

things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either. Laws permitting, and even requiring, their separation in places where they are liable to be brought into contact do not necessarily imply the inferiority of either race to the other, and have been generally, if not universally, recognized as within the competency of the state legislatures in the exercise of their police power. The most common instance of this is connected with the establishment of separate schools for white and colored children, which has been held to be a valid exercise of the legislative power even by courts of States where the political rights of the colored race have been longest and most earnestly enforced.*

The Court concluded that Plessy's case finally foundered in the idea that segregation itself was the problem. "We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it." If negroes feel inferior, Brown argues, they have only themselves to blame. The government is doing all it can, should—or will. After the case the free Homer Plessy drifted into anonymity, becoming a life insurance collector before his death in 1925.

Plessy v. Ferguson has long been considered among the worst decisions the Supreme Court ever made, one ranking with its *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision of 1857, which ruled that African Americans "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." Plessy's reputation is partly a matter of hindsight—subsequent events would show it legally legitimate a racist state in which African Americans were systematically deprived of political, civil, and social equality for decades to come—but observers at the time (the few that were paying attention, that is) recognized it would have a disastrous impact. "In my opinion, the judgment this day rendered will, in time, prove to be quite as pernicious as the

* Brown is referring to *Roberts v. the City of Boston* (1850), a precedent that established the legitimacy of school segregation. Southern lawmakers were fond of basing their own segregation statutes on antebellum northern ones. Besides the obvious legal utility in cases like this one, it was also politically helpful when northerners began moralizing about "southern" racial problems.

decision made by this tribunal in the *Dred Scott* case," Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan, himself a former slaveholder, wrote in a lone dissent. "The present decision, it may well be apprehended, will not only stimulate aggressions, more or less brutal and irritating, upon the admitted rights of colored citizens, but will encourage the belief that it is possible, by means of state enactments, to defeat the beneficent purposes which the people of the United States had in view when they adopted the recent amendments of the Constitution" (i.e., the Thirteenth, ending slavery; the Fourteenth, guaranteeing African Americans citizenship; and the Fifteenth, granting them the right to vote).

Abraham Lincoln may have made the slaves' *free*, but not even he, as he pointed out repeatedly in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, was prepared to make them *equal*. The *Plessy* decision was part of a broader political effort to make two concepts that had been widely considered virtually interchangeable into two that were wholly separate, even antithetical.

Race relations wasn't the only area of American life where such a redefinition was taking place. The acceleration of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century, combined with the growing application of the Darwinian theory of "the survival of the fittest" to human affairs, popularized a notion of freedom as the right of the individual entrepreneur, like John D. Rockefeller, to make as much money as he could without interference that would drag down the progress of the human race as a whole. In this view, freedom meant freedom to dominate and freedom from regulation. Equality, by contrast, was a base "leveling" instinct that restricted freedom by insisting that everyone, even those who were evidently superior, had to play by the same rules, respect the same limits. Any assertion that people should be *more* equal than they theoretically already were smacked of socialism—and socialism, like other "foreign" ideas, was thoroughly beyond the pale. Such logic became the cornerstone of Republican ideology in the closing decades of the nineteenth century—and, for that matter, the closing decades of the twentieth as well.

But nowhere were the language, assumptions, and passion for inequality more entrenched than in race relations, and nowhere was the fear that attended the prospect of a truly egalitarian society more apparent. That might not have been a problem; many societies in world history have durably embraced inequality as the foundation for their social organization. Moreover, there have always been Americans in the South

and elsewhere quite willing to deny the validity of equality entirely, and others who would pay it lip service lest meddlesome Yankees impose their will with lawsuits—and, once every century or so, with armed troops. But most of us have believed that equality must play a role in everyday American life, even if that role is almost wholly theoretical.

That's because the American Dream depends on it. At some visceral level, virtually all of us need to believe that equality is one of the core values of everyday American life, that its promises extend to everyone. If they don't, then not everybody is eligible for the American Dream—and one of the principal attractions of the American Dream, and its major moral underpinning, is that everyone is eligible: this has been the benchmark, commonsense notion of what equality has meant for quite some time. That the circumstances of everyday life routinely belie this belief is hardly a problem as long as the *principle* of equality is affirmed.

