

My parents pointed my sister, brother, and me forward with perspectives and values such as: “You are valuable; you have gifts to be developed; you do best when you are oriented toward honest assessments and caring outreach.” Yet it was my fourth grade teacher at Gatesville (Texas) Elementary School, Mrs. Erma Stiles, who shaped my learning and study skills as no other.

Every academic or research challenge I have been able to complete over the 57 years since I was in Mrs. Stiles’ class from August 1962 to May 1963 has been do-able because she required much and settled for nothing less. In addition to study minutes during classroom hours, she averaged assigning an “overflow” total of between 60 and 75 minutes of homework four evenings each week in math, geography, or reading and spelling. Her modeling of “when o.k. just isn’t enough” long preceded the AT&T television ads’ slogan which we see broadcast multiple times daily in 2019 and 2020.

When I was moving toward the sixth six-weeks of my fourth grade year with Mrs. Stiles in central Texas, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was engaged in a campaign for equal civil rights for African Americans across the Southern United States. On April 12, 1963, while incarcerated in Birmingham for resisting Alabama court orders against parades and protest gatherings, Dr. King read in a local newspaper smuggled to him an “open letter” signed by eight Caucasian clergymen (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish). It was entitled, “A Call for Unity,” declaring, “We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.”

As the newspaper was smuggled in, Dr. King’s reply had to be smuggled out. Although, in its final form, it is an essay of twenty-plus pages, he began the reply by writing in the margins of the newspaper brought to him, continued writing on scraps of paper, and completed the

communication through conversation transcribed onto legal pads by attorneys visiting him at the jail.

Dr. King's essay includes memorable lines such as: "For years now, every Negro has heard the word, 'Wait,' which has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.' ... I hope religious congregations and communions will meet the challenge of this decisive hour, but even if they do not come to the aid of justice ... we will win our freedom, because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands ... Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away ...so the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty."

While 34 year old Dr. King was scribbling on used newsprint and speaking with his attorneys inside an Alabama jail, as a nine year old, I was writing on clean notebook paper in Mrs. Stiles' (segregated) Texas public school classroom. That same April of 1963 my parents told me how the fall would be different. Two local school districts now racially divided would be one after summer recess.

My parents, Mrs. Stiles, and others were paving the way for a smooth transition, because they modeled how what we may think is "good enough" in the present is many times "not good enough." More is required. With God's help and others' partnership, we are capable of more than we frequently expect of ourselves on our own. What a difference this makes.