

IN HIS STEPS

Written May 4, 1965 shortly after my return from participating in the final day of the Selma-Montgomery March led by Dr. Martin Luther King. This poem has been shortened from the original. The event had a profound impact on me as a young student and as a Canadian not personally familiar with the experience of Black America.

I walked the other day,
 Step by step, in perfect harmony
 With the reawakened conscience of a sick society.
Tired feet, dusty street,
 Narrow road, and stifling heat
 All spoke of futility –
But the unity of mind symbolized the coming of a new era
 In the relations of man and man.

They walked, that humanity would no longer
 Be fractured and scattered like sand
 On a windy beach,
The first man turned against God,
 The second man against the third,
And every man since time began
 Has added to this legacy of hate.

Save one,
He came to reverse this ugly tide.
He planted a seed in the hearts of men.
 Love has deep roots, but grows slowly.
Two thousand years have passed.....

They walked that day,
 Some say they demonstrated.
Yes. They demonstrated that the love
 In hibernation for so long,
 Has finally heeded the call of spring.
The blossoms of a new day will add their beauty
 To a tarnished creation.

They walked
 but not alone.
Black soles on black pavement,
But the souls which know no color
 Reach up, out, beyond,
 This morass of hate and evil.
Souls, straining to breathe
 The pure atmosphere of a higher order.
God is love it is written,
 And love walked the streets
 Of Montgomery that day;
An Irrepressible torrent which poured into the heart of the Confederacy.

A human tide in a sea of love.
A new hope borne by feet
Grown weary from oppression.
Love walked the streets of Jerusalem long ago.
Love walked in Montgomery the other day.

They walked together,
Black and white
Protestant, Catholic, Jew.
From North, South, East and West they came.
The horizontal representation was complete,
But the vertical dimension
Of our ontological imagination was also represented.
Love surged through the ancient streets,
And for a day a rent appeared
In the granite heart of Dixie.
But hate lined the sidewalks, the windows, the doorways.
The human tide receded
And hate closed the wound
And once again made the streets its own domain.
The wound was closed,
And later sealed with blood.
The façade of strength may linger on,
But the shaft of love which pierced the heart of Dixie,
May well have struck a mortal blow.

They walked with quickened steps.
Those last miles were but a heartbeat
On the long weary road of suffering.
Freedom now they shouted.
That cry had echoed for a hundred years,
But this time it was different.
Not a cry from the depths of despair,
But the determined expression of a new hope.
They had glimpsed the rising sun,
Signaling the end of the longest night.
Centuries ago their sun had set on an African shore.
This sunrise had been declared a century ago,
But in the confusion
Someone forgot to draw the shades.
The bloody cross of the Confederacy
Still swings in the Alabama breeze.
Soon it will vanish,
And with it the shackles
Which bind hopes and aspirations.

They walked, but not in vain.
It wasn't Montgomery that walked,
But all humanity took a stand

On that historic day.
Hate has reigned supreme,
But the dormant seed of love
 Welled up within the human race
 And swelled into an irresistible tide.
The roots of love are in the heart,
 But the fruit is in the hand,
 The word,
 The step.

I walked the other day
 “A Christian is not of this world,
 We are to love and leave.”
Yes, I say, and what is love?
Are we not bound to history,
 To time and space,
 By the chains of our human existence?
We aspire to the beyond,
 But our feet are captives
 In the clay of mortality.
Man’s purpose on earth is not to escape his destiny
 But to fulfill it.
The soul of man is but a window
 Which translates the vertical reality of God’s love,
 Transforming it.
The love of God cannot act in this troubled world,
 But through the medium of creation.

Yes, I walked the other day.
I walked that all men
 May stand straight,
That all men may breathe
 The air of Freedom which I breathe.
That mankind may pass on a heritage of Hope
 rather than despair.
I walked, because someone else walked this earth years ago,
 And showed me how to love my neighbor.

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