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In Remembrance of the Death of Martin Luther King a Half-Century Ago

Fifty years ago, I was 16 years old, a junior at Fowlerville High School, living on a dairy farm, and (for what it was worth at the time as far as having any measurable impact) a supporter of Robert Kennedy's bid to be president.

It was not the assassination of Martin Luther King on April 4, 1968 that had a major impact on my life at that time. Rather, the seismic event was, first and foremost, the death of my father at the age of 38 the previous November. It was an event that suddenly thrust me into the necessity of having to milk the cows twice a day and otherwise operate our farm, while still going to school--adult responsibilities if you will--but also gave me a measure of freedom that I'd never experienced before. My father was no longer there, "on his sad height."

The other major event that affected me personally was the murder of Bobby Kennedy a little over two months later, in early June; the assassin's bullet ending the campaign and suddenly leaving me--and I'm sure many other supporters--stranded. Instead of riding what seemed a tide, we now found ourselves,

to borrow from Shakespeare, "in the shallows and miseries."

In the aftermath of Kennedy's death, I purchased an album of his speeches. Among them was his impromptu speech, given on the evening of Martin Luther King's death to the crowd who had assembled for his campaign appearance.

In the ensuing years it's been considered one of his best--if fact, someone called it his "Gettysburg Address", short and heartfelt. The message of this speech, and others from that album, had a great influence on my views and on my early writing.

Unfortunately, a half-century later, the message of this particular speech remains relevant. It seems we still have some ways to go in "taming the savageness of man and making gentle the life of the world."

Here is Robert F. Kennedy's full speech in Indianapolis on Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, along with a link of him giving it

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"I have bad news for you, for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight.

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort.

In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black -- considering the evidence there evidently is that there were white people who were responsible -- you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization -- black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred toward one another.

Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.

For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote: "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black.

So, I shall ask you tonight to return home, to say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King, that's true, but more importantly to say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love -- a prayer for understanding and that compassion of which I spoke.

We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times; we've had difficult times in the past; we will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence; it is not the end of lawlessness; it is not the end of disorder.

But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings who abide in our land.

Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.

Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.