

THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT:

Reflections On Birmingham

FREEMAN A. HRABOWSKI, III
President, University of Maryland Baltimore County

Whenever I am asked about my memories of the Civil Rights Movement, I hesitate to respond because so much has already been written by scholars and national leaders about this important period in the nation's history, and about the people who participated. One wonders what else can be said. However, as I talk to my students, and as I think about my own experience as a child during this period, it becomes clear that each person's story can add to our collective understanding of what happened to us as individuals, as communities, and as a nation.

The importance of these recollections was underscored several years ago, during Black History Month, when President Clinton invited to the White House major Civil Rights leaders and former youth participants in the Movement to celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. Those of us who had participated in the Movement as young children were grouped according to our home states (from Georgia and Arkansas to Alabama and Mississippi). I found myself thinking about the lives of other African Americans who, like me, had participated in the Movement as children in towns and states throughout the South. In their faces, I could see that they all remembered, with pride, the important role that young people played not only in the national arena, but also at the state and local levels. In fact, although a small number of national events captured the country's attention, the Movement was played out most dramatically in cities, towns, and local communities.¹

My own background is that of a middle-class child growing up in the 1950s and '60s in Birmingham, Alabama at the very time of the Civil Rights Movement. In this statement, I have tried to capture my childhood perceptions of the Movement—perceptions that have lived with me through the years and that shape my view of the Movement today, including especially the role played by the children of Birmingham, who, like children in other localities, were trained to lead marches and to know how to respond to the police. Certain childhood memories remain vivid—from the uplifting spirituals we continue to hear in our heads over and over to the terror of the police dogs and fire hoses.

It is important also to think about the communities in which the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement occurred, including especially the values that guided those communities. In the large African American community in Birmingham, as in other cities and towns, adults served as parents to both their own and other children, and children felt accountable to all adults. Also, churches were central in our lives. While churches, schools, and neighborhoods made us feel special, the larger, outside world, which was White, told us in many ways that we were second-class citizens.

I first perceived this message as a five-year-old child in 1955, when Rosa Parks stoically refused to yield her seat to a White person on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. On a personal level, the message was reinforced during that same period. I remember once opening a textbook and eventually realizing that the book had already been used by students in a White school.²

I asked my teacher why this was the case, and she replied that although the book may be secondhand, the knowledge it contained was first-rate. Other messages reinforcing the second-class status of Blacks were inescapable—from water fountains, restaurants, and hotels labeled “Colored Only” and having to enter movie theaters through side entrances, to being forbidden to attend the “White Only” amusement park (and wondering what it would be like to ride the big ferris wheel), to seeing on television only White people portrayed as successful.

Our internal world told us that we would have to be twice as good as others in order to overcome life's unfair obstacles. All of these messages had an immeasurable impact on the psyches of young African American children; yet, the Black community constantly worked to balance those negative messages—from constructive guidance in the home and neighborhood and moral lessons taught in the church, to inspirational stories in the Negro-owned newspapers and constant encouragement by teachers who told us we were very special. It was in this community, during tense and often terror-filled times that gripped the nation, that I lived as a child.

On a recent Sunday, more than 30 years after growing up in Birmingham, I had the pleasure of taking to church over 100 of my students—all Meyerhoff Scholars, talented African American students in science and engineering—to hear Civil Rights leader, and former United Nations Ambassador and Atlanta Mayor, Andrew Young speak. As I introduced my young students to the church congregation, I could not help but remember—and remind Ambassador Young—that I was a child of 12 when he and Martin Luther King came to Birmingham, where they prepared children, like me, to march peacefully in protest for our civil rights. As I spoke to the congregation that Sunday, I wondered how much the students were able to appreciate my comments and perceptions, and those of Andrew Young—especially because all of them had been born after 1975, years after the Civil Rights Movement.

As I talked to my students, I vividly remembered that for many of the children involved in the Movement academic work took on an added dimension. From our exposure to local leaders, like Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, and national leaders, like Dr. King and Reverend Young, we learned that very often these leaders were knowledgeable people, and that knowledge was power! They had the ability to think clearly, speak eloquently, and act confidently. In so doing, they reinforced what our families and teachers had been telling us all our lives—that education makes the difference between success and failure. In the process, many of us became more committed than ever to becoming the best, so that one day we would be successful competing against all kinds of children, proudly representing ourselves, our families, and our race.

The Movement, its leaders, and our parents also taught us a great deal about values—what’s right and wrong. We learned about the importance of teamwork from the many, many hours we spent in meetings with adults and other young people, talking about the challenges we faced and trying to understand the strategies and legal issues involved. I remember that my childhood friends and I talked with our parents about whether we would be allowed to participate in marches and the likely implications of doing so. I also recall hearing the rumors that teachers and other workers

(like my mother and father) would lose their jobs if they marched. We witnessed the courage of fellow students and our families, and we took part in the Alabama Christian Movement’s evening meetings where we learned how spiritual music—from I Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around to Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Set on Freedom—can fortify a people and give them a vehicle for expressing their aspirations and strong belief in lofty goals.

