School Bussing (to racially balance classes and equalize black children's access to quality education) drove the point home as did the Voting rights Act to prevent states from instituting procedures or regulations that would make voting more difficult for minorities. All were well-intentioned and helped move the civil rights struggle into America's consciousness.

Since the sixties, we've seen the laws and intentions challenged as the black community has also changed, grown and improved itself in many states, unfortunately not in many of our major cities. The problems these folks face are traditional and generational ones. Poverty is a traditional problem. Gang warfare and indiscriminate drive-by killings with automatic weapons is not. Education is traditional. Absentee fathering is not. The bigots among us will just say, "Well, that's who *these people* are and nothing's going to change, no matter how many laws you pass." The more charitable and decent among us will probably say that, "If we ignore the least (or most needy) among us, how can we hope to build a just society for all of us?"

THAT'S what civil rights is all about - building a decent and just society that respects the least among us as well as those whose wheels squeak the loudest. This brings me to all the other pressing social issues of our day and the many groups in our country who feel that it's now their turn at the podium and in our courtrooms. There's not enough room in this article to address them all, and I'm not really sure I'm brave enough to, because the truth is that even when we ask rhetorical questions about some subjects or issues we are vilified, branded this or that and sometimes end up on somebody's enemies list for later action.

Where I WILL go is to the subject of how societies change. While it's true that legislation builds a nation, it's also true that you cannot legislate morality or totally ensure fair choice, fair play, fair anything. Without a moral compass, strong conviction or belief in justice, a society can never hope to guarantee equality. It can only make laws and punish the law-breakers, and while some societies can change overnight, most change, incrementally, and from the bottom up. Our constitution guaranteed us certain basic human (civil) rights, but it's up to us to live up to them by our actions. I don't need a law to tell me what's right and wrong. My parents and my teachers did that. I don't need the Attorney General to sit at my kitchen table over coffee and explain it to me. But that's just me.

My dream is that one day all men and women will be judged by their actions and not just their words and that the thoughts they hold dear precipitate charity and compassion.

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