

Michael Symons: A chance meeting among the multitudes
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It was exactly 50 years ago today when I stood no more than a hundred feet from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as he delivered those unforgettable words from the steps of The Lincoln Memorial.

It was August, 1963 -- summer vacation -- when a teacher's thoughts are furthest from the classroom and the minds he presumes to have touched.

I was working in an inter-generational, Jewish culture camp in upstate New York and, although removed from the outside world, we were very aware of the announced "March on Washington" scheduled for the 28th.

Camper participation was a foregone conclusion. We knew we had to be part of this. Our eldest, many of whom were veterans of the labor struggles of earlier times, were most interested, and, it was from this population that we managed to sign up a busload of potential marchers. Most were in their 70s, some in their 80s, but all brought with them an enthusiasm which the intervening years had not dampened.

We planned a pre-dawn meeting at 3 a. m. behind the kitchen where, with the help of a few volunteers, I managed to serve breakfast while others packed the proverbial camp lunch: an American cheese sandwich, a piece of fresh fruit, exactly two cookies and a single budget-conscious napkin.

Placed carefully on the bus was a banner in bold Yiddish letters which two in the group had prepared in the art shop: "**FREIHEIT FAR ALLE MENSCHEN**" (**Freedom for all People**). They were no strangers, these two, having walked countless times for now-forgotten causes.

It was still dark as the bus pulled away from our familiar campgrounds. Leaving the dirt road behind, the driver turned south on Route 22. His headlights, illuminating the path ahead verified that we, alone, were awake at this hour. My campers, older than I by more than half a century, stared out the windows and chatted in Yiddish. All were certain of being involved in something important. I had my doubts. My initial concerns were not with logistics. Rather was I filled with angst at the thought of a less than noteworthy turnout.

We were riding perhaps an hour and still no sign of fellow travelers. Where were the caravans of good people promised by Walter Reuther and envisioned by A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin? Sometime before daybreak, we came abreast of a yellow school bus with the letters of a church group on its side. The denizens of each vehicle sensed their allies and waved accordingly. We were not alone! There would be at least two buses unloaded this day in Washington.

But soon, the state's back roads merged into broader highways, all of which fed into The New Jersey Turnpike where, finally, appeared the sight for which we had been hoping. They had come! From small churches and giant unions they had come! From individuals to family groups, they had come! What I saw, I would never forget. Each vehicle gave sustenance, one to the other, and their endless string as far as the eye could see, gave testimony to America's conscience.

Later, in the shadow of the Washington Monument, on the great ellipse, the multitude was organized into lines of march. Responding to men with loudspeakers and armbands, cadre after cadre stepped off onto Constitution Avenue, 30, perhaps 40, abreast.

Our banner was proudly displayed among the sea of blue hats of the United Auto Workers and the straw hats of the church gentlemen. The cadence of the afternoon produced a strange mix of euphoria and calm. **A quarter of a million human beings had, on this day, converged on a single spot on earth and underlined the best of what their species was capable.**

Not far into the march, I heard my name called. It was a female voice. Again my name -- this time somewhat closer.

A young woman was attempting to reach me through the legions of marchers and was, by degrees, achieving her goal. Once alongside me, she identified herself as Arlene T., a former student in my junior high school English class. I looked sideways into her face as we walked together. It was brown and beautiful and had finally caught up to her teeth which, I recalled, being slightly too large when I last saw her smile. A woman of 19 -- maybe 20 -- but immediately recognizable as the 13-year-old who sat before me some six years earlier. An anecdote or two instantly bridged the years and we had, in a moment, recaptured our past relationship.

She was with her church group but would I mind if she marched with me for a while as we edged closer to the Lincoln Memorial where, within the hour, we'd be witness to one of the greatest speeches of all time.

And so, there we were -- a teacher walking arm-in-arm with a former student nearly 300 miles from the classroom in which they first met. He with an elderly, Yiddish-speaking group of Jewish immigrants; she with an all-black church group from Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant.

What impact, if any, had he made on this young woman? Had any words penetrated? Had any ideas percolated in her young head? In brief, had he made a difference? They continued to catch up on their respective lives.

"How great to see you again, and, of all places here," he remarked, making sure to emphasize the drama of their meeting site.

She smiled whimsically and began her measured reply: "Well, you see, it all started with my 8th grade English teacher."

Michael Symons is a frequent Eagle contributor.