

Looking back to Martin Luther... by Kenneth Bagnell

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The time has come to tell the story I've never told. I've been hesitant for many years and for a variety of my own reasons. It's all began, by happenstance, when, after my 1958 ordination and marriage in Dartmouth Nova Scotia, to Barbara, I was assigned to a pastoral charge of five small congregations in friendly and beautiful New Brunswick, near Fundy National Park. I conducted three or four services every Sunday. I still recall all the members, who gave us a fond farewell and enduring memories after we accepted, in 1961, the invitation to come to Toronto where I would become The Observer's Managing Editor as well as a writer. Even when, several years later, I accepted positions on Editorial Boards of The Toronto Star, then The Globe & Mail, I now and then still contributed to The Observer. I'm in my eighties, but I still visit Editor David Wilson as we discuss the everchanging culture of Christianity, specifically that of our own United Church.

Now that I am in the evening of my life, I want to record for you and the United Church archives all that follows:

One of the five churches in which I conducted worship was in a village called Alma about 15 miles south of Riverside, where our parsonage was, sheltered in front by swaying shade trees. Each Sunday I would conduct either three or sometimes four services, the largest congregation being in Alma, not far from the waters of Fundy bay, and the green hills of Fundy National Park. There was one unique aspect to those summer congregations in Alma: in July and August they'd have a large percentage of American visitors who came to worship. Almost every Sunday, one or two would shake my hand at the end of the service. and say, "I'm a minister too."

It was, as I recall, my second summer, when as I shook hands at the doorway with a man, accompanied by his wife, said he was a minister and I smiled and nodded as usual. But just as he moved on he added: "My name is DeWolf." I said my goodbye when something flashed in my brain and I touched his hand again and said: "By any chance are you the author of "The Case for Theology from a Liberal Perspective?" "I am." he said with a wide smile.

He was, it turned out, Professor of Systematic Theology at Boston University, a widely respected institution. We talked and talked on the church lawn until our wives seemed to shake their heads. But I knew he wanted to talk more and so did I. Barbara and I asked if they'd like to join us for tea the next evening and I am ever grateful they said they'd stay an extra night to have Monday evening with us. Barbara gave them directions to manse in Riverside.

Naturally, we did more talking about theology, partly because I wanted to hear him on the future of liberalism. He was optimistic and obliging. We were about a half hour into conversation when he said he had a matter he really wanted to bring up. I said to go ahead. He did: "I always thought that Canada had laws preventing the exclusion of people of color from accommodation in hotels." I replied that I was certain Canada did have such laws. He responded by saying he had a brilliant student and wanted to bring him with his wife on their trip but he wanted to take no chances since the young man was black. So he wrote a letter to the park superintendent wanting absolute assurance there'd be no embarrassment to his student and his wife. The reply to Dr. DeWolfe was rather vague saying that he and his wife were most welcome, but regarding the student and his wife, he was not certain.

I said immediately he should send me the letter, I'd tend to it immediately and assured him it would never happen again. My then member of parliament Gordon Bell was a good man and my friend. He was also Parliamentary Secretary to Justice Minister Davie Fulton. They were prompt in having it made clear that any suggestion of racial bias is fully unacceptable especially in a national public park. Gordon Bell promptly advised me he had acted. Naturally I got short loud blast by phone from the senior park superintendent which was not surprising. I took it in stride.

The conversation on that summer evening in the manse went on, and Dr. DeWolfe wanted us to know that his student, was a very, very special student. He was for one thing, a brilliant person, the most intelligent

student he'd ever had. It was obvious to Barbara and to me, that he was searching for words that would convey the level of his admiration this student at every level intellectually, socially and theologically. He went on and on with his respect and admiration for his student. Barbara and I listened and Mrs. DeWolf nodded giving us the impression that the student was not just a great scholar but a truly great man.

