

I recently participated in a tour of Civil Rights sites in Alabama (Birmingham, Selma, Tuskegee, Montgomery), and Atlanta, Georgia. For the last few years, I felt pulled to visit these places. This pull felt like my soul's call to witness my ancestral history as a white person. Though I wasn't sure why, I knew that direct experience of the truth of the devastating impact of white oppression on the enslaved and facing personal accountability for the benefits of white privilege was important to me. I approached this trip as if it were a pilgrimage. By definition a pilgrimage is a journey, especially to a sacred place or shrine. Some write of categories of pilgrimages, "... a spiritual pilgrimage, a nature pilgrimage, a solidarity pilgrimage." *Ok, that last one got my attention.* "A solidarity pilgrimage is a journey that is made in order to learn from and experience the world through the eyes of another. Just as pilgrimage allows us to travel the world, a solidarity pilgrimage invites us to journey to the worlds of others as we seek to humble ourselves, broaden our perspective, and respond with action" (reference below). That resonated with the hopes I had articulated for myself during the trip... "to learn what I don't know...to be receptive and open and to find hope for change going forward". *Yep...I was going on a solidarity pilgrimage!*

The "respond with action" part speaks to a question that I've been holding for decades, "What will motivate and support more white people to confront our history and be a part of the change that many people want?" "How can we process the shame and guilt that festers when unexamined and, therefore, is a barrier to joining/continuing our collective march for freedom?" My hope was to learn about myself but also how I might take actions that enable us all to come to the table for healing the wounds of racism...and for participating in much needed change.

So, in late June, off we went in a comfy bus that felt a little like the Magic School Bus to me! The learning began immediately. We watched documentaries and had mini presentations by our leaders, and began the formation of our own beloved community (as encouraged by MLK) to hold us all as we collectively entered the worlds of our ancestors.

Most of the historical sites we visited were visceral experiences for me. Standing in these sites and moving through the memorials filled in gaps of knowledge and also carried me beyond my own intellectual understanding of this history. I'll share one experience to illustrate. We started out at 16th Street Baptist Church where four little girls were killed in a bombing by whites reacting to nonviolent protests for civil rights. Across the street from the church is Kelly Ingram Park which is filled with sculptures that memorialize the Children's March in 1963. This is the place where young nonviolent protesters were hosed with water cannons and attacked by dogs and heavily armed police. *Did you know that a water cannon can take the paint off a wall?* What must that force have felt like to those young bodies? In this place, I began to imagine some of the terror and determination these young protesters must have experienced..

I came upon a statue of a life-size policeman, holding a young black person by the front of his shirt, and also holding a dog on a leash but close enough for the dog to attack the boy. My first response was, "Oh is that real? Is that how this really happened?". My stomach turned. I wanted to look away. I was scared. The next thought I had was that I had seen the video footage of this exact event yesterday! I saw the video footage! It really happened! So, there I was...face-to-face with my mind's habitual response (informed by white culture) to a scene of unspeakable cruelty. My mind didn't want me to get overwhelmed by the shock of this history...which is my ancestral history as a white person. I took a breath and just kept saying to myself "this was real, this was real, this really happened" and I kept walking. **Humbled!** Humbled by the fortitude and courage of those kids and parents. Humbled by how my mind repeatedly tries to protect me by racing away from the truth.

Later that evening, in a debriefing session with the group, I shared this experience and how automatic the fear and denial response was for me. With some shame but willingness, I spoke of times when black skin had been scary to me. After some silence, another group member who was black and female said, "You know sometimes I'm afraid of white people". "What? Scared of me because I'm white?" Well... yeah... and why wouldn't that be in the experiences of people of color? **Perspective.** This viewpoint startled me out of the painful past...including feeling guilty, out of the white privilege habit of seeing white skin as the standard for all things (safety in this case), and into connection with that person who was offering me compassion and the people I was actually in community with at that moment. There were important gifts in that simple statement and shift in perspective.

Oh yeah, now I remember...we humans have more similarities than differences!

Yes, we're all biologically wired to experience fear when we believe we're in danger. We are going to feel threat and we need to feel it because it's often justified, especially for people of color. But we've also learned what to be afraid of and what we learned and where we learned it is dramatically different for white people and people of color. I learned the threats that are particularly based in the system of white privilege and most of the people of color in our group, and likely our country, have learned about threats within the system of racial inequality and injustice. We're all still afraid at times and many feel too threatened to sit at the same table. In that moment I was so grateful for the other "pilgrims" that had joined together to hold all our experiences of sameness and difference in community. *Here hope that arises from solidarity begins to creep into me.*

I entered the world of the enslaved and activists briefly but as I come back to the present I'm bombarded with evidence that injustices and death are still happening. I've felt very discouraged and lacking hope for some years when pondering the changes that are still desperately needed for racial equity to be a lived experience for both white people and people of color. As the trip progressed, we had the good fortune to meet and speak with people who lived through the period of the early civil rights movement as well as with some who are living in racial inequity still and yet tirelessly working for change. I kept encountering in them what I could describe as justified pride in the movement, past and ongoing, graciousness, or grace, certainly the kind of human community that I long to engage in. As I reflect now on my hopes for my pilgrimage I recall that staying open and receptive was a hope of mine. I wanted to be open to changing myself in whatever ways might show me a path for action. I did and do need hope for that and for moving forward. On this pilgrimage, I had the opportunity to express my deep sorrow to the millions of enslaved. At MLK's tomb, I expressed my deep gratitude for the sacrifice that people of color have made, not just to build our country, but to fight for themselves and humanity. And I found hope in the many reminders that there have always been people of color and white people who want and work for change. There are so many people working on this transformation! The courage and resilience of communities of color are deep and wide. I am part of that too and for the first time in a while I can authentically join in on "We shall overcome!" ***There's my hope!***

I've written this from a very personal point of view. It has felt important to share the experience of pain and healing that I received in these few days of learning supported by community. The sorrow and gratitude will continue but so will hope. I offer my story as an invitation to white people who are struggling with hope for healing around white supremacy in our country and for anyone wanting a path to actions for change. Since returning and digesting these experiences, my story about my history is something I can hold with more compassion. Paths for involvement in racial justice that feel hopeful are opening for me. I'm deeply grateful.

*Our goal is to create a beloved community and
this will require a qualitative change in our souls
as well as a quantitative change in our lives.
~ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

Reference for pilgrimages

<https://www.asacredjourney.net/types-of-pilgrimage/>