

**“Living the Dream”? One Inner-City Neighborhood Fifty Years
after the March on Washington**

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Thirteen years ago my husband and I moved our young family into a Victorian house due west of Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard. In Baltimore, MLK is a significant border, separating Downtown, filled with repurposed Art Deco office towers and waterfront condos, from Old West Baltimore, the neighborhood where the city's middle-class African Americans lived for most of the twentieth century. The area had gotten poorer as the century progressed. By the time Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. participated in the March on Washington in 1963, our section of Old West Baltimore would have qualified as “a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity” he referenced in his “I Have a Dream” speech (King). In Southwest Baltimore about a third of the residents live below the poverty line, and despite the attempts at historic preservation, the area is dotted with vacant houses and is in no danger of being gentrified. In 2000, we were thrilled to discover an area where we were able to afford a Victorian house with many details intact.

The charming neighborhood comes at a cost. We routinely pick up trash, call 911 when we see drug deals, and trade war stories about encounters with junkies on the street. The crime rate here is 83 per 1,000 residents, and the juvenile arrest rate is 133 per 1000 juveniles (*Baltimore Neighborhoods*). We assure our extended families that even though violence occurs just blocks from our houses, it only involves people active in the drug trade, so we have nothing to worry about. However, this past fall, my next-door neighbor was shot as he came home from work. His wounds were not life-threatening, but the blow to the community was intense. My husband and I left the house each day worried that we would see “For Sale” signs along the square, but instead, everybody stayed put. We received an email from his wife Erika assuring us that they were not leaving: “Events like this remind me that we really are in this together. [...] Will and I are

unwavering in our commitment to this lifestyle” (Brockman).¹ Erika’s use of the word “lifestyle” implies that living in this neighborhood is a choice, and for us it is. If we decided we had had enough, we, with our graduate degrees, steady jobs, good credit and white skin, could find another house in a less violent neighborhood or even a less violent city (Baltimore had over 200 murders in 2013) (Reutter). But many of our neighbors cannot make a move so easily. ProPublica, the online independent, non-profit investigative journalism organization, has done a series of stories about continuing residential discrimination four decades after the Fair Housing Act. They followed black families who tried to rent or buy from white property owners and who, even in 2013, were turned away while white families with identical qualifications are handed the keys (Hannah-Jones). How could this happen fifty years after The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and, noting the century anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, declared that “one hundred years later the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land”? (King).

I know. I know. There’s a black President in the White House. How are black people exiled in their own land when Barack Obama runs the land? I am not one who says that nothing has changed in American race relations in the past fifty years, but Obama’s two elections did not usher in a post-racial society. Click on the link to the outstanding interactive Racial Dot map created by Dustin A. Cable at the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service (Cable). For this project Cable color-coded 308 million dots to indicate race, using green for African Americans, blue for whites, red for Asians and orange for Hispanics. He then placed a colored dot representing each American on his or her place of residence. Zoom in on any area in the US, and you can clearly see streets like Baltimore’s MLK that mark the boundary between white and black neighborhoods. You’ll see the huge swaths of America that contain only dots of one color. In some cities like Memphis and Baltimore, green dots fill many spaces while blue dots cling to a central corridor and then spill into the suburbs, testament to Dr. King’s 1963 warning: “We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro’s basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one” (King). In many cities orange and red dots fill in isolated

1 See also Carrie Wells, “Member of State Attorney General’s Office is Shot in Robbery Attempt,” *Baltimore Sun*, 18 Sep. 2013.

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peninsulas, illuminating areas similar to the ghettos that exploded after Dr. King’s assassination in 1968.² A half a century after the Apollo program gave us our first unifying photos of the big blue marble from space, Dustin Cable showed us our true colors.

Residential segregation leads directly to school segregation. Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute released a report on the anniversary of the March on Washington that found that in 2013, black students were more isolated than they had been in 1973 (Rothstein). In our neighborhood, 90% of the school-age children receive free lunch, and 57% of our high schoolers are chronically absent (*Baltimore Neighborhoods*). Our zoned school located right across the park was taken over by the state of Maryland for poor performance, so my neighbor Erika and I, committed to public education, started a charter school. Charter schools are free public schools operated by nonprofit organizations instead of the city school system. In Maryland charter school teachers belong to the teachers union and students are admitted by lottery. Southwest Baltimore Charter School, where Erika is Executive Director and I chair the board, now serves 420 students in kindergarten through eighth grades (*SbcSchool*). Our own children have spent their entire school careers in public charter or magnet schools where they were in the extreme racial minority, providing a few little white hands for dozens of little black hands to hold.

I became friends with a number of other like-minded parents during those sometimes-turbulent school years. We were all committed to making our city a better place and encouraging diversity within our social circles. I had them over to my house this week, and even they, people who live in Baltimore City and who had sent their children to the city’s public schools, commented on the blight they encountered after they crossed MLK: Trees growing out of buildings! Brick facades tumbling to the ground! Even these people who are truly committed to Dr. King’s vision choose routes in and out of the city that bypass the most neglected streets, and I don’t blame them. It is exhausting to constantly encounter these problems. I had only once driven through my neighborhood before I bought a house there.

One of our friends remains a tireless investigator of race and poverty in our nation: the historian Taylor Branch. We go to church together, and

2 For more details on Baltimore during the uprisings that followed Dr. King’s assassination see Jessica Elfenbein, Tom Hollowak and Elizabeth Nix, *Baltimore ’68: Riots and Rebirth in an American City* (Philadelphia: Temple UP., 2011).

over the past year I have had the privilege to work with him as he taught a seminar on “The King Years” at my institution, the University of Baltimore. A highlight of his class was a “stretch” or extended assignment he designed to introduce students to the risks the civil rights demonstrators took in the 1960s. Taylor asked his students to go somewhere that made them uncomfortable and then report back to the class on their experiences. His students picked their own destinations: a devout Christian attended a service at an Orthodox Jewish temple, an inner-city kid ventured into Amish country, an African-American woman got her hair done at a white salon. In each of these instances, students crossed a boundary, sometimes acknowledged and sometimes tacit, not hoping that they would “get to know” people who were different from themselves but anticipating that they would at least see them. The students reported that the experiences were transformative, one of the most positive things they would remember about their college careers.

So fifty years after the March on Washington we can aspire to seeing each other, acknowledging that there are different ways to make a situation visible. Violence is of course one way. Terrorists use this tactic; so did the armed men in my neighborhood this fall (2013). The shooters have not been caught, but they have been seen. But non-violence can make things visible as well. The civil rights movement adopted non-violent tactics in order to make visible the ugliness of segregation. King stated that they had held the March “to dramatize a shameful situation” (King). In Washington the civil rights movement showed the world the power of self-governance as hundreds of thousands of African Americans and their white supporters demonstrated that they could exercise their rights of assembly in an orderly way, opening the door for the extension of further rights through the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act. In contrast, the disorderly uprisings that followed the assassination of Dr. King made visible the work that was left to do after the passage of those acts. Today, projects like Dustin Cable’s map make visible the realities of our own neighborhoods. We need to truly see the shameful situations that others make visible, but then we need to act as well. Like the students in Taylor Branch’s class, we need to take risks and put ourselves in unfamiliar places, talking to people unlike us. We all need to find our local Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard, cross it and stay there.

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