

Opinion

OUR VIEW

Are we there yet? No, but there is progress

In the not-so-distant past, Minnesota wasn't exactly a focal point of national attention on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Sure, there were the usual observances all over the state, including the annual breakfast at the Rochester Golf & Country Club, where King's impact and legacy were rightly celebrated by Minnesotans of all races. Those who attended such gatherings usually received a strong message about how far we were from fulfilling King's dream, even in a state that never knew the violence of Selma, Tulsa or Birmingham.

Today, however, one could argue that Minnesota has seized the spotlight in our nation's struggle for racial equality and social justice.

It's a distinction we would have preferred to avoid, but one can certainly argue that the killings of George Floyd, Daunte Wright and Philando Castile have forced a long-

overdue acknowledgment that lurking behind the facade of "Minnesota nice" is a persistent set of beliefs and biases — some unconscious, some highly intentional — that directly conflict with King's vision.

The reckoning, playing out on TV and social media, has been ugly, costly and embarrassing. People around the world who had never heard of Minnesota now know it as the place where a police officer casually knelt on the neck of a black man until he died, while other officers watched and bystanders begged him to stop. The world watched as rioters took over the streets and more than 1,000 buildings were destroyed or damaged by arsonists.

But the world now knows Minnesota as the place where Derek Chauvin will be imprisoned for the rest of his life, and where three of his fellow former officers soon will stand trial for their own involvement. Minnesota

is the place where a police officer who shot and killed an unarmed Black 20-year-old faces years in prison, despite claiming that she simply made a mistake.

These are small steps, taken in response to tragic, criminal actions — but we think MLK would herald them as signs of progress.

And more positive steps are being taken in Minnesota. Next November, it's possible — likely, we hope — that Minnesota voters will be asked to vote on an amendment to the state constitution that would require all children to receive "a quality public education that fully prepares them with the skills necessary for participation in the economy, our democracy, and society."

Former Minnesota Associate Supreme Court Justice Alan Page is the driving force behind this amendment, which is aptly named "The Page Amendment." For years, Minnesota has tried unsuccessfully to narrow its

large achievement gap between white students and students of color, and Page and the amendment's backers believe their proposed amendment could push Minnesota to make long-overdue, targeted investments in public schools — especially schools that primarily serve students in the lower half of the socioeconomic spectrum.

Will this amendment pass, and would it work? Time will tell, but the idea certainly seems sound.

At the local level, one sign of progress in Rochester is the success of the Community Engagement Response Team, or CERT. After a fatal shooting downtown in June, volunteers united to bring free food, haircuts, basketball games and other activities to parts of Rochester that previously were deserted and/or dangerous after dark.

Crime and calls to police declined. Fun, not fighting, was the norm. People who might otherwise never have

met each other — or would have met in less-than-pleasant circumstances — chatted and laughed together as they battled on the basketball court.

We think Dr. King would have liked a Minnesota in which justice is blind to the color of a person's skin. He would have liked a Minnesota in which a black child growing up in poverty attends a school with teachers, technology and resources that rival what is found in the wealthiest metro suburb. And he would have liked a Rochester in which young black men battled police officers on chess boards, rather than on the streets.

Are we truly there yet? We are not. The developments described above are isolated examples, and change takes persistence and time.

Still, we believe the path to achieve King's dream is clearer than it was just a few years ago. Now it's up to every Minnesotan to decide whether to follow that path.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FALSE FRAUD ALLEGATIONS MAY SPELL THE END OF OUR DEMOCRACY

I was alarmed by the recent survey by the Washington Post and University of Maryland showing 34% of the respondents agree there are times when violence against government is justified. How did we become an uncivilized country? A real patriot recognizes that America is a democracy which chooses its leaders with free and fair elections, that his or her preferred candidate will not always win, and would never use or promote violence to attempt to subvert a legitimate election.

I believe this survey result has much to do with Donald Trump continuing to spout his bogus claim that massive voter fraud cost him the 2020 election despite no evidence of this. He undertook a gargantuan effort to overturn the outcome, but dozens of lawsuits and countless recounts and audits

in multiple states failed to uncover evidence of widespread fraud. Then-Attorney General Barr admitted the Justice Department had found no such evidence. Even the partisan recount in Maricopa County, Arizona, initiated by Republican state legislators affirmed that President Biden won that county by even more votes than originally counted.

Unfortunately, despite this failure to find widespread voter fraud, Republican-controlled state legislatures in several states are using the unproven fraud allegations to justify their attempts to further suppress voting and, most disturbing, giving themselves the power to decide whose votes count and overturn results they don't like. If nothing is done to stop this, it may be the end of our democracy.

Carole Mataya, Rochester

PEKEL DESERVING OF PERMANENT LEADERSHIP ROLE

In the Jan. 4 Post Bulletin piece titled, "Rochester School District release mid-year summary review of Interim Superintendent Kent Pekel."