The way we typically square the difference between principle and reality is to cite the concept of equality of *opportunity*. The notion that everyone has the hypothetical possibility of being equal in public life is a standard we consider practical, as opposed to equality of *condition*, which we typically do not. We can accept, even savor, all kinds of inequalities as long as we can imagine different outcomes—that you can earn a million dollars (if you're lucky); that there's no obvious external barrier forcibly *preventing* a Latina child from attending an Ivy League university (if her test scores are good enough); that you too can hire jury consultants in your murder trial (if you're rich and/or famous); and so on. This allows us to believe we live in a reasonably fair country that bears some relationship to its founding ideals—in this case, that "all men are created equal," as usefully ambiguous as the phrase is—and gives us the hope that our own dreams are not impossibly out of reach.

In an insidious way, this commitment to a fuzzily defined equality of opportunity can actually prevent equality from ever being realized, in much the same way a cigarette smoker believes it's *possible* to kick the habit and thus remains free to maintain it a while longer. One is here reminded of 1972 presidential candidate George McGovern, who was surprised and dismayed by the negative reaction to his suggestion that large inheritances be heavily taxed. "They must think they're going to win a lottery," he mused. Rarely has it been so clear why a candidate lost.

Still, for all the laziness and hypocrisy our attitude toward equality has engendered, even the highly diluted equality of opportunity has

never been wholly without transformative potential to regenerate the American Dream. Indeed, the great irony of *Plessy v. Ferguson* is that the legal basis of the ruling sowed the seeds of its own destruction. The Louisiana lawmakers who crafted the original state railway law knew the federal government would never let them get away with "separate" unless they at least made a *pretense* toward "equal." This is why most Jim Crow laws meant to deny blacks their constitutional rights never actually *said* African Americans could not vote but instead created standards (like literacy tests, poll taxes, and the like) that were supposedly racially neutral but effectively prevented only African Americans from exercising their rights. Beyond that, most Jim Crow laws didn't even bother with pretense: there was no point to them unless separate could mean *unequal*. Nevertheless, the standard, however flouted, provided the wedge that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—founded in the wake of *Plessy*—used to argue that the separate facilities typically provided for blacks were not in fact equal. This effort resulted in a string of legal victories in the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), in which the NAACP showed that the separate law school facilities provided by an institution in Texas failed to meet the *Plessy* standard. The NAACP advanced simultaneously on another front to show that even where theoretical equality existed, separation itself was inherently unequal. This was the basis of the celebrated *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, which overturned a practice—school segregation—that even *Plessy's* own lawyers took for granted in making their own case.

The fact that it took almost sixty years to overturn *Plessy*, however, is not exactly a resounding affirmation of the American legal system. Actually, Supreme Court justices themselves would be the first to say that law is an awkward instrument of social policy. (It's only fair to note that it took states like Louisiana decades after the Civil War to get those Jim Crow statutes on the books in the first place.) The most powerful, and meaningful, battles to infuse the spirit of equality have taken place not in the courts but on the streets. In 1892 Homer Plessy rode a train. In 1955, Rosa Parks—who, like Plessy (and, for that matter, Dred Scott) worked with a series of collaborators on a carefully planned scenario—opened a new phase of the struggle by riding a bus.

This historical movement embodied by figures like Parks has come to be known as "the civil rights movement." That name is accurate in that many of the issues that were fought over in the next fifteen years

But equality? No way, said the diehards. Not without another Civil War. Even then.

Yes, my friends. I want equality. Nothing less. I want all that my God-given powers will enable me to get, then why not equality. Now, catch your breath, for I am going to use an adjective: I am going to say I demand social equality. In this republic we shall be less than freemen, if we have a whit less than that which thrift, education, and honor afford other freemen. If equality, political, economic, and social is the boon of other men in this great country of ours, then equality, political, social, and economic is what we demand.

—John Hope, responding to the arguments of
Booker T. Washington in address before the Colored
Debating Society of Nashville, February 1896

The half century following the *Plessy* decision was a desert in the history of American race relations. To a great degree, this was because equality was simply not part of the national agenda—not in race relations or anywhere else. This was the age of the Robber Barons, men who relished inequality of condition because they believed in equality of opportunity. Any poor boy could theoretically become as rich as they were (and any poor girl could marry one of them).

