WEEK 7
Letters to My Children

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Is America a Racist Society?

January 24, 1988—If the definition of news is “when man bites dog,” try this sample of our topsy-turvy times: As the nation celebrated the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, something odd emerged on television.

On several different channels, the scene went this way:

A black civic or political leader is interviewed on the legacy of King. Inevitably, the question, most often from a white journalist: Is America still a racist society? If the answer was no, then the challenge: What about Howard Beach, New York; Forsyth County, Georgia; and Jimmy “the Greek” Snyder?

If the answer was yes, then this challenge: What about Jesse Jackson running for president, Gen. Colin Powell running the National Security Council, and Bill Cosby running first in the ratings as national dad?

In the 20 years since his death, King’s dream has become our national riddle: Is the bottle half empty or half full?

Walk down the mean streets of any inner city in America. See the drug dealers, the poverty and—always the hardest to take—children without hope. If the rich cadences of King’s dream were to ring in your ear, you would call it a nightmare. Empty bottles everywhere.

Now turn on the tube. The black general is a recruiting-poster artist’s dream. This is a general’s general, over six feet tall, broad shoulders, exuding confidence and generous doses of charm. He is as effective on television as he is in person.

The word that enters your mind when you meet General Powell is command. He is clearly in command of NSC and of his world in the corridors of military power.

The night King was killed, there was a riot in the nation’s capital. It came within 10 blocks of the White House. There was a scramble to defend the city. A high-level planning session was assembled by the federal government.

The black mayor of Washington showed up and was barred. He, by virtue of his color, might have given away the game plan to “the enemy” on the streets. A national security adviser made that decision.

January 24, 1988
Two decades later, the president’s national security adviser is General Powell. In a permanently racist society, do black men ever grow up in New York, graduate from City College, rise through the ranks of the military command structure and emerge as head of the NSC? It certainly couldn’t happen in today’s South Africa.

So is the bottle half empty or half full? Is America racist? Yes and no. We have made huge progress toward King’s dream, but we are still confronted by Howard Beach and the Jimmy “the Greek” Snyders of this world.

Perhaps the better question is this: What does it take to finish fulfilling the dream? Here the issues become more tangled, the assessment of blame more difficult, and a national consensus most elusive.

That last, in my opinion, is the key to our future. If we can develop a no-fault national consensus, we can finish the job. It is in our long-range interest.

A no-fault approach reduces the need to apportion past blame to each group for its part in the mess of the cities, the collapse of public education or the persistence of rural poverty. Let’s declare a national moratorium on finger pointing.

Our society will be stronger if we mutually commit to finishing the nation’s business. Our economic and political competitors, sharks in the waters of our future, will eat us alive if we continue to burden our society with the pathological legacy of slavery and racism.

Seen that way, King’s dream becomes less of a riddle. That is, if each of us assumes a share of the burden for solving the puzzle. We have accomplished mighty things, including winning a world war, thinking and working much that way.

Besides, that approach eliminates one more dumb argument from television over half empty or half full.
Racism

September 29, 1991—Edward R. Murrow, the father of American broadcast journalism, ended his career disheartened at the direction of the new medium. He saw "so many lights in a box" flickering vacuously through our days and nights. That was a pity to him, the waste of what could have been "the biggest classroom in America." It was becoming something much less than that by the time he died in 1965.

Sometimes when a promotion for some lurid tabloid television program comes flickering across our screen, I twitch for Murrow. His worst fears come true daily, his great hope rarely. He was not alone, of course, in prophesying this great video wasteland that now comes through on 205-channel tuners. The medium has become the biggest classroom, all right, but I don't think Murrow would recognize much of what we see as valid education.

Every once in a while, a broadcast comes along that makes you wish Ed Murrow were still alive. I know that if he had seen ABC's "PrimeTime Live" the other night, he would have been proud of helping invent this craft. It was television at its educative best and journalism in one fine hour.

The issue was race. One of the great frustrations about race in America concerns perception. A white person and a person of color can see the same event and come away with distinctly different versions of it.

This is especially true in matters concerning discrimination. Many white Americans, including distinguished commentators, will tell you that race is no longer an issue in America. They say remedial programs are no longer needed. After all, they argue, discrimination is now against the law. But Americans of color will respond that racism is not so easily expunged.

Indeed, there is significant evidence that racism in America is alive and well, living possibly on your street. In a way never before done, ABC's "PrimeTime" demonstrated just how insidious and persistent racism is in America. It was as revealing a piece of journalism on this subject as I have ever seen.

