Heroes and Sheroes by Julie Lombard 1/19/2014

I was born after Dr. King's assassination, the youngest of four children of parents who were greatly impacted by the decade of many assassinations, and with two older siblings who could remember Dr. King; yet I was born and raised in NH where honoring an African-American was a foreign concept. To find heroes and sheroes from that movement, I had to look in creative places because I wasn't bound to find them in my sheltered white community.

Dr. King's powerful ripple effect was felt far beyond the comforts of my childhood home, but that's where it started for me. I need to thank my racist parents for turning on the television and leaving the station on PBS. I was the first generation to be raised on the longest running children's program ever, Sesame Street. Created in November 1969, it was seen as a way to home school Pre-Schoolers through their TVs. Sesame Street was ground breaking for its lessons, overtly taking on such affective goals as social competence, toleration of diversity, and nonaggressive ways of resolving conflict. These issues were addressed through interpersonal disputes among its various characters.

Many of us know that Jim Henson was the creator of the Muppets used on Sesame Street. His hero status is firm. However, few people know of Thandeka, the African American woman who helped set the stage for my childhood worldview. Thandeka was another of the earliest puppeteers with Henson, working behind the scenes on Sesame Street. Since she was left-handed, she became all the Muppets that were also left-handed in those early years. She left being a puppeteer and eventually arrived to teach at Williams College where she told my friend how she was the one who worked all the left-handed Muppets. Today, she is known as The Rev. Dr. Thandeka, she's a Unitarian Universalist theologian, journalist, and congregational consultant who leads the project titled "We Love Beyond Belief." She's a professor at Meadville-Lombard Seminary in Chicago. It's people like the ones I found on Sesame Street that subtly opened my mind to alternative ways of looking at the world I was living in. Thandeka is one of my many sheroes because she found it important to befriend children of all races.

In the small town in NH where I was raised, there was little diversity; however on Sesame Street there were people of all ages and races. These folks became my friends and teachers. May we not forget those Muppets, how they reflected a rainbow of colors and a fun example of how to live in harmony. They challenged the rest of us to join them in their Rainbow Connection. Eventually, I graduated from watching Sesame Street to watching The Electric Company which aimed their multicultural stories at children ages 7 to 10. Actors like Morgan Freeman and Rita

Moreno would visit me in my home during the show's first run from 1971-1977. There was a steady stream of progressive thought pumping out to my generation watching PBS even if we weren't learning it from our parents.

NH was one of the last states to recognize Martin Luther King Day. As the rest of our country decided how it would remember this era, some states argued to recognize the man while others argued to recognize the movement he lead. NH seemed paralyzed to do either. I don't know what was fueling the resistance to celebrate Martin Luther King; I was relieved the day NH finally got on board with celebrating this holiday. I was an adult by then and I thought it was about time that my state joined the movement that was embracing the works of this leader, this prophet, and a man who put his life at risk for justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. What matters isn't when you or I were born, what matters most is how we put into practice the lessons learned from Dr. King.

Today, I'm still finding heroes and sheroes in creative ways; about a month ago I discovered another hero while I listened to a BBC radio program called Outlook. Matthew Bannister, the host, was interviewing Daryl Davis, a famous blues pianist who played at President Clinton's inauguration. In the interview, Daryl Davis tells of his childhood; he calls himself an Embassy Brat. He was born in the late 1950s to parents who worked in the Foreign Service. Much of his childhood was spent living in Europe in a multi-cultural environment, but he did spend a short time living in the states in 1968. He was 10 years old and in fourth grade living in a suburb of Boston. He was one of only two African-American children in his school. Life was good for young Daryl, he joined boy scouts and had many friends. So, you might imagine his shock after being the flag bearer for a scouts march from Lexington to Concord where rocks and bottles were thrown at him. He thought, "Wow, these folks really don't like scouts." He didn't know that he was the only one being targeted. His parents had to tell him the truth about racism in America as they were bandaging him up after the parade. He was left with the burning question: "Why would someone who didn't even know him want to inflict pain on him?" Soon after, his family moved back to Europe and back to the multi-cultural environment where he was safe from the racism he found here.