To be sure, there were those, white and black, who swam against the tide. But such people knew that they were in a decided minority. The conventional wisdom of the era was expressed by Booker T. Washington in a much-celebrated 1895 speech in which he asserted, “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to human progress.” Even before *Plessy*, separate but equal was common sense.

Washington’s racial philosophy has sometimes been perceived as naive at best, but he was no patsy. He ran a virtual empire out of his beloved Tuskegee Institute in rural Alabama, and his opinions won him and his followers positions of national power and influence. His emphasis on good work habits and vocational training made vivid sense to generations of African Americans, particularly working-class African Americans, in a way the work of other intellectuals we tend to regard highly today, notably W.E.B. DuBois, did not. He promoted a dream of upward mobility very much like that of Abraham Lincoln, and in prin-

ple, there was no reason why separate but equal couldn’t work as long as African Americans were free to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Indeed, in principle, even now there’s no reason why separate but equal couldn’t work—except that history shows that in the realm of race relations, it never has. And that’s because, as a practical matter, separate but equal was simply a legal fiction whose entire reason for existence was a reality of separate but unequal. Proving this in court was very difficult; some exceptionally smart, dedicated people devoted their entire careers to upholding Jim Crow. But by the 1930s and into the 1940s, painstaking legal work was establishing an irrefutable gap between what we as a people said we believed and what we were actually doing.

This gap was proving increasingly difficult to ignore. The onset of the Great Depression showed that the price of national inequality was very great, even frightening, even for those most committed to the status quo: hopeless people have fewer compunctions about destroying fine things they don’t believe they can ever have. The Scottsboro case of the 1930s, in which a group of black boys were wrongly convicted of raping a white woman, galvanized black-white solidarity in the North and drew attention to the gross inequities of the legal system. Above all, World War II raised troubling questions about the difference between a Nazi Germany that persecuted Jews and a United States that persecuted blacks. African Americans fought in that war, as they had in every other, and came back ready to fight still another. “I spent four years in the Army to free a bunch of Dutchmen and Frenchmen, and I’m hanged if I’m going to let the Alabama version of the Germans kick me around when I get home,” said one black soldier in 1945. “No sirree-bob! I went into the Army a nigger; I’m comin’ out a man.”

But it took another observer—this one, like Tocqueville a century before, a foreigner—to crystallize the untenable size of the gap between ideals and reality. Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal doesn’t use the term “American Dream” in his massive two-volume 1944 study *An American Dilemma*, but it looms large over Myrdal’s work. What he does talk about is what he calls the national “Creed,” which, as he defines it in his introduction, encompasses “liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity for everybody.” (Note that “equality” and “fair opportunity” are *not* considered one and the same any more than “liberty” and “justice” are.) The dilemma Myrdal referred to was the conflict between this Creed and the way Americans were actually living their lives.

ALL

For Myrdal, inequality lay at the very heart of the American Dilemma:

Liberty, in a sense, was the easiest to reach. It is a vague ideal: everything turns around *whose* liberty is preserved, to *what extent* and *in what direction*. In society liberty for one may mean the suppression of liberty for others. The result of competition may be who got a head start and who is handicapped. In America as everywhere else—and sometimes, perhaps, on the average, a little more ruthlessly—liberty often provided an opportunity for the stronger to rob the weaker. Against this, the egalitarianism of the Creed has been persistently revolting. The struggle is far from ended.

Indeed, as Myrdal himself presciently recognized, a new phase of the struggle was about to begin.

The question was where and how to wage it. In 1950 a young NAACP attorney named Thurgood Marshall convinced his colleagues to strike at the very heart of separate but equal: racially segregated public schools. This was a bold step. The legality of school segregation had been enshrined since 1850 in *Roberts v. the City of Boston*, a precedent that not even Homer Plessy dared challenge. (His lawyers pointed out that integrated train travel posed far less of a problem than the virtually unthinkable integration of schools.) In what became a group of cases collectively titled *Brown v. Board of Education*, the NAACP represented parents and children who were willing to risk ostracism—or worse—in the name of their aspirations. With admirable concision, historian James Patterson has explained what was at stake:

What these and other parents yearned for above all was part of the American Dream: equal opportunities for their children. That is why schools, which later events indicated were among the toughest of all institutions to desegregate, became some of the fiercest battlegrounds in conflicts between the races in postwar America. Like many white people, the parents and students who engaged in these struggles believed in a central creed of Americans: schools offered the ticket to advancement in life. It was a creed that forced schools to the center of racial turmoil for the remainder of the century.

