INSIGHTS

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"Ask yourself one question. 'Is it right?' Then do what you believe is best for your town, your state and your country." — James M. Cox, founder, Cox Enterprises

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Work to be done before 'ultimate democracy'

Keeping America the best nation requires ensuring right to vote.

By Andrew Young



Former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young says what's at stake in our legislatures is not just the right to vote, but our right to survive. And to survive, he says, we must be an enlightened democracy. COURTESY

I learned to read as a very small child because Louisa Fuller was old and had lost her eyesight. She liked to hear what was in the newspaper, but there almost wasn't a day that passed without my grandmother having me read out loud to her from the Bible.

Looking back now, it's no surprise I ended up becoming a minister.

After she was in her 80s, Gran started praying every day for the Lord to take her home – and for her, home was not the racist South, although she had somehow thrived in that South.

For Gran, "going home" meant going home to her Creator. Faith had guided every aspect of her life, and so it would guide her death.

Now, I find myself older than she was. The closer I get to 90, as more and more of my friends die, I find myself thinking quite a lot about what's next. What is it the Creator has in store for us by virtue of the life we have lived on this earth?

The other day, somebody asked me what I'll say to Martin Luther King Jr. when I see him in heaven.

That's something to think about. Am I even sure I'm going to end up in the same place? That's going to make a lot of people uncomfortable for me to say, but I'm becoming more outspoken than ever and most folks would say I was pretty outspoken before. This is the kind of thing you start to wonder about, especially late at night when you're alone with your thoughts.

Martin surely had such nights, even though he was a young man, not yet 40, when we lost him. For a decade he lived every day knowing it might well be his last – and he used to talk about it to those of us who worked with him during the Civil Rights movement.

"We probably won't make it to 50," I remember him saying, "but those who do have got to make sure to make it to 100, because there's a whole lot of work to be done."

Dr. King called death "the ultimate democracy." He would add, "You're all gonna die."

One thing people really don't know or appreciate about Martin was his sense of humor, even when it came to mortality.

He'd speculate that somebody with bad aim would try to shoot him and get one of us by accident, and then he'd proceed to preach your funeral – but the way he did it sounded more like Richard Pryor than a Baptist minister. You never realized how much he knew about you until it was your turn to be the uncomfortable subject of one of his satirical eulogies, listening as he asked God's forgiveness for your sins – and naming them all as everybody else laughed. I was only in my 30s back then, so I've got nearly another 60 years to answer for.

That's how he dealt with the stress of living with a target on his back. He could laugh and joke at death, even his own, with confidence that he had done what the Lord required of him.

But has Andrew Young?

In one of the last meetings we had before his death, Dr. King said the future of America depends on whether we could get the energy, vitality and vision of the Civil Rights movement off the streets and into politics.

If we do meet again in heaven, I might tell him that's what I really tried to do.

We've done it well in Atlanta. We've fed the hungry, clothed the naked and healed the sick. And while I don't take credit for that, I helped define and make it possible during and after my two terms as mayor. I've devoted my life to making Atlanta as much like the kingdom of God as possible, knowing how far short we fall.

I think Atlanta is the best city in the world, and I think America is the best country in the world.

Not that we're perfect. We're far from it, but I grew up believing that to some extent we're the hope of humankind – and I don't want to have to stop believing it now.

That's what's at stake in our legislatures and in the political decisions they make. The issue is not just the right to vote, but our right to survive. And to survive we must be an enlightened democracy!

I fought a lifetime battle against greed and avarice, but I don't think I can get into heaven if America loses its democracy over a failure to guarantee the rights of all God's children.

I'm quite proud of the things all four of my children are doing to make this world more like the kingdom of God, but I'm also leaving this world to 9 grandchildren and 1 great-grandchild. I can't leave the world to them without the protection guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States.

And so it falls on me.

I wonder how many of my political colleagues realize that, someday, apart from the pollsters and contributors and constituencies and elections, we are all going to have to face our Creator. I wonder how many senators realize that they are not far behind my friends U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson and U.S. Rep. John Lewis. I wonder how many have stopped to think that death is the ultimate democracy.

I really started thinking about racism and white supremacy when I was 4 years old – and I've been dealing with it for almost 86 years, without bitterness or resentment.

One reason I am optimistic is that I've had such wonderful experiences with any number of notorious racists of the past. Most of them repented. George Wallace came to an SCLC meeting and said he was wrong. I can't list all of the good deeds Lester Maddox and Herman Talmadge did to help the city of Atlanta to survive and to thrive in the last days of their lives.

You might just be surprised by who you see in heaven.

Yet my concerns are still right here on earth.

Martin saw the promised land.

He said so in that final speech at Mason's Temple in Memphis, and I heard it. But now I wonder if I've made a mistake in thinking that these United States of America could be that promised land.

I hope and pray it still can.

Surely, there are at least 60 God-fearing men and women in our Senate prepared to live up to their oath and defend the Constitution – to vote for one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Andrew Young is a world-renowned civil rights leader whose work is widely credited with helping change the course of history. He has been a mayor of Atlanta, a U.S. Congressman, a former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations and a counselor to presidents.