ABC told the story of John and Glenn. They are two young
Americans of average size, looks and demeanor. They were comparably educated and from very similar backgrounds. Only John is white. Glenn is black. Thereby hangs the tale of race in America.

John goes to a store. A salesman rushes to wait on him. Glenn enters the same store a few minutes later. The salesman tails him around the store to make certain he does not steal. John goes to a car dealership. The salesman offers him a no-money-down deal. Glenn waits 10 minutes to be assisted. Then he is told he would have to pay $2,000 down. His offer is $500 higher than John’s on a $9,000 car.

John goes to see an apartment. The landlord welcomes him and sends him with a key to look the place over. Minutes later, Glenn is told the apartment was rented hours before either he or John came calling.

Now, about television and Ed Murrow. As Diane Sawyer guided us through this exceptional portrait of America’s No. 1 social problem, I kept thinking of Murrow. He believed good journalism required very little embellishment.

The power of the pictures is what makes it news. The power of the images of John’s ready acceptance is vivid. The power of the images of the rejection of Glenn, time after time, is also vivid. No one could see those images and declare racism dead.

I asked “PrimeTime” producer Ira Rosen how this piece of journalism came to be. It began, he said, with a young black colleague who knew from personal experience about the power of rejection. That, I think, would make Murrow cheer even louder. He would know that the telling of the story of America today demands many voices and many minds.

This broadcast is an example of many things done well by the people of ABC News. I have no doubt the country will benefit from seeing this portrait of itself. Thoughtful Americans will know its meaning. They will know what rejection looks like through eyes of color. They will know that it is not true that racism is dead. They might reflect on Glenn.

This is what he said at the conclusion of the broadcast:

“You walk down with a suit and tie and it doesn’t matter. Someone will make determinations about you that affect the quality of your life, and the only basis is the one thing that will not change
about you. I am not going to take off black skin. I am going to be black forever.

Ed Murrow thought television could help us understand each other. In the matter of race, I have never seen a more telling effort at genuine understanding. This time real journalism transcended the wasteland.
Prophets and Protesters

August 27, 1989—If Huey Newton and Martin Luther King Jr. ever met, they certainly formed no bond. They are bound nonetheless today by the common threads of how they lived and how each died. In one of history’s curious accidents, their deaths help tell the tale of their times.

Dr. King and Huey Newton shared a deep concern for their people and the plight of the poor. They aroused the passions of their generations. They were charismatic figures whose words were remembered and repeated. In different ways, the movements they led helped change America.

Dr. King was gunned down in Memphis, probably at the instigation of a hate group. Newton was gunned down in West Oakland, probably the victim of criminal street activity. The full extent of his own criminal involvement is not altogether clear.

What is clear in the first half-light of history is how the two men differed. The work of one is revered in much of the nation, yet the activity of the other was reviled by many Americans.

Newton was representative in the ’60s and ’70s of sharp and chic radical diversion from the mainstream of the civil rights movement. There were others, such as Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. Their criticism of Dr. King and the nonviolent movement was that it was too passive, even “Uncle Tom.” They shouted for “Black Power.”

I covered many of those leaders before and after the split in the movement. I found the differences fascinating. So were some of the similarities. All agreed on one basic tenet: Racism was destroying black lives by the millions.

Newton, Carmichael and Brown, though all critics of Dr. King, differed in their styles and approaches. They shared with each other and with Dr. King a great talent at articulating the nature of the inequities in our society.

The radicals differed among themselves and with Dr. King in the solutions they advocated. Newton and the Panthers espoused socialism and allied themselves with fringe groups in the white community. Carmichael and Brown preached black nationalism and racial separation.

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Dr. King preached democracy. He resisted those who would change ours to a socialist system. He also had no patience for those who advanced the idea that black people should have a state of their own. Dr. King believed black Americans contributed mightily to the shaping of America and were entitled to their fair share of the American dream.

The struggle of differing views did not die with Dr. King in 1968. Some of those arguments went full force into the decade of the '70s. By then, the Voting Rights Act and other reforms of the non-violent movement began showing tangible results.

The fringe movements died. Their leaders had their 15 minutes of fame. H. Rap Brown took a Muslim lifestyle and name, and leads a very low-profile life. Stokely Carmichael pops up now and again, but he has a small following.

Dr. King, even in death, continues to command the conscience of the nation. This is so because his choice of a remedy was to resort to basic American principles of justice, fairness and equality.

To see the urban underclass is to recognize how much remains to be done. It is also worth noting that the violent streets that spawned the radical movements remain violent streets. It was on those streets that Huey Newton's life ended.

