

1968 - MLK's ASSASSINATION

Rowena Conkling/2018

It was a tough time. We had got over the Cuban crisis but the Vietnam War was still ongoing. President Kennedy had been assassinated earlier that year. Civil rights was a burning issue. Then, on April 4, 1968, came the stunning blow – we learned that Martin Luther King had been shot in Memphis. The TV stayed on while we watched the developing stories of rioting, burning, looting, violence, in cities across the country.

Our family is living in the South End of Boston (not to be confused with South Boston) an area bordering Roxbury and still economically and racially mixed in 1968. My husband and I look at each other, stunned, and stare at the TV, mesmerized and in silence. I get a phone call from the Mayor's office. "Mayor White is asking some responsible people in vulnerable areas of the city to keep an eye out. If you hear of any trouble, please call this number." I'm seized with panic. Will my neighborhood go up in flames? I open the windows upstairs and lean out. The streets are deserted; silent, no traffic, no people, no sound at all.

I return to the TV to hear an announcement. James Brown, who was asked by the police chief to cancel his concert at the Boston Garden, had refused. Instead he had invited PBS Channel 2 to broadcast the concert, free of charge, and was asking the other channels to publicize it and to ask everyone to stay home and watch it. And they did. From time to time that night I hung out of my windows, listening for the sound of sirens or gun-fire – and it didn't happen. Silence reigned in the city. I am convinced that James Brown saved Boston from the tragedy of destruction affecting so many other cities.

A week or so later a group calling themselves "10 Black Men" organized a "funeral procession" which would follow a "coffin" for MLK from Roxbury to the South End, along the route where MLK had marched years before. I took a bus to join the procession, as I had when I joined the earlier march for civil rights. Most of the participants were black, but they took the hands of us white folk in welcome as we walked and sang in solidarity. Little did we know then that yet another death was still to come.