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In May 1963, students in Birmingham, Alabama, staged a series of nonviolent protests that inspired an entire nation to action. Commonly referred to as the Birmingham Children’s Crusade, these protests confronted the racial profiling of Bull Connor’s racist police department, the inequities and disparities in Governor George Wallace’s educational and economic policies, and the segregationist practices of local government and small businesses. Hundreds of students were jailed, water-hosed, attacked with police dogs, and even held captive inside cattle pens used to house animals during the Alabama State Fair (Houston). These were the children—our nation’s weakest, most vulnerable citizens—the ones every educator vows to serve and protect.

These events, thanks to the widespread mobilization efforts of local and national media, were widely reported and televised. The grotesque, savage nature of the attacks on innocent schoolchildren that were broadcast on television and displayed on newspaper front pages brought the horrors of Black life in the South to the forefront of American consciousness. While many citizens could turn a blind eye to the plight of adult Civil Rights activists, few could stomach watching the harm being done to innocent children. In living rooms, at lunch counters, and at workplaces around the country, people were discussing the absurdity of seeing mug shots for children as young as fourth grade (many of whom were incarcerated and kept away from their parents for more than 30 days).

The remarkable result of the children’s sacrifice was President John F. Kennedy’s famous June 11, 1963, “Report to the American People on Civil Rights.” In this televised address, President Kennedy challenged the United States to make good on its promises of liberty and justice for all. The following excerpt from Kennedy’s address adds context:

It ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color. In short, every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated, as one would wish his children to be treated. But this is not the case.

The Negro baby born in America today, regardless of the section of the Nation in which he is born, has about one-half as much chance of completing a high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day, one-third as much chance of completing college, one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man, twice as much chance of becoming unemployed, about one-seventh as much chance of earning $10,000 a year, a life expectancy which is 7 years shorter, and the prospects of earning only half as much.

This is not a sectional issue. Difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every State of the Union, producing in many cities a rising tide of discontent that threatens the public safety. Nor is this a partisan issue. In a time of domestic crisis men of good will and generosity should be able to unite regardless of party or politics. This is not even a legal or legislative issue alone. It is better to settle these matters in the courts than on the streets, and new laws are needed at every level, but law alone cannot make men see right.

We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our
fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who will represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?

One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression. And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that this is the land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes?

Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise. The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or State or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them. (Kennedy)

The parallels between the times during which Kennedy challenged this country morally and those in which we presently find ourselves are eerily similar. Daily, educators are faced with the task of helping students navigate the murky waters of civil unrest and social injustice. If ever there was a time to make good on what we purport to believe in, the time is now. Our children’s bodies are under constant attack. Gun violence in our schools and places of worship is rampant, and media reports of sexual offenses against our children grow more common. While we have been so heavily focused on their math and reading scores, we have shamefully left our students uncovered physically and psychologically.

Thus, this piece is a call to action. I challenge you, whoever you are, to take up arms and fight in the best way we know how. Arm your students—your babies—with the skills and strategies they will need to overcome the obstacles facing them. Give them the gift of rhetoric. Introduce them to the powerful legacy of protest literacy through song, dance, and the visual arts. Teach them to wield the power of the pen in ways that help them write their way out of adversity. Teach them to speak truth to power in passionate, meaningful ways—including taking to their airwaves or blogging about the things that matter.

If we truly believe that education prepares our children to preserve and participate in this Union, then we must emancipate them to test that theory. But chances are that your babies will need some practice challenging social injustice if they aren’t even allowed to challenge their teacher inside the classroom. Begin to see your classroom as a launching pad for justice and an incubator for change.

Let them practice being bold in a safe (even sacred) space before venturing out to challenge sites of systemic oppression. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, teach your babies to practice self-care. Every warrior of light must know when to retreat, restore, and replenish.

The battles we face are ancient ones, and every generation must learn to fight in its own way and on its own terms. History confirms that what we fail to confront will eventually rise up to destroy us because, as Katherine Anne Porter reminds us, “The past is never where you think you left it.”

Works Cited


Kennedy, John F. “Report to the American People on Civil Rights, 11 June 1963,” www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/LH8F_0Mzv06Ro1yEm74N.g.aspx.

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