

The State of the Dream
Dr. Tony Stringer

It's been seven years since I became a granddad. Go ahead. Congratulate me!
Thank you.

I find that being a grandparent is very different from being a parent. There is no where near the same level of responsibility, and hence, there is no where near the same level of parental anxiety. When my granddaughter visits for the weekend, I don't worry about the consequences of her staying up until 11:00 pm. I don't worry about consequences of feeding her too many hot dogs and too much cotton candy. After all, that's why God made grandparents. So what if we forgot to get bread or cereal for breakfast? As long as we have cake, we're good to go. If she throws up, she can go home. Yeah, that's how I roll. I'm that kind of granddad.

Regrettably, the "cake-for-breakfast" incident earned me a posting on my daughter's Facebook page. I believe it's the only time she has ever posted about me. I'm not on Facebook, but I'm told the posting wasn't too flattering. But that's okay.

I've found, however, that a different kind of anxiety comes with being a grandparent. I don't worry so much about whether my granddaughter is in the right school, or whether she'll get into the right college. I don't worry about her future career choice. I don't worry about whether she will choose the right man, or woman, to marry. It really doesn't matter to me if she chooses to not marry at all. With regards to all those normal parental concerns----I've been there and done that. Let my daughter and son-in-law worry about those things. Instead, what I find myself worrying about is the future she will inhabit.

Most of us, not all of us, but most of us have our children when we're relatively young. So, barring unforeseen misfortune, we can expect to share a significant portion of the future with them. We, and them, will get most of the way to that visible far horizon. The future our children will inhabit, will not be so dramatically different from our own. But not so with grandchildren. Their horizons are much further away. Their future can be markedly different. Different even in ways we grandparents can't imagine. And the future that we can't imagine, is often the future we fear the most.

Professor Tom McBride, and his collaborator, Ron Nief, co-authors of *The Mindset Lists of American History*, invite us to consider just how different the everyday world is for our grandchildren. And maybe even for some of our children. McBride and Nief invite us to consider how technology has changed cultural frames of reference.

For many of our children and grandchildren:

- (1) Computers have always been small enough to fit in a backpack.
- (2) A tablet is no longer a pill.
- (3) Java is no longer a cup of coffee. It's a software program that keeps updating on my computer, although no one I've talked to seems to know exactly what it does.
- (4) Faxes have always been yesterday's innovation.
- (5) And getting a cell phone and a Skype account have become more important teen rites of passage, than getting a driver's license and a car.

Consider, that for many of our children and grandchildren:

- (6) Paul Newman has always made salad dressing, rather than movies.
- (6) Perpetual Sesame Street Roommates, Bert and Ernie, have always been old enough to be your parents, and protestations to the contrary, probably have always

been gay.

(7) *Les Mis* has always been on stage. And *Law and Order* has always been on television, where its reruns play over and over again.

For many of our children and grandchildren:

(8) The U.S. has always been at war with Al-Qaida.

(9) Fidel Castro has always been a geriatric patient.

(10) Kentucky Fried Chicken has always been sold in China.

(11) Black people in this country have always been called African Americans. And it has always been illegal to discriminate against us.

The world inhabited by our children and grandchildren is so very different. It isn't only technological revolution that makes their world different. It's also the social justice revolution of the 1950s and 60s that has made the world such a different place, particularly for children and grandchildren of color in this country. It was once **legal** to discriminate against me. Not so for my granddaughter.

We're in the midst of celebrating a number of fiftieth anniversaries----- anniversaries of landmark events from the social justice movements of the 1950s and 1960s. In the time I have with you this morning, I want to talk about how the world has changed in the 50 and some odd years since those landmark justice movements. I want to talk about this because I think how we regard what has happened in the last 50 years is important in how we will act to shape the next 50 years. The next 50 years that belong more to my granddaughter, more to our grandchildren and children, than to us.

Fifty some odd years ago Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of a better future.

I want to talk, this morning, about the state of that dream, as King expressed it during the historic March on Washington on August 28th, 1963. The vocal articulation of King's dream wasn't planned, at least not for that particular day. If you read King's earlier writings, listen to his earlier oratory, all of the elements that came together to form his dream had long been on his mind. It was not a new dream. He had been dreaming it a long time.

But he didn't intend to talk about it. Not that day. Not in Washington. Not during that historic march. He didn't want to get people too excited. He didn't want to get the crowd riled up. Because the worst thing that could happen was provoking a riot in the nation's capital. It's what he and his colleagues feared most, and they even tried to get young firebrands, like the future Congressman John Lewis----then just a college student rabble rouser-----to tone down their rhetoric.