Based on Dr. Kent Pekel's five month review he has made effective progress toward his personal goals. Summary of a district and community survey reveals Dr. Pekel's effective and highly effective approval rating.

I read with interest the board's decision to launch its search for a permanent superintendent by

contacting search firms.

The district has benefited first hand watching and evaluating Dr. Pekel's leadership which has been steady, strategic, and strong in these challenging times.

I support the Rochester Board of Education to remove the Interim title on Dr. Kent Pekel and name him Superintendent.

It has been said, sometimes the grass is greener right where you stand.

Peter Stenson, Rochester

DEFEND FREE ELECTIONS, OR SAY GOODBYE TO AMERICA

Fearing harassment or violence against me or my family has kept me from writing about this for a long time. But now fear for our democracy is greater. So here goes.

Democracies are fragile. Their survival has many requirements including: honest news sources, office-seekers motivated by love of democracy not lust for power, politicians who have alternate policies not alternate facts and well-informed eligible voters freely able to cast their votes.

Voters must also be confident their votes were properly counted and that when all challenges were addressed, all sides peacefully accept the results and move on.

Those democracy requirements are now vanishing. In plain sight, certain

politicians are taking radical steps to subvert our democracy. We the people must choose freely our elected officials not the other way around. If they succeed, this will end the grand American experiment.

I see only one defense for our democracy. There are tens of thousands of small and large groups in America, working hard on every important issue imaginable. Could each regularly discuss the situation? Could they stress the need to get out the vote? Could they work with other democracy-loving groups? A record high voter turnout this November is our only sure solution.

Please, don't let us go down in history as the generation who let our democracy slip away.

Edward Coen, Rochester

Sidney Poitier was a singular role model

These days, we have Denzel Washington.

We have Viola Davis, Kevin Hart and Jamie Foxx. We have Octavia Spencer, Regina King and Samuel L. Jackson. We have Idris Elba, Lupita Nyong'o, Taraji P. Henson, Michael B.

Jordan, Mahershala Ali, Tiffany Haddish and Will Smith. We have, in other words, a bounty of bona fide, mainstream Black movie stars.

But once upon a time, we — African Americans — had only one. His name was Sidney Poitier, and he died last week at the age of 94.

Praises have been raining upon his name ever since, and deservedly so. As an actor, Poitier was known for an economy of expression and movement that could be shattered at any moment by a sudden volcanic intensity. As a social activist, he was brave, supporting the Civil Rights Movement and using his art to illuminate and explore provocative racial themes. And he was a path breaker: first African American to be voted the nation's top box-office attraction, first Black man to win the Academy Award for Best Actor, which he took home for 1963's "Lilies of the Field."

But to fully appreciate what Sidney Poitier meant — to us, at least — you have to understand what it was like back when he was the only one. You have to know why Jet magazine felt it necessary to run a page listing the "Negro" performers who would be on television that week. You have to remember how word that the Temptations or Supremes were going to be on "The Ed Sullivan Show" was enough to make you alert all your friends. You have to understand why Martin Luther King said, "You cannot," when Nichelle Nichols told him she was leaving her role as Uhura on "Star Trek."

In other words, you have to have some sense of how it was to be Black in mainstream American culture. Which is to say, largely invisible.

From the porters toting Jimmy

Stewart's bags in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" to the maid Mae West commands to "Peel me a grape" in "I'm No Angel," Black film characters were almost always servile and incidental, orbiting the main action like satellites until it was time to serve coffee or provide comic relief.

In a society that draws so much of its sense of the world and of itself from what it sees onscreen, to be unseen there — or to be seen only in demeaning caricature — is, in a very real sense, not to exist. Culturally speaking, it is a kind of death.

In his years of greatest impact — the late '50s through the 1960s — Poitier required the movie-going world to see Black people. In those years, the Miami-born Bahamian actor was a doctor, a teacher and a soldier, a cop, a convict and a warmhearted handyman. In other words, he embodied blackness in all its shades of humanity and did so with an unyielding insistence upon his own — and therefore, upon our — dignity and worth.

As they say these days, he represented.

It is not an easy thing to represent. Indeed, it is an unfair — albeit often necessary — burden. To represent a people — to be their avatar in unwelcoming places — is to surrender some of your own prerogatives as an individual, your ability to act according to your own tastes and moods without need of calculating whether that will adversely impact the millions of people whose hopes are embodied in you.

Yet Sidney Poitier did exactly that. Indeed, he bore upon himself the needs and aspirations of an entire people with singular grace and class. For so many years, he was the only one we had.

As it turned out, he was also the only one we would need.

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President Barack Obama awards the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Sidney Poitier during a ceremony at the White House in Washington D.C., on Aug. 12, 2009.
Olivier Douliery / Abaca Press / TNS