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America is in pitiful condition. Nothing proves it better, I think, than our remarkable reaction to the killing in Birmingham of four little girls and two young men. The response to no great event or catastrophe that I can remember was so lacking in genuine expression or action. The President of the United States expressed himself, on behalf of the nation, as "shocked." One sensed in his "shock" the same as, say, the "shock" he feels upon learning of several deaths in an earthquake or tornado or a bad fire that was no one's fault. And then, of course, the President met with Birmingham leaders, headed, of course, by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Said Dr. King of the talk, "It was fruitful." So much for Dr. King.

In my hometown of York, Pa., a week after the massacre, there was a memorial meeting on Penn common, a two-block wide, three-block long park near the heart of the city of 60,000. In its center is a bandshell, in which the leaders of a protest movement (formed several months ago to react for the Negro community to the biting by police dogs of three Negro men) received permission to hold a memorial assembly. It was a depressing affair, as is told in the following letter:

The day was warm and very sunny; not a cloud in the sky. The trees, ever so gently swaying in a warming breeze, seemed in a sensual way to be showing off what they knew to be the last of their summer beauty. One felt in looking at their retiring lushness as one might feel in looking at a lovely woman about to turn 40. She has everything and she knows it, and she wants you to realize and appreciate what she has for she knows she shan't have it much longer. This can in many ways be a beautiful woman. Thus did I feel on that Sunday about the trees in Penn common.

About the crowd, my feelings were mixed. Coming across the common, it looked as though hardly anyone was there at 1:40 p.m., 10 minutes after the meeting was due to begin. When I came closer, I realized that for the trees, I had failed to see the men. There must have been 350 present at that time. Many were white. As I stood and listened to the speeches, though, I began to feel disappointed about the crowd. The least militant white Presbyterian could have been there and felt at home. It was that sedate.

It was not a day for black people to gather in sorrow and make firm resolve to change their lot. It was a day on which we, through the guilt in many whites, sought to bring them to our presence and ask them to change ever so slightly out of pity for our plight.

In York, Pa., last Sunday, the victims of Birmingham died again--without dignity. Nothing we offered in words over the memory of their death either raised by one iota the level of our resolve, or increased the acuteness of our recognition of what had happened. We followed the lead of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and quietly said how bad it was, made a genuflection of contempt in the direction of the madmen who did the deed, and uttered our profound hope that the nation had learned a lesson and that this would never happen again. Not in Birmingham, nor in York, Pa. Then, satisfied that we had "had a good meeting," we went home.

Nothing since the Birmingham bombing itself has so clearly demonstrated that we have become a people without feelings, inured by the facts of constant torture. So insensitive have we become that we reacted by rote. One could have remained at home and predicted without fear of inaccuracy what was going to happen in Penn common. This is so because we have become insulated by the brutality of this act and by all the previous lynchings, bombings, and tortures. A frightened people, we react by rote because the only thing we can really think is, "I hope that it never happens to me." And the fear that it never happen to us is not a fear of the reality of suffering solely because one is black, but rather the fear alone of dying, and dying in pain.

Leaflets calling the community to the memorial service asked whether the "bombs of hate could explode into real bombs in York?" I submit that while this may be an interesting topic for speculation, it is quite beside the point. The fact is that there are children dying in York today, just as really as the children in Birmingham--for death is death--and that they die like sheep. Their parents are the shepherds tending the flock into the grave of oblivion.

Most of the children about whom I am speaking are walking around, eating after a fashion and playing more or less. About them is the appearance of breath, but they are dead, dead from the day of separation from the womb, dead because there is nothing for which to grow up, dead because life is hope and hope is life. There is no hope on Frey's "Avenue." Where the hope in Hope Alley? What the future of growth in Oak Lane? One need not fear the bombs of Birmingham. There is enough to do to save the children of York. Our children are being strangled by our indifference to the hatred they suffer at the hands of this society.

The four girls who died in Birmingham should be remembered as long as we have minds--but how remembered? Memorial services with mealy-mouthed ministers preaching deliberation and non-violence in the face of the horror of the Sixt enth Street Baptist Church are ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ irredeemable blasphemies. I

can suffer the thought of their death better than I can the thought of how we chose to remember them. That was more than I could take.

I don't need a white minister to pray over me that I remain calm and thoughtful about the death of four of my little children. If in this mad society four little girls can die that way in Birmingham, there is no protection for my daughter, Dori, in New York. And the reason there is no protection is that I have not yet made her country safe for her to live in. My memorial on Sunday last or any other should have been for my manhood.

I remember once telling you that I felt I had made a serious mistake in having a child. Now I would like to amplify that statement. To begin with, the world's needs are not for more children, but for more men. I have no desire to increase my ~~bowless~~ jewel-less, castrated progeny--no desire to bring more suffering youngsters into this world. To say, "I want a child," is a selfish thing, when in fact you can't care for the child, when in fact you know that you bear a child who is going to suffer at the hands of this society, and when in fact you know that you aren't going to protect the child because you haven't the nerve to die defending your young as would the lowest primate.

I learn from the New York Times that James Baldwin and some others want to have a "Don't Celebrate Christmas" movement. I approve of this; however, since Christmas is for children, it leads me to the conclusion that the real thing to have is a "Don't Have Children" movement. Let's stop giving America more children to bomb until we are prepared to protect the ones we already have. Until I, were I a resident of Frey's "Avenue," am ready to burn down the house with its rats and then march up to Wyndham Hills and tell the slum landlord, "I'm moving in here until you dig into your bank account and build me a decent house out of all the blood you've sucked from my veins lo these many years," because I'm not ready to add one more mouth to the public welfare rolls.

Yes, stop having children--until we are men enough to save them from

ourselves first and from this society second.

Why do I say all of this? Dr. King, in his eloquent, sugary address to the Agust 28 march on Washington, told the assemblage, "I have a dream. . . ." Well. . .

I have a nightmare: that one day in this land professing to be for the free it will be decided that I and all of my children are an expense that can ill be afforded and that we are a burden unnecessary to carry. Then, as it was for the Jews in Germany, the gas chamber. . . .

I have a nightmare: that by the lessons learned so far, that we take bombings in stride and we protest lynchings in empty words--one day any white man who wishes to do so may gun down our sons in the street and rape our daughters with immunity. . . .

I have a nightmare: that deep in the deserts of America, far away from life, there are concentration camps as there were for the Japanese during World War II and if we continue to be subservient in our non-violence, continue to show America we can out-suffer his ability to torture us, that there we will find ourselves, suffering indeed. . . .

Oh, God help us, I have a nightmare: that the documents of the declaration of independence and the constitution and the bill of rights and all these utterances of freedom were never meant for me . . . that there is no room in America's notion of freedom for me . . . that we came as slaves and slaves we have remained, but that with automation, even slaves are no longer needed and that because slaves are no longer needed, there is no place for me, except that somehow America be rid of me, one way or another.

Dr. King has a dream. I have a nightmare. So far, I have seen more of mine than I have of his. Mine is more real by simple observation. I have dreamt mine all my life.

And so, we gathered last Sunday in the common. We prayed, we listened, we sang, but most of all we thanked God that we were not in Birmingham. Thank God, it hadn't happened to us. And by this act, something more terrible became our fate. We became one, not with the victims, but with their assailants. For we, by the act of having done nothing all this time and by being incapable even then of anything but hollow words, invited the devils to do it again. As long as they didn't do it here.

A final note. How well our women were dressed. It was, as I have said, a beautiful day, a day to dress up. The hats, how very chic they were. And I thought, what a shame we could not have come in sackcloth and ashes. It's the least we could have done.