In spite of the inspirational meetings and speeches, those children who went to the jail often found themselves in a frightening situation. For me, incarceration was especially depressing and unnerving because we were intentionally placed with juvenile delinquents who had had very hardened lives. In some cases, these delinquents were proud of us, but in other cases, they could be cruel. Like others, I spent my five days of confinement thinking about the meaning of freedom while constantly worrying about my own personal safety. I must admit that I began to breathe with ease only after my parents secured my release. Even after getting out, I was devastated to realize that I could not return to school. In fact, the local Board of Education had suspended all children who had participated in demonstrations and used this approach to discourage others from doing so. In fact, I distinctly remember worrying that, even as an A student, I might not be able to finish school, or that I might miss so much school work that I would be unable to excel. I will never forget the jubilation we all felt that night in one of the Movement’s church gatherings, when we learned that a federal judge in Atlanta had ruled that those of us who had marched could return to school and go on with our lives. I will always hear and see in my head the singing, speeches, and celebration of this moment because it symbolized the hope for a better day.

My memories of Birmingham in 1963 are vivid, indeed. As a ninth-grade student, I listened to adults seriously questioning the idea of asking children to march as a tactic in the struggle for civil rights. In fact, there were many middle-class Black families who, like prominent Black business leaders and the head of the Birmingham World, C.A. Scott, were suspicious of Dr. King and the Movement.³ What became increasingly

clear to the Black community in Birmingham, as events began to unfold and media coverage increased, was the significant role that the Movement would play in our lives. From my perspective, it was exhilarating to march for a such a worthy cause, but frightening to encounter menacing police dogs and to spend time in jail with other children that spring. We believed, however, that we were very much a part of the Movement, and it was cathartic to learn that we could be agents of change. This realization was especially meaningful for me, because I was allowed not only to participate in the Birmingham marches, but to lead a group of kids to City Hall. Such an experience told me that our voices—the voices of the young—were significant, and that young people could think and act responsibly, and that our actions could change the course of history and the world. Our experiences broadened our hopes and aspirations, and they helped us understand fully that not only did we have the right to sit at lunch counters or enter buildings through the front door, but that we had the responsibility to claim those rights as Americans. We learned, firsthand, the value of citizen participation.

Our participation went beyond marching to jail and singing songs. It also included boycotting buses and stores because we came to understand the power of the dollar and to realize the strength drawn from a unified effort. I have strong recollections of riding around Birmingham with my mother and father to pick up people who did not own cars, but were committed to the bus boycott and needed transportation to their jobs. And I will always remember Easter of 1963, when, as children, we normally would have been excited about getting new clothing for church. But because my family was participating in the store boycott, we proudly wore old clothes and jeans to church as a symbol of the great value we attached to our freedom. (I do recall, however, the temporary moments of selfishness and disappointment we experienced because we were not getting our new clothes.) And so we learned another important lesson—about foregoing immediate gratification for more meaningful gains down the road.

It also was eye-opening to see how Americans of all races responded to the way we, as children, were treated in those demonstrations. It was the first time that people around the nation, including other Black children, had witnessed social action on the part of African American children over television. They saw the gross mistreatment of Black adults and children, alike, by Alabama's and Birmingham's White establishment—from the police, who brutally unleashed their dogs to bite us, to firemen, who used their powerful hoses to knock down little girls and boys.

My memories of these events are particularly clear. I recall leaving my church (Sixth Avenue Baptist Church) and leading my line downtown, with the goal of kneeling on the steps of City Hall and praying for our freedom. My heart was pounding, and my head was swimming with fear. Before we could reach the steps, however, we were stopped by the Birmingham police. Police Commissioner "Bull" Connor, himself, stopped us and asked me, "What do you want little Niggra?" and, meaning to or not, spat on me. As I replied, "We want our freedom," my fellow demonstrators and I were shoved into the paddy wagons in a moment of confusion.

Later in the fall, we were shocked by the vicious and cowardly bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, one of Birmingham's most prominent African American churches. We soon learned that four innocent young African American girls had been killed; I was devastated to hear that one of them was a good friend and classmate, Cynthia. I'll never forget that Sunday morning in church at Sixth Avenue Baptist, when our minister, Reverend Porter, announced that our sister church had been bombed. Congregation members immediately left their seats, in a state of shock, because our relatives and friends belonged to that church.

For years following the funeral, I had nightmares about the three coffins (one family had a separate funeral) in the front of the church, with the smallest one, placed in the middle, containing the remains of the youngest girl, Denise McNair. As Dr. King delivered the eulogy, I realized that as much as our parents and elders cared for us, they could

not protect us from the horrors of racism, which raged like a fire. We grew up witnessing the bombing not only of churches but of homes belonging to people like Reverend A.D. King, Dr. King's brother, and the most prominent Black attorney in town, Arthur Shores.