So King didn't come prepared to give his best speech. He wasn't bringing his "A" game. But hearing Gospel legend Mahalia Jackson's unmistakable contralto, calling to him from a few feet away, imploring him to "Tell 'em about the dream," King was moved to depart from his prepared text. He was moved to improvise, and in so doing, King gave the best speech of his lifetime. Indeed, he gave one of the best speeches of the century.

Two hundred-fifty thousand people listened in person that Wednesday, standing shoulder to shoulder, filling the National Mall. Who knows how many millions more listened remotely on black-and-white television sets, color t.v. being a rarity in 1963? My family gathered to watch it on our black and white set, with the antennas you had to keep adjusting so that the picture wouldn't jump. My 7-year-old granddaughter watches

PBS kid shows on her own tablet computer, so those old antennas are something else she knows nothing about.

I was 7 when I heard the speech. It didn't impress me, and I scarcely remember it. It wouldn't have held much interest for me. At age 7, I was far more caught up in my own dreams, than those of a man I didn't know. And there was no way my 7-year-old mind could comprehend that any hope I might have of realizing my, as yet, unexpressed dreams as a black child in America, was bound to this nation's comprehension and realization of King's so eloquently articulated dreams.

But any realization of King's dreams almost didn't come. "He's damn good," acknowledged President John F. Kennedy, as he watched King's speech on one of the few color television sets in the nation. "Damn good." But not good enough to change America. When President Kennedy met with Dr. King later that same day, he doubted a Congress dominated by conservative, southern Democrats----that's right, Democrats---was anywhere near to being ready for doing right by black Americans. Kennedy was dead in three months, felled by, as best we can tell, a deranged assassin's single bullet.

The president's death in 1963 did for black Americans what no other death seemingly could do. It did what the deaths of four black children in Birmingham could not do, victims of a Ku Klux Klan church bombing that same year. It did what the deaths of hundreds of black people killed in white race riots from the 1920s up to the present time had not done. It did what the 3400 lynchings of black Americans since the 1800s had not done. The unrelated death of one white man, made an act of Congress on behalf of all black people, finally a possibility.

While Kennedy had already introduced civil rights legislation, it was going

nowhere in a Congress dominated by segregationist southern Democrats. But after the assassination, the tactically astute Lyndon Johnson capitalized on the emotions of the nation. In a speech to both houses of Congress, Johnson argued that, and I'm quoting, "no memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long."

It's an interesting appeal, isn't it? Johnson knew what would move Congress. If you can't do it for the Negro, do it for Kennedy. Johnson's appeal carried the day. The bill was written and rewritten, debated and re-debated, filibustered for 54 days, but finally passed. Only 69% of Democrats in the House, and 63% in the Senate, voted for the bill. The affirmative votes from Republicans were 82% in the Senate and 80% in the House. You can see why people wonder today, what in the hell has happened to the Republican Party?

Enacted July 2nd, just over a year after King's speech and less than a year after Kennedy's death, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The Civil Rights Act ended the unequal application of voter registration requirements----at least until recently. And it ended racial segregation in schools, the workplace, and public facilities-----or at least it was supposed to. In 1964, it became illegal to discriminate against me. I was 8 years old. Like me now, I'm sure my grandmother was pondering how different her grandchild's future would be.

Both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X watched the debate over the legislation from the public gallery in the Senate, and indeed this was the only time the two very

different black leaders would ever meet in person, albeit for less than a minute. The more militant Malcolm doubted the legislation would pass. He just didn't think white people had it in them to do the right thing by their black countrymen. King, however, steadfastly believed in the legislation. He was fond of saying that the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice. He included some version of this statement in many of his speeches. In so doing, he was quoting one of our own-----the 19th century Unitarian Transcendentalist Theodore Parker.

It's easy to see why King admired and quoted Rev. Parker. Theodore Parker was far from perfect. Indeed, many of his ideas were patently and blatantly racist. He was as confident in the superiority of white people as he was convinced of the inferiority of black people. Nonetheless, he knew injustice when he saw it, and he never cowered in its wake.

Theodore Parker was involved in all the social justice movements of his time----- women's suffrage, penal reform, and anti-war. Parker's biggest influence, however, was in the Abolitionist Movement. He openly defied the Fugitive Slave Law, which required that escaped slaves be returned to captivity. Parker organized and led the resistance to this law in Boston, and was so effective in doing so, that from 1850 to 1861, only twice were escaped slaves ever captured in Boston and returned to their enslavers. And even on those two occasions, Parker brought Bostonians out into the streets in mass to protest the injustice. Not a perfect man, and unquestionably a racist by today's standards. Nonetheless, for his work in the service of justice, we can be proud that Theodore Parker was one of our guys.

