



Bridges Arc of the Universe

“The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.”

Beautiful words from Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

There is something comforting in those words, and yet at

times I think that arc is just too long for my impatient soul. At times it seems barely perceptible from the standpoint of one human life.

I heard two stories lately that connected up some large historical dots from which I can see that trajectory of justice. One story had to do with an imaginary space explorer and the other with a real life astronaut.

It goes like this.

Remember Lt. Nyota Uhara, Star Trek’s Communications Officer? She was played by Nichelle Nichols who started with that role in 1966. After one season, she was ready to leave, but she met Dr. King at an NAACP dinner in Las Vegas.

Dr. King was thrilled to meet her and said he was her biggest fan. He said that it was the only show that he and his wife Coretta would let the children stay up and watch.

Nichols says King told her that her character was showing the nation a universe where “for the first time, we [African-Americans] are being seen the world over ... as we should be seen... Once that door is opened by someone, no one else can close it again.”

Dr. King said that quitting wasn’t an option. “You have been chosen.” And so she stayed.

And here’s where the next thread of the story picks up. Few of us will forget the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster when the lives of seven astronauts were lost, including Dr. Ronald McNair, the second African American astronaut.

Guess what influenced the young Ron McNair? Watching Star Trek. And specifically seeing this multicultural, multiracial cast working together in the frontiers of space. His older brother, Carl, interviewed on NPR, explained that although he and Ron watched the same Star Trek, they had a different experience.

“Star Trek showed the future — where there were black folk and white folk working together... I just looked at it as science fiction, because that wasn’t going to happen, really,” he says.

“But Ronald saw it as science possibility.”

Carl explained that they grew up with the viciousness of Jim Crow laws in South Carolina. Even the “public” library was off limits to black children. In 1959, when Ron was 9, he overlooked this fact and went there to check out books. Mortified, the librarian refused and asked him to leave. For Ron, not getting a book wasn’t an option and he wouldn’t leave.

The librarian called the police. His panicked mother arrived just as the police did, and somehow, on that day, the police didn’t see a problem with it. Ron took the books home.

“Ron was one who didn’t accept societal norms as being his norm, you know? That was for other people,” Carl said. “And he got to be aboard his own Starship Enterprise.”



Ron went on to become his high school valedictorian, earn a bachelor’s degree in engineering physics, graduate magna cum laude from North Carolina A&T State University, and become Dr. McNair when he received his Ph.D. in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, his work nationally recognized in the field of laser physics. He received three honorary doctorates, a score of fellowships and commendations and achieved a black belt in karate.

It is easy to see the arc of the moral universe touching the steps of the Alabama State Capitol in 1965 when Dr. King asked, “How long will it take?”

But how amazing to see it travel from Dr. King to Nichelle Nichols to Dr. Ronald McNair. Who would think that same arc would weave through the Hollywood sets of a TV series no one expected to survive beyond the first season, then through the library stacks of a small, segregated town in South Carolina?

What a powerful reminder that few of us know when history is being made, when connecting these small dots will reveal that larger sweep of the arc.

Speaking on April 4, 2008, the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. King, Senator Barack Obama (not yet President), added these words, “It bends towards justice, but here is the thing: it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us in our own ways put our hand on that arc and we bend it in the direction of justice.”

I like the idea of each of us shaping and bending that arc. Imagine if we can place our hands on the trajectory of justice. Each in our own way.

Maybe in a march like Dr. King. Maybe in a career choice like Nichelle Nichols. Maybe in a library like Ron McNair.



Arc of the Universe (cont)

Maybe in saying yes when we want desperately to say no. Or saying no when others want us to give up.

Maybe in coming together at our Monthly Networking Meeting for a simple meal and a caring conversation between neighbors. As neighbors, not as charity, which is often how we treat economic difference.

As neighbors who see beyond our racial and economic divides. As neighbors who show up simply because we care about each other.



Some allies have said, "I don't think I'm making a difference." But in these simple and imperfect gatherings, I believe we are breaking down those social divides, we are creating possibility. Like watching Star Trek in 1966 and letting a new vision settle into our souls.

We've been showing Unnatural Causes, a PBS documentary that looks at the long-term devastating health effects of racism and poverty. More than 400 people have viewed the film. One person wrote: "Very much an eye opener when I heard that social isolation is a killer, that it is chronically stressful. To stay closely socially connected is extremely essential to survival."

Maybe we are collectively placing our hands on that arc, giving it a bit of a nudge in the direction of justice. I hope to see you at our Isms workshop with Jodi Pfarr on March 17th, and throughout the year.



Jodi Pfarr is Coming!

Jodi will run two workshops on Thursday, March 17, 2011:

Day Two Training at Saint Mary's College, 9am-3pm. Cost is \$50. For more info, please check out our blog.

The "Isms" & Poverty at SJCP Main Branch, Colfax Auditorium, 6-7:30pm. Free! For more info, please check out our blog.

Day Two Registration closes on Monday, 3/14!



April Monthly Networking Meeting

No March Monthly Networking Meeting: join us for Jodi's presentations that Thursday! Our next MNM meeting is **Monday, April 11**. We'll have a pasta & salad bar, and we'll begin our series on Community Resources with a conversation about Transportation.

COMMUNITY ACTION CORNER

The **SJCPL Lasalle Branch** still needs your support! Over the winter months, circulation numbers have dropped. Ask friends and family to continue their support by checking out materials! Your past support has helped develop programs and services needed in the community. Contact Lasalle Branch Manager, Julie Hill, at 574.282.4633 or j.hill@sjcpl.org with any questions.

VOLUNTEER Opportunity

We are looking for a math tutor and an English tutor for a few of our graduates who are preparing for the GED or needing some review for positions in work. If you are interested (and qualified!), please contact us at 246.0533.

St Joseph County Bridges Out of Poverty

117 N Lafayette, South Bend, IN 46601

SJCBridges@gmail.com 574.246.0533 www.SJCBridges.org