



IT'S BEEN 52 YEARS, ARE WE READY TO LISTEN?

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"Oh God, when is this violence going to stop?"

Those words might conceivably belong to any place and time, given humanity's unfortunate tendencies toward hatred, cruelty, and destruction. They are, however, fifty-two years old, and were spoken by Senator Robert Kennedy in response to the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April of 1968.

Kennedy had just boarded a plane and was headed to Indianapolis, merely another in a long line of campaign stops following his recent entry into the race for the presidency. It turned out to be much more than that, as the senator ignored the advice of his aides, most of whom were pleading with him to cancel the event and pressed on to Indianapolis. He discarded most, if not all of his pre-planned remarks, in favor of the last-minute informal comments that he hastily scribbled down during the flight.

It was already dark when he arrived, and in keeping with the nation's collective mood, a slow, cold rain pelted the faces of those who had gathered to hear Kennedy speak. Just how much they knew is debatable. King's shooting had been reported earlier that evening, but the news of his actual death was not yet widely known. That changed in a matter of moments, as the senator climbed aboard the flatbed truck that had been provided as his makeshift stage. His words, delivered unsteadily and with none of the timing and cadence that had characterized his brother's famous presidential speeches, have since become enshrined to history.

"I have some very sad news for all of you, and, I think, sad news for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world," said Kennedy, "and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee."

Anyone could have delivered that announcement, and anyone would have heard the same united cry of anguish and despair in response. What Kennedy said next is what continues to set him apart, even more than a half century later. He did not insult the largely African-American crowd by insinuating or claiming outright that their demands for equality and justice were somehow to blame for the violence that was becoming increasingly more commonplace in 1968. Nor did he pander to them with false empathy or empty promises. Instead, he made an effort to relate to their pain as a fellow human being. He spoke honestly and from his heart, not as a senator, not as someone running for office, and not even as someone in a position of influence and authority at all.



Although Kennedy had never known what it was like to be poor, and certainly had never suffered any injustice because of his race ("No Irish Need Apply" and Jim Crow are simply not comparable), he did understand pain, loss, and anger. He had lost his oldest brother during a midair explosion in WWII, an older sister to a plane crash, and had suffered his greatest loss in November of 1963 when President John F. Kennedy, yet another older brother, was assassinated in Dallas. In the past, his response to tragedy had almost always been to either soldier on with grit and determination or to retreat into himself. The crowd in Indianapolis saw something entirely different from the senator that night in 1968. He reached deep within himself and shared publicly the raw emotions that he had felt, and was still feeling, as the result of his brother's assassination. He connected with the crowd through pain, and the honesty and vulnerability with which he did so earned him their trust and their respect.

Kennedy told the crowd that what was lacking during those violent days of 1968 was "an effort to understand, and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, compassion, and love." He added that "[w]hat 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 and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another." Most important of all, Kennedy stressed the need for "a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country."

Just two short months later, Kennedy was himself the victim of an assassination. In fact, June 5 marked the 52nd anniversary of his murder in the pantry of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. When he died, something in this country's soul died with him, and it's been dead ever since in my opinion. We mourn that loss every June, the same way we do President Kennedy's untimely death every November and King's every April. The documentary footage is dragged out once again, new articles and television specials emerge, the current crop of candidates and political leaders make the expected speeches, and those who experienced the events first-hand sit down for another round of interviews. Senator Kennedy is often referred to during such times as America's last and best hope, and his death takes on a "what might have been" quality far more than do other similar tragedies that have occurred, either before or since.

That same type of memorialization does not appear to be happening this year, or at least not in the same ways, not for King and not for Kennedy. Admittedly, the global pandemic has consumed and redirected quite a bit of the world's energy and attention. It also doesn't help that this is the 52nd anniversary of the deaths of both men, rather than the 50th or 60th, as decade, quarter-century, and century markers always receive more attention than do the years in between. There is, however, a certain irony at work here. For 52 comparatively peaceful years (Vietnam, Watergate, and 9/11 notwithstanding), America has been replaying the desperate and heart-felt pleas of these two leaders who gave their lives in the service of peace, justice, and love. Now, at a time when we need those words and the actions they are capable of inspiring more than ever, they are receiving far too little attention.

Mark Twain is famous for saying, among countless other things, that history does not repeat itself, but that it does rhyme. Borrowing on that theme, it seems that 2020 is doing its best to mimic 1968, only on steroids, leaving many to once again ask in despair, "Oh God, when is this violence going to stop?" Kennedy answered his own question that dark and rainy night in Indianapolis, and humanity has had more than five decades now to follow the recipe that he provided. Despite the fact that the senator's speaking style was far less smooth and eloquent than JFK's, and regardless of the awkwardness and discomfort which gave his words an even more dysrhythmic quality before that heartbroken crowd than they were already famous for, I think his remarks in Indianapolis that tragic night were poetic, and the "Mindless Menace of Violence" speech that he gave in Cleveland the next day was probably even more poetic. Poetry often rhymes, just as Twain claimed history does. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that much of America's history during the last half century has more often than not found itself rhyming with the themes that Kennedy sought to caution the nation against. Far too often, hate has been chosen over understanding and compassion, violence has been chosen instead of love and wisdom, and the status quo has proven far more alluring and attractive than has creating a feeling of justice for those who still suffer in our country and throughout the world. If society's iambic pentameter continues in this direction, is there any real doubt as to how the poem ends? Kennedy gave us all another option. After 52 years, are we finally ready to listen?