His death is a reminder that the civil rights movement spawned prophets and protesters. Dr. King pronounced a prophecy that remains a challenge to the conscience of our society. And, although Huey Newton and Dr. King differed on solutions, their deaths are joined as reminders of the nation's unfinished business.
Yanks Drop 2; Sox Split; 4½ Out

Braves Whip Cubs, 23 to 10! Then 4 to 0

The New York Yankees lost their first double header of the season yesterday, but what to lose the first-half lead in the fall all-star.

The Cubs beat the Sox at 10:30, but lost the game, 3 to 4. In the second game, the famous Red Sox in the American league with 4½ games.

Billy Pierce, with help from Harry Statler, scored his 100th hit of the season, but the Braves won the game, 3 to 4.

The New York Yankees never really moved toward National league pennant with the Cubs leading in the American league, but the Braves won with their 23-10 victory.

The Braves scored 10 runs in the opening game, and 2-4 in the second game. Billy Pierce, with help from Harry Statler, scored his 100th hit of the season, but the Braves won the game, 3 to 4.

The governors of Arkansas fear a race riot, Little Rock Ark., Sept. 2 (AP). The Arkansas national guard has already been used to disperse a crowd of 1500 people from Little Rock.

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Britain Hikes Fee for State Medical Care

LONDON, Sept. 2 (U.S.) - The cost of Britain's national health care is about £12.70 per adult.

The government has raised the fee for state medical care, surgical operations, hospital treatment, medical and surgical appliances, medical and surgical treatment, and medical supplies.

The federal government now covers 140,000,000 of the 172,000,000 people in England.

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ACT TO BLOCK INTEGRATION IN ARKANSAS

Governor Fears Race Riot

Little Rock, Ark., Sept. 2 (AP) - Gov. Orval Faubus ordered national guardsmen to surround Little Rock Central High School here tonight and declared later that the troops "will probably have to help separate whites and Negroes" and block planned integration tomorrow.

The school cannot integrate if peace and order is to be maintained, the governor said in a speech.

Asked flatly afterward if he had ordered integration stopped, Faubus said:

Cordon Around School

"That assumption might be correct. It will be left to the discretion of commanders. There is a very good possibility there will not be any integration tomorrow."

Even as the governor spoke, over three television stations to the people of Little Rock, about 100 national guardsmen formed a cordon around the 2,000-pupil school, that was supposed to have Negro students attend classes tomorrow.

The guardsmen, carrying clubs and carbines, halted traffic on side streets along the high school and directed it along the main thoroughfare in front of the building.

Soldiers to Do Duty

Faubus ended his half hour speech with the dramatic statement that the military was at the school not as segregationists nor integrationists but as soldiers to carry out their assigned tasks.

Then he said it was his opinion, "yes, even a conviction, that peace could not be maintained if forcible integration is carried out tomorrow. The schools in Pulaski county (Little Rock) must be operated on the same basis as they have in the past." In the past Central High has been all white.

WE, THE PEOPLE

1 ALWAYS FOLLOW PUBLIC OPINION!

Church Rolls Reach a Record 103 Million

New York, Sept. 2 (AP) — Church membership of all faiths reached a new high of 103,224,034 in the United States last year, the National Council of Churches reported today.

The figure, based on compilations for the council's 1958 Yearbook of American Churches, represents a 3 per cent gain during 1958, nearly twice as large as the estimated 1.7 per cent population increase for the year.

It means that 62 per cent of Americans of all ages are members of a church or synagogue. A century ago, the percentage was only 20.

In the past 30 years, the council said, United States church membership has doubled while the population has increased by 40 per cent.

Protestants Up 1.7 Million

According to the new yearbook, there were 60,148,000 Protestants in the nation, 1,760,000 more than in 1953.

Risogian Catholics numbered 34,563,031, up 1,167,244, Jews 3,590,000, up 150,000.

The Roman Catholic church considers all baptized persons, including infants, as members. So do Lutheran and United Methodist denominations. The Christian Church, however, lists only persons who have attained full membership, most being over 17.

Sunday school enrollment was reported at a record 90,804,033; a 2.2 per cent increase.

Building at New Peak

New church construction topped the previous year by 40 million dollars for a total of 775 million dollars. This was also a new peak.

In the major Protestant groupings, Baptist denominations led with nearly 20 million members. Next came the Methodist denominations, claiming nearly 12 million; Lutherans, 7 million, and Presbyterians slightly below 4 million.