The "arc of the universe is long-----and it bends towards justice." This was

Parker's dictum, often quoted by King and by both Presidents Lincoln and Obama. The arc of the universe bends towards justice. Despite the eloquence of Parker's statement, despite the almost mystical hope it embodies, despite the boldly cosmic faith it encapsulates, is this statement true? Is there a moral arc, however long and however slow, that bends towards justice? Is this central tenet of one of our most important Unitarian ministers actually true?

One way of answering this question is by looking at what has happened, and what has not happened, in the 50 or so years since Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law. Fifty years ought to be long enough to discern even a long bending arc.

So what has happened? In 1964, 69 percent of all Americans voted in presidential elections. For black Americans, the number of voters was 57 percent nationally. However, in places like Mississippi, where a black person voting was actually putting his or her life on the line, the percentage who voted was in the single digits. Today, there are no places in America like Mississippi was 50 years ago. Indeed, Mississippi today, isn't the Mississippi of 50 years ago. Today, the overall number of people voting in presidential elections has actually dropped from 69 to 56 percent, but for black Americans, the voting rate has increased to 62 percent. A larger percentage of black Americans voted in the last presidential election than did white Americans.

Barack Obama was a powerful magnet for bringing black people to the election polls, and he is a powerful symbol of how much has indeed changed. While it is true that having an African American president doesn't mean that racism in America is over,

it is still an accomplishment that was unimaginable in 1964. King articulated many dreams in his speech, but a black president wasn't one of them. It's simply an amazing accomplishment and I would challenge those who argue it is only a token achievement. In 1970, there were just over 1400 black elected officials in the entire country. Today there are over 10,000. Do we seriously want to argue that black people are powerless today?

In 1964, there were 2.4 million black people with a high school diploma. Today there 20.3 million black high school graduates, that's an increase from 25 to 85 percent of the black adult population. In 1964, only 365,000 black Americans had college degrees. Today, there are more than 5 million black college graduates. And associated with that increased education is increased income. In the 1960s over 40 percent of black people lived below the poverty line. Today, that percentage has been cut nearly in half. Indeed, since the 1960s, the black middle class has quadrupled in number.

All of this prompts the question, should we change the name of the Negro Spiritual from "We Shall Overcome," to "We Have Done It?" What do you think?

Ta-Nahisi Coates, a senior editor for *The Atlantic* magazine writes in the May 2014 issue that "the lives of black Americans are better than they were half a century ago." But, he goes on to say, "such progress rests on a shaky foundation, and fault lines are everywhere." While black wealth has increased, "the income gap between black and white households is roughly the same today as it was in 1970." Despite the black middle class having quadrupled, despite the black poverty rate having been cut nearly in half, if you look at the actual neighborhoods that people live in, 62 percent of

the black population still lives in a poor neighborhood.

And this helps explain the gap between blacks and whites in wealth. Most of us have our wealth in property. Our homes are our most valuable asset. Well, if you are a white family with a \$100,000 dollar income, you live in a neighborhood where everyone else makes \$100,000 or more. But if you are a black family with \$100,000, your neighbors are more likely to be making thirty thousand dollars. The typical home owned by a black family is valued at \$75,000, compared to the \$217,000 for the typical home owned by a white family. Black people may escape poverty, as defined by income, but that doesn't mean we escape living in poor communities, with all the crime, all the litter, the underperforming schools, and the low expectations that come with the neighborhood.

But enough statistics. You know the point I'm trying to make. Much has changed. But much still needs to change. And it is in recognizing this, that we keep King's dream alive. You see, King was wrong about something, and Theodore Parker was wrong before him. They got the metaphor wrong. There is no arc to the universe, and no inevitable bend towards morality in human history. There is, instead, an inevitable choice confronting each generation anew. A choice that sometimes seems to confront us daily. We can choose justice. Or we can choose the alternative.

There is a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri who chose the alternative, who chose bullets over justice. There is a police officer in New York City who chose the alternative, chose to choke a black man to death, rather than to loosen his grip long enough to hear the words, "I cannot breathe." Now before anyone objects that I am being unfair to the police, let me say two things. First of all, the lives of police officers

matter to me as much as the lives of the people they must sometimes confront. I am horrified and I grieve over the loss of their lives, in the line of duty, as I do over the loss of life that occurs when the police take their duty too far. All lives do matter. And I value immeasurably the lives of the men and women who wear the police uniform.

