

We together . . .

By Deirdra Brown, Race Unity Circle member.
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“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” – Maya Angelou

Last month, my husband John and I designed a trip through the Deep South. We wanted to visit museums and offer prayers for forgiveness, hope and unity at Civil Rights memorials along our route. Our trip was both a spiritual journey and an investigation of truth.

We flew from New York to Chattanooga, Tennessee and rented a car. Over the next ten days we would visit Chattanooga, Birmingham, Montgomery, and Memphis, with a few side trips included. Here is an account of what we saw, what we “noticed” about what we saw and how we felt.

Our first stop was Ross’ Landing, located on the Tennessee River in downtown Chattanooga. The Landing was one of three embarkation points for the Cherokee people who were forced from their land by the United States Government in the 1830s. Some 4,000 people perished on the *Trail of Tears*. The memorial at Ross’ Landing is entitled *The Passage*. The space is open and welcoming. An *inspiringly diverse* group of locals were gathered there to enjoy the cool water and one another. John and I felt welcomed and accepted. The memorial’s central feature is a *Weeping Wall* where water flows perpetually, cascading down the walls and onto a flight of stairs, gaining momentum as it gathers in a wading pool near the Landing. I cooled my feet in the water as we read and reflected upon the seven ceremonial-disc-reliefs representing the seven nations of the Cherokee people: each disc offering a theme on life, communion with the divine, and death.

On the drive from Chattanooga Tennessee to Huntsville Alabama, we stopped in Scottsboro to look for a marker commemorating the nine innocent black teenagers sentenced to death after being falsely accused of rape by two white women in 1931. Dubbed the “Scottsboro Nine,” it would take forty-five years and multiple appeals, for the state to “pardon” the teens, *three of them posthumously*. The commemorative marker, placed by the Scottsboro Historical Society in **2003**, sits on the south lawn of the Courthouse square in front of the building where the teens were convicted and sentenced to death by an all-white jury. The plaque omits mention that the boys were innocent or that they were *falsely* accused, and insinuates that the boys were troublemakers, just “riding a freight train as it

passed through.” The brief, inadequate account of this miscarriage of justice shares space on the same plaque with a description of the history and architecture of the courthouse building. Directly across Courthouse Square facing east is a large bust of Andrew Jackson, the president that signed the Indian Removal Act. That bust was placed on the square in **1976**.

In Birmingham, we visited Kelly Ingram Park, just across the street from the 16th Street Baptist Church. Civil Rights leaders used the Park and the Church as central staging areas for peaceful, non-violent protests of Birmingham’s rigid, humiliating segregation laws. The Park is only one city block, but we spent an hour-and-a-half reading the commemorative plaques and reflecting upon the life-sized sculptures. The sculptures depicted firehouse-water-cannons and ferocious snarling dogs used by Birmingham law-enforcement to attack children and other peaceful protestors. As we left the park, we saw the sculptures of four beautiful children. One reaching for birds while a second helps her adjust the ribbon on her dress, a third is urging her companions to hurry, and a fourth sits quietly with a book on her lap. These four sculptures commemorate the four children murdered by a Klansman’s bomb as they prepared for Sunday school in the basement of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Before leaving, we bowed our heads and prayed for forgiveness for failing in our societal duty to keep these children safe and for the progress of their souls in all the worlds of God.

Next, we traveled to *The Legacy Museum* and the *National Memorial for Peace and Justice* in Montgomery Alabama. I do not have words adequate to describe what we experienced there except to say that if you are committed to truth and justice, you *MUST* visit these two memorials. I was glad that President Biden traveled to Tulsa Oklahoma to commemorate the savage attacks in 1921 against innocent people whose social and economic progress stoked a jealous rage in those whose broken self-perception called them to violence and murder. But the Tulsa insurgency *only scratches the surface of the campaign of terror* against African Americans all over the United States¹, all of which is carefully documented and curated at the *Legacy Museum* and the *National Memorial for Peace and Justice*.

We traveled the 54 miles from Montgomery to Selma and stopped at the Edmund Pettus Bridge to pray and reflect upon the noble sacrifices of a resilient people who walked the length of that highway in a struggle for universal suffrage and to pull this country toward a higher calling.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/06/01/tulsa-race-massacres-silence-schools/>

We wound our way along state routes to Philadelphia Mississippi where we located a commemorative plaque marking the spot where three innocent young Civil Rights Workers were arrested and then murdered by law enforcement and the Klan. The marker was poorly cared for and had been vandalized as it stood crooked atop its pole. Using our GPS, we found the earthen dam where the bodies of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney were concealed. There was no marker at this site.

Next, we stopped at Bryant's Grocery Store in Money Mississippi where the innocent fourteen-year-old Emmett Till purchased candy for the last time before being abducted, tortured, murdered and thrown into the Tallahatchie River. Carolyn Bryant, a White woman, falsely accused the fourteen-year-old of menacing her in a sexual way. She recanted those accusations in 2017. Carolyn Bryant is now 87 years old and still lives in Mississippi. The well-tended marker was placed in front of the Bryant's grocery store in 2011 as part of a series of markers on the Mississippi Freedom Trail.

Finally, we visited the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee and stood below the balcony where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. The site is a National Civil Rights Museum that includes the Motel itself and the Whites-only Guesthouse across the street where James Earl Ray aimed his rifle through a bathroom window and fired the fatal shot.

Mayor Rolison has declared the second Sunday in June to be Race Amity Day in Poughkeepsie. To commemorate this day, the Race Unity Circle has chosen the theme "**We, together . . .**", and planned a symposium to be held this weekend, June 12 and 13, 2021. I believe that moving forward *together* means facing the legacy of White supremacy and White rage in our country. Spiking White nationalist attacks, the resurgent threats against universal suffrage, debates over reparations, the controversy surrounding Confederate monuments and the historic and recent spate of violence against Asian Americans are just a few examples of this persistent, pernicious legacy. My faith teaches me that we are one humanity, and the fact of our oneness is and has always been true. Science now confirms this. The United States, because it is a microcosm, is poised like no other country on earth to demonstrate to the world this divine truth. I pray that we will rise to the occasion.

O God! Let this American democracy become glorious in spiritual degrees, even as it has aspired to material degrees, . . . This American nation is worthy of Thy favors and is deserving of Thy mercy. Make it precious and near to Thee through Thy bounty and bestowal. – Abdul Baha (Baha'i Faith)

