

Reflection and Prayer Time: Timely Help from the Sidelines
January 25, 2021

Last Monday we did not meet due to the celebration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday and I hope that we all did something to honor his life and that we carry that honoring throughout the year. I've often lamented that I didn't learn about the Civil Rights struggle very much until I entered seminary. I remember learning just a few years ago that Martin Luther King Jr. improvised the most iconic part of his "I Have a Dream Speech." It is strange to think that it might have been a completely different speech with an entirely different impact. The I Have a Dream phrase was considered but was determined by King's advisors to be too trite and too cliché, used it too many times already.

On Wednesday, August 28, 1963, 250,000 Americans united at the Lincoln Memorial for the final speech of the March on Washington. As Martin Luther King Jr. stood at the podium, he eventually pushed his notes aside. The night before the march, Dr. King began working on his speech with a small group of advisers in the lobby of the Willard Hotel. The original speech was more political and less historic, according to Clarence B. Jones, and it did not include any reference to dreams. Looking at his prepared speech, he balked when he reached this mouthful of a sentence: "And so today, let us go back to our communities as members of the international association for the advancement of creative dissatisfaction." Instead, he transformed his speech into a sermon. He instructed the audience to "Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama ... South Carolina ... Georgia ... Louisiana ... to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair." After delivering the now famous line, "we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream," Dr. King transformed his speech into a sermon.

When he balked, there was 10 seconds of silence as he felt the weight of the moment and the inadequacy of his prepared remarks. Onstage near Dr. King, singer Mahalia Jackson reportedly kept saying, "Tell 'em about the dream, Martin," and while no one will know if he heard her, it could likely have been the inspiration he needed. Dr. King then continued, "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. ..." And then the famous Baptist preacher preached on, adding repetition and outlining the specifics of his dream. And while this improvised speech given on that hot August day in 1963 was not considered a universal success immediately, it is now recognized as one of the greatest speeches in American history. And aren't we glad Mahalia Jackson could look out upon the crowd and see what was needed! Aren't we glad Dr King left room for someone from the sidelines to in an impromptu, spontaneous moment change the tone and change the course of history?

If you've never heard of the Johari window, it's a technique used to build trust in a team. There are four quadrants – what is known by the self and known by others, what is known by the self and unknown by others, what is unknown by the self but known by others, and what is unknown to the self or others. Today in the Women's Empowerment program at Freedom House, volunteers will assist the women in recognizing their strengths and worth by posing the question – what would your best friend say about you and what your best qualities are? Often we need "another" to help us see clearly and to realize our potential as beloved child of God. Aren't we glad Mahalia saw Martin's way forward with the speech to have the desired enduring impact it's having.

May God bless us with vision and love for one another to see ourselves and our neighbors in the beloved community of God. Thanks be to God.