Let me also say, that while I have never been a police officer, I do know at least a little of what it is like to walk in their shoes. While I have never been a public safety officer, I have worked in private security. I have legally carried a gun, indeed it was a requirement of my job. On more than one occasion I had to confront young black males, alone, outnumbered, and in dark spaces. So I know at least some measure of the fear, and the uncertainty, that police officers must put aside in order to keep the rest of us safe.

I've felt some of that fear and uncertainty. On at least one occasion, I can recall unsnapping my gun holster before plunging ahead, just in case things took a bad turn. But I was also ever conscious that my best defense in those dark places was to treat everyone, even those young black males who might have been up to no good, like I was their servant and not their master. Like I was their brother, and not like they were my enemy. And no one ever died in those encounters. Not me. And not them, in those dark places.

Am I being naive? Maybe so. But that is the choice, naive or not, that is the choice between justice and it's alternative. That is the choice we both must expect and demand, from those whom we authorize to serve and protect us. And if, as a police officer, you are unable to make that choice for justice, then you have not found your calling. You do not belong among the men and the women in blue uniform.

My message is simply this: The good fight is never over. Civil rights are never won in perpetuity. Justice is never won for all time and all people. And that is why we must keep King's dream alive. While we should rejoice in all that has happened in the 50 years since civil rights were affirmed in this country, every victory won is but a vantage point from which to take on the next challenge. The next choice between justice, or the alternative. The dream changes, as the challenges change. The dream evolves as injustice evolves. And that is how the dream stays alive.

And so it has been 50 and some odd years since Dr. King proclaimed his dream. I am here to tell you, the dream is still alive. If you still believe in the dream, let me hear you say "Amen."

King said: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'that all men are created equal.'" I am here to say that dream is still alive. It is a different dream-----a dream that lives on in the 36 states that have legalized same sex marriage. But a dream yet to be realized in the 14 states that have not. If you still believe in the dream, let me hear you say "Amen."

King said: "I have a dream that one day...the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood." I am here to say that dream is still alive. It is a different dream-----a dream that lives on in the hopes of undocumented children for a chance to be educated in the only country most of them have ever known. If you still believe in the dream, let me hear you say "Amen."

King said: "I have a dream that one day the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice...will be transformed into an oasis of freedom." I am

here to say that dream is still alive. It is a different dream, but a dream that lives on in the 18 states that no longer allow the death penalty. But a dream yet to be realized in the 32 states, including Mississippi, that still do condone execution, putting us in the odd company of China, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia----the only countries who kill more of their own people than we do. If, despite the sweltering heat of this injustice, you still believe in the dream, let me hear you say “Amen.”

King said: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” I am here to say that dream is still alive. It is a different dream, but a dream palpably evident in the election of a black man with the improbable name of Barack Hussain Obama. But a dream yet to be realized by the 1 in every 3 African American males, and the 1 in 6 Latino males, that will be incarcerated at some point in their lifetimes.¹ If, despite these statistics, you can still believe in Dr. King’s dream, let me hear you say “Amen.”

King said: “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight....” I am here to say that dream is still alive. It is a different dream, but a dream that lives on in the call of the Catholic Pope for a more equitable distribution of wealth in an economically polarized world. But a dream far from being realized when the very country that gave birth to the American Dream has the highest

¹1 Huffington Post (10/4/2013). “1 in 3 Black Males Will Go To Prison In Their Lifetime, Report Warns.” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/04/racial-disparities-criminal-justice_n_4045144.html

income inequality of any nation, at any time, in the history of civilization.² Let the enormity of that sink in. Then, if you still believe in the necessity of Dr. King's dream, let me hear you say "Amen."

King said: "I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers." I am here to say that dream is still alive. It is a different dream----but a dream we know lives on. The Supreme Court is doing its best to chip away at laws protecting women and minorities. But in Berkeley, Boston, New York, Ferguson, and elsewhere, the streets fill with people of all colors chanting that "Black lives matter." If you still believe in the dream, let me hear you say "Amen."

It is faith in this dream that King took with him from Washington, as he returned to the battles still awaiting him in the South. It is this faith from which he would "hew that stone of hope" from a looming "mountain of despair." It is this faith which I believe keeps King's spirit alive, keeps his dream alive, in us, despite the death that overtook him in Memphis.

If you still believe in the dream, despite all that we still must do, despite all we still must make right, despite the distance we still must travel to get there, if you still believe in that dream, then brothers and sisters, a final time, let me hear you say it: "Amen."

² Piketty, Thomas (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Belknap Press.