Despite the terror, it was encouraging to know that people throughout the country were deeply troubled by the events in Birmingham, and that the nation's President, John Kennedy, was on our side. We learned from the experience that faith in God and ourselves, coupled with individual acts of courage and service, meant far more than we could ever realize. We learned also the importance of hating in justice rather than people, and of being on our best behavior and exercising strong self-control, especially when we were confronted by the police during the marches and while we were in jail. We learned, too, the value of controlling our emotions and of conducting ourselves as responsible citizens. Finally, we learned that America, at its best, cares deeply about its children, and that children touch the conscience of adults. The nation's conscience was stirred, and people of all colors came to see this struggle not simply as a racial conflict, but, even more important, as a question of American justice.

Today, the critical question—besides asking what have we learned from our experiences in the Civil Rights Movement—is what are the similarities and differences between the 1960s and 1990s? Several thoughts come to mind. Most important, this nation has made enormous progress in expanding opportunities for all of its citizens. One clear outcome of the Movement is that large numbers of African Americans have been able to gain a college education, and more, at all types of colleges and universities throughout this nation. In addition, we have increased substantially the number of Black elected officials at all levels, and the numbers of Black professionals, in general, from doctors and lawyers to accountants and business people. Certainly, people with the financial means can now eat in any restaurant or attend any university (if they have the necessary academic credentials).

As I looked into the young faces of my students on our recent visit to church, I was struck by how hard it was for them to understand the meaning of not being able to drink from a public water fountain or use a public restroom, having to enter the side door of a restaurant, or being forbidden from attending a school, simply because of the color of one's skin. I am also struck by the fact that many young African American children today still face injustice and discrimination, but in more subtle ways. We continue to see totally segregated schools, particularly in urban areas, that are far more poorly funded than their suburban counterparts, but people do not readily see or understand the distinction. Moreover, integrated schools today often place larger numbers of Black children in lower-level classes, while Black children in gifted classes usually see themselves as exceptions. And although our children now see more African-American success stories in the newspapers and on television than in the 1950s and '60s, the success stories, more often than not, are about successful Black entertainers and sports figures. Sadly, few know that less than 2% of the research scientists and engineers produced each year in America, and fewer than 4% of the nation's new social scientists, are African American. In short, although it is true that we, as a race, have made substantial progress over the past 30 years, millions of our children are being poorly educated everyday. The major challenge facing young African Americans today, unlike in the 1950s and '60s, when we were denied our rightful access to schools we were qualified to attend, is to capitalize fully on the opportunities our nation offers. The leading question is what role can today's young people play in increasing the numbers the young African Americans who succeed in American society—particularly in the light of recent governmental decisions that significantly threaten affirmative action programs in this nation?

One answer is that, like African American children of the 1960s, those in the '90s and the 21st century must focus on being the best and believing that knowledge is power. My second response—one that most closely resembles the youth involvement during the Civil Rights Movement—is community service. In fact, in the words of Martin Luther King,

“Everybody can be great because everybody can serve.”⁴ Opportunities for service range from getting involved in the youth association of the NAACP to serving, as many students on my campus do, as tutors, role models, and mentors for inner city children. More and more young people today are finding that through community service they can positively change the lives of others, learn more about themselves, and appreciate what their parents have been able to do for them.

A significant lesson from studying the role of youth during the 1960s is how important it is for young people both to evaluate their life circumstances and to know that they are not simply victims of those circumstances. They can change their own lives, and, equally important, can have a positive impact on the lives of others. It is true that African Americans have made much progress over the past three decades; nevertheless, lunch counters, restaurants, and schools still are often closed to millions of Black children and their families simply because they lack the resources or the skills to go there. Most important, like the children of the Civil Rights Movement, today’s young African Americans must believe that they can determine their own destinies and that education is as critical to their success today as it was in the 1960s.

September, 1996

ENDNOTES

1. Dittmer, John, Wright, George C., and Dulaney, W. Marvin, *Essays on The American Civil Rights Movement*, University of Texas at Arlington Press, College Station, 1993, p.4. These essays focus on three distinct local movements in Mississippi, Kentucky, and Texas (specifically, Dallas). The essays contain a variety of bibliographic materials that can be used by teachers and students.
2. See Williams, Juan, *Eyes on the Prize, America’s Civil Rights Year, 1954-1965*, Viking Penguin, Inc., New York, New York, 1987, for excellent history of the Civil Rights Movement, including events in the schools of the South.
3. Branch, Taylor, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1988, pp. 760-61. Branch’s book is a superb history of an important segment of the Civil Rights Movement and chronicles, in much detail, the involvement of youth.
4. Martin Luther King in *The Forgotten Half: Non-College Youth In America - An Interim Report on the School-to-Work Transition*, The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, January, 1988, p. 48. This document identifies a variety of service-related activities in which students can become involved.

UMBC

AN HONORS
UNIVERSITY
IN MARYLAND