It was in Europe that he loved to listen to the Kings of Rock and Roll: Fats Domino, Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry. Upon hearing them, he decided to become a piano player and learn how to play the boogie-woogie he loved. He told the interviewer that he wasn't that talented, he just practiced non-stop. This study brought him to learning about the men who inspired the musicians he admired, Pinetop Perkins and Johnny Johnson. He wouldn't just study these folks; he would befriend them which was a skill that would pay off later in his life. He would invite Pinetop and Johnny into his home and he would invite himself into where they lived, too. He sneaked into Elvis Presley's Las Vegas hotel room to get to meet him. Daryl had passion and drive that got him places many people only dream of going. He eventually met his biggest hero, Chuck Berry, and so you might imagine what an honor it was when he had the chance to play his favorite song, "Johnny Be Good" on stage with Chuck Berry. Daryl embodied the blues because he believed that they are the root of the Common Man's music and that music brings people together.

In 1983 he was playing in a country music band. He was the only African-American in the band and in the all-white lounge where they were performing. When the band took a break, he went to the bar to get a drink. That's where he met up with a guy in his 40's who told him that he had never seen a black man who could play the piano as well as Jerry Lee Lewis. Daryl's response was to question the man and ask where he thought Jerry learned to play like that? Daryl explained that Lewis was influenced by black men such as Perkins and Johnson; he knew that because he was friends with them. The man said that he doubted that, but asked to buy Daryl a drink. After buying the drink, the man told Daryl that it was the first time he had had a drink with a black man. Daryl looked at the man and thought he was asking a simple question, "WHY?" The white man was quiet and after Daryl asked again, the man finally said it was because he was a member of the KKK. Daryl burst into laughter thinking he was joking, but when the man pulled out his membership card, Daryl's laughter ceased. They continued to talk and they became friends. The white man gave Daryl his business card and asked Daryl to call him when he came back to town with the band. So, Daryl did and the man would always come and bring his Klan friends. The scope of diversity that these white men knew was narrow; they couldn't imagine a black man playing the music they loved. Daryl learned how music brings people together. Soon these men were giving up their membership in the Klan and handing their vestments over to the pianist.

It was that experience that planted the seed for Daryl to set out on writing a book about his experience with racism called "Klan-destine Relationships." He wanted to get back to answering that question that haunted him from his childhood: "how can you hate me if you don't know me?" He thought "who better to ask than members of the Klan?" So, he began interviewing members of the Klan near where he lived and eventually worked his way up to Roger Kelly, the Imperial Wizard of MD. Upon meeting, they shook hands and the first words out of Kelly's mouth were, "I don't like black people." That was clear as Kelly's Night Hawk, his bodyguard, stood at attention beside them in full fatigues with a gun on his hip. The conversation continued, sometimes getting loud, but never violent. Today, the men are good friends and Kelly is quoted as saying, "I would go to hell and back because I believe in what he stands for." That's right, Daryl's got his hood now, too.

Daryl's purpose was to openly communicate with these people, to see what was going on in their heads. He wanted to befriend them so that they might change their hearts and minds. What resulted was that these Klan members would hand over their Klan vestments without being asked. See, Daryl never set out to convert anyone; he only wanted to be a good example. "I don't change their minds, they change their own minds," says Davis.

Sometimes Daryl Davis gets called an "Uncle Tom" by other African-Americans who can't understand his method of befriending the enemy, but he asks those folks, "How many robes and hoods have you collected?" He embodies this way of being in everything he does, recently he got married and many of his friends in attendance at his wedding were ex-Klan members. His life revolves around diversity; why would he think to exclude someone because they were different? Daryl says, **"As human beings, it's up to us to teach and learn from one another."**

Friends, it just goes to show you the power of friendship and where it can lead us. Whether it is with people who brought to life the Muppets of my childhood that taught me the true meaning of diversity, or with the men who removed their Klan vestments for the love of their goodwill friend, these are my heroes and sheroes because these are the folks who never backed away from letting their little light shine. Let us have the courage they have as they love their neighbor. May you go forth shining your little light by befriending the stranger among us or even your enemy, and may you feel the transformative power of friendship come alive as a Civil Right.

May it be so. Amen.