The evening wore on and the moon was high. I was concerned for their narrow and winding drive on an unfamiliar road back to their accommodation in Fundy National Park. I gently mentioned that. Dr. DeWolf looked at his watch, his wife, and as he pushed back his chair he said: "This man is a man I hope you will one day meet." I said I also certainly hoped that would happen. We walked out onto the veranda and Barbara and I stood there as Dr. DeWolf and his wife got into their car beneath the evening trees. He turned the ignition and was backing out when something struck me. I waved to him shouting that he please roll down his window. He did. I said: "You forgot to give me his name." Dr. DeWolf laughed and then, as he pulled away, he waved and said: "His name is King. Martin Luther King."

Years passed and while I had never met him, I felt like so many others that I knew of him and greatly respected him. Along about 1962 or 1963, I picked up the phone in the Observer office and heard the voice of a very respected rabbinical friend, Reform Rabbi Gunther Plaute of Holy Blossom Temple set in a Toronto neighborhood called Forrest Hill. Dr. Plaut was a great scholar and a good friend. The latter was revealed in his call that day. He said this: "Ken, Martin Luther King is to speak at the temple this coming week. How would you like to interview him?" My answer was instant. Gunther told me I was to meet Dr. King at The King Edward Hotel, in downtown Toronto and interview him in the back seat of the limousine taking him to Holy Blossom. I did so and while I cannot recall my questions or his answers, I can recall the last words we exchanged when we arrived in front of the Synagogue. We sat there a minute just chatting. Then as the driver came to open his door I said, "Dr. King, I met your professor Dr. DeWolf and his wife once, back when I was a minister near Fundy National Park." He smiled softly and in his great baritone voice he replied: "You did?? Why I rememba that... Coretta and I---we were going to go on that trip.... but something happened ... I neva knew what... but for some reason we just didn't go." I didn't tell him the reason.

The years went by and like each of you I became deeply interested and indeed attached to the life and purpose of Martin Luther King. My early years at The Observer, went from 1961 to 1968, and though I still contributed to it, I decided that I'd put what skills I had to the wide public of Canada, by accepting a position on what is called, the editorial board, of The Toronto Star, the country largest newspaper. Barbara and I, accepted the offer in early summer 1964, and each working day I'd write an editorial for the following day. Usually the subject I'd be assigned to would be social, culture, ethics, religion, or other benevolence. Almost always my editorial would take most of the day and appear the next morning. We lived in Don Mills just a walk from our Donway United Church and our public library.

On the morning of April 5th, 1968, I woke at my usual hour, 7 AM. Almost immediately, I heard Martin Luther had been shot on the balcony of the Montgomery motel he was staying in. According to the medical people he was rushed to St Joseph's Hospital and died at five minutes past seven. April 5, 1968. To be honest I stayed calm, had a light breakfast as usual and drove from Don Mills to a parking lot used by staff members of The Toronto Star. I took the elevator to the third floor which was set aside for the office of the Publisher, the late Beland Honderich, and the four or five editorial writers. Immediately, the board was called to an office meeting of the senior Editor but this time with heads shaking soberly with almost disbelief. The editorialists were all former experienced foreign European and Asian correspondents so I sat quietly to see which one of such senior and experienced correspondents would be assigned. They'd have to get very busy with an editorial that would clearly lead the editorial page.

Everyone of my colleagues looked toward me and nodded. All have left us to eternity, but I recall one of them, a fine man from New Brunswick, named Robert Neilson, looked to me and said, Ken, "this is for you... you knew him and you have the touch..." Immediately I got up, nodded, told the senior editor, I had to go right away to my own office. As I did, a young man was rushed to stand outside my small office in those days, in order to take each page up to the newsroom so that immediately the editorial would be on its way to lead the page. There was no time to sit and ponder. I had an old fashioned typewriter, no planned editorial, but at least the young fellow who, once I handed him a page would almost take off to get to the desk. It had to be done that

fast with a prayer that it was the right facts and the proper tone. The new reporters and their editors saw to the front page, if it needed modest change, but the editorial written in that small as a closet office, had only one chance and no revision. Thus it went to press.

Today, 50 years after Dr. King's dreadful death, I have the editorial I wrote on April 5, 1968; I will now read it and then will give each your own copy to retain for all the reasons you may realize.