

“Singers of Life”

On this day, April 8, fourteen years ago, a great American passed out of life and into history. Marian Anderson was arguably the greatest contralto of the twentieth century, but it was her role in the struggle for civil rights as much as her extraordinary voice that imprinted her on the world’s imagination.

She grew up singing in church, African American hymns and spirituals, songs of exile and the promised land. Even as a child, she enchanted listeners and began to sing at rallies and community events for twenty-five cents a performance. Her family was working poor, her mother taking in laundry and scrubbing floors to afford the increasingly expensive music lessons that would eventually launch her toward a triumphant European tour, singing for kings and queens and heads of state. In Finland, the composer Sibelius toasted her with champagne and wrote a song in her honor. At the Salzburg Festival, conductor Arturo Toscanini told her that “a voice like yours is heard once in a hundred years.” When she returned from Europe, she sang for the President and his wife, Franklin and Eleanor, at the White House. But in Washington D.C. as in much of America, there were homes and public places where Marian Anderson was not welcome, because of the color of her skin.

The finest concert venue in the nation’s capitol was Constitution Hall, home to the National Symphony and the Washington Opera. With its outstanding acoustics and seating capacity for four thousand, it was the only auditorium comparable to the settings Marian was accustomed to. But Constitution Hall was owned and operated by the Daughters of the American Revolution, who had established a strict “whites only” policy for performers there. When the D.A.R. refused to allow Marian to sing on stage, the First Lady resigned in protest and called her friend the Secretary of the Interior to see if an outdoor concert might be arranged on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

No one can visit that memorial without feeling moved. The marble effigy of the seated figure is itself enormous, nineteen feet high and nineteen wide. But it’s the brooding, pensive, expression on Lincoln’s face that gives the monument its power, not the expression of a victorious commander but of a weary man who has seen too much sadness and borne the pain of war in his own soul. Along each side of the seated figure are carved words to the Second Inaugural and the Gettysburg Address. But the Great Emancipator might as easily have been flanked by words to the old spirituals like the ones Marian Anderson included in all her concerts and sang that day ...

Been in the Storm So Long

Hard Trials

Motherless Child

Trampin’

Nobody Knows the Troubles I’ve Seen

Like few other national shrines, Lincoln’s Memorial is a site made holy by suffering, consecrated by the tears and blood of those who died in a transcendent struggle for freedom. And all of this was surely in Marian Anderson’s mind when she ascended the steps and looked out on the seventy-five thousand people gathered on the mall and began to sing ...

My country ‘tis of thee,

Sweet land of liberty;
To thee we sing.
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the Pilgrim's pride,
From every mountainside
Let freedom ring!!

She sang it more as a prayer than as an anthem, the invocation of better days to come. For it was 1939. Hatred was engulfing central Europe. Jim Crow still ruled the South. It was a cold spring day, overcast, with a spitting wind. But none of that seemed to matter. It was Easter Sunday, and it was a triumph. A triumph of hope and decency over ignorance and fear. A triumph of sisterhood and brotherhood over barbarism and inhumanity. A triumph of good over evil. Walter White of the NAACP came to the microphone at the conclusion of the performance, seeking to restrain the throngs that were crowding the singer and threatening to mob her. "As I did so," he remembered, "a single figure caught my eye in the mass of people below ... It was a slender black girl dressed in somewhat too garishly hued Easter finery. Hers was not the face of one who had been the beneficiary of much education or opportunity. Her hands were particularly noticeable as she thrust them forward and upward, trying desperately, though she was some distance from Miss Anderson, to touch the singer. They were hands that despite their youth had known only the dreary work of manual labor. Tears streamed down the girl's dark face. Her hat was askew, but in her eyes flamed hope bordering on ecstasy. Life which had been non too easy for her now held out greater hope because one who was also colored and who, like herself, had known poverty, privation, and prejudice, had, by her genius, gone a long way toward conquering bigotry. If Marian Anderson could do it, the girl's eyes seemed to say, then I can, too."

For the rest of her life, wherever she sang, at the Met in New York, in Israel, South America or the Far East, people would approach her to confide, "I was at that Easter Concert." And strains of that day still echoed a generation later when Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on those same steps and again evoked the dream. Let freedom ring, he said. Let it ring from Georgia's Stone Mountain. Let it ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire and the curvaceous slopes of California. Invoking history, King told the quarter million gathered to hear him that "Five score years ago, a great American in whose symbolic shadow we now stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice." But blacks were still not free, King told his audience. They were confined to islands poverty within a great sea of American prosperity. They remained manacled by discrimination, second class citizens in their own land. But as he did so often, Martin Luther King assured his listeners that this experience of struggle and deprivation carried in itself a redemptive meaning, a transforming purpose. Using language borrowed from Gandhi, he assured them that "soul force" would prove stronger than the powers of hate.

After all, King himself had been arrested and jailed on Good Friday, just a year before, and a black man in a Birmingham jail in 1962 had to know fear. The letter he wrote from that jail cell was a masterpiece of erudition. It was addressed primarily to the clergy, and displayed King's wide knowledge of theology and church history and Biblical criticism,

as he appealed to the hearts and minds of his fellow ministers in Christ to overcome their timidity and take the risk of acting on their professed principles. But the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" which became a landmark in the literature of ethical reflection was no academic exercise. It could only have been written from a prison cell, by a man who'd been stabbed and shot at, known helplessness and humiliation, yet who would still rather have received threats and absorbed blows to his own body than given them to others.

King believed that people could obtain a wisdom and purity and moral power through suffering they could achieve no other way, not only because Jesus said "Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn," but because he had experienced this as a fact in his own moments of hardship. It was at the center of his commitment to non-violence as the key to social change. And he expressed this faith in the speech he gave in 1963, under Lincoln's awesome presence.

"I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations," he said that day. "Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by storms of persecution and staggered by winds of police brutality. You have been veterans of creative suffering," he told the crowds. "Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive."

This is of course the decisive claim of Easter, that the cross is not the end of the story, but only a necessary way station to more love and fuller living. The passion is prerequisite to resurrection. And it's a claim I almost believe. For while I'm not convinced that suffering always does us good, history does seem to show that the good people--the most righteous, the most humane and innocent--do tend to draw down unmerited retribution on themselves, precisely because their conscience sets them at odds with the prevailing mores which always favor the vested interests. This was true of Jesus, it was true of Lincoln, and it was true of King. They might have turned away from the test, taken the path of least resistance each one, flinched at the critical moment. Each suffered for their unwavering purity of purpose and each attained an apotheosis in death that eluded them in life.

Like King, I believe there is a soul force in the world, an undying hope and ineradicable hunger for justice that enabled black slaves and the children of slaves not only to sing the songs of exile--Go Down Moses, Hard Trials and Been in the Storm So Long--but that enabled them to survive the dark years of oppression and lift their voices in hallelujah with spirituals like "I'm Bound For de Kingdom," and "Peter, Go Ring Dem Bells." The same frightful passage that gave birth to the blues also generated gospel and created hosannas of jubilation like "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands."

That was the song that Marian Anderson sang when she appeared once more on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial with Dr. King's March on Washington. She was older, her voice not as strong in 1963 as it had been twenty-four years earlier. But still it rang out to the far reaches of the reflecting pool, resonant and resilient, as their voices still continue to carry, to every hill and mole-hill in Mississippi, to you and me brother, across time, like a chorus from some finer world.