Until 1950 these parents and their allies most often demanded educational quality, not desegregation: a separate-but-equal system of schools was tolerable if it was truly equal. It was only when they became con-

vinced that whites would never grant equality that they began to call for the dismantling of Jim Crow in schools.

In 1954 a unanimous Supreme Court decided in these parents' favor. "In the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate-but-equal' has no place," Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote in his opinion. "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Brown v. Board of Education is a landmark in American history, chiefly because it redressed a fundamental lapse in the American Creed represented by the *Plessy* decision. But there's a difference between revising the Creed and actually living it out, and the decision raised two unanswered questions. The first was whether the nation would really abide by the ruling; a half century later, the answer remains largely no.

The other question was whether separate but equal would continue in other areas of American life. But this argument, unlike *Plessy* or *Brown*, was no polite courtroom drama. Nor was it conducted in the language of legal briefs. This one played out against the rhythms of a lyrical American Dream.

Tell 'em about the dream, Martin.

—Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson to Martin Luther King at the Lincoln Memorial, August 28, 1963

The American Dream is in many ways a story of omissions, and few omissions have been more glaring than that of the place of women in society. Abigail Adams's instructions to John notwithstanding, the Founding Fathers did not remember the ladies—or women who were not ladies. Frederick Douglass, a stalwart supporter of female suffrage, nevertheless sometimes seemed to regard the word "manhood," with its implication of a human condition that was universally shared, as a virtual synonym for "equality." Inequalities of opportunity and condition have been central features of the American experience for women, and while this has changed to some degree in modern times, the American Dream remains problematic. It has largely been a male dream, though one hopes that it does not have to be—will not always be—so.

But history is not entirely barren in this regard. Despite their neglect and exclusion, at least some women have always pursued the American

the New England Conservatory of Music, in 1953. He would be a habitual adulterer for much of his marriage.

There is little indication that he contemplated a life as an activist. "King left virtually no references to race or politics among his student papers at Boston-University," Taylor Branch reports in his massive multivolume biography. "He took some courses from professors who were known crusaders for racial justice," Branch notes, but did most of his work with "sympathetic non-activists." When he finally began his ministerial career, he evaded his father's grasp once again, deciding, after some hesitation, to accept the pulpit at Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1954. He was twenty-five years old, and wholly unsuspecting of the events that would thrust him into international prominence the following year.

The point of this small biographical sketch is to suggest that while Martin Luther King Jr. was a boy raised with great expectations, he did not always meet those expectations and exhibited character flaws that could be attributed to the sense of privilege, even vanity, of his upbringing. He was a boy prince—albeit a prince with a common touch. "He told me, fairly early, that he was not a scholar, and that he wasn't really interested in the academic world," a Boston friend later recalled. "He said, 'I like people too much. I want to work with people.'"

This helps explain what brought King to Montgomery. What it doesn't explain—what no biographer has or probably ever will be able to explain—is how it was that King was transformed into the great leader he became. King himself seemed bemused by the transformation that the Montgomery bus boycott wrought. As he reflected in December of 1956: "If anybody had asked me a year ago to head this movement, I tell you very honestly that I would have run a mile to get away from it. I had no intention of being involved in this way." Once he did, though, something happened. "As I became involved, I realized that choice leaves your own hands. The people expect you to give them leadership. You see them growing as they move into action, and then you no longer have a choice, you can't decide *whether* to stay in or get out of it, you *must* stay in it."

In some sense, King was inaccurate or even misleading to say "you no longer have a choice." Of course "you" *always* have a choice: there were no slaves in the civil rights movement. Millions of Americans managed to calibrate their involvement in countless ways (something that Coretta Scott King must surely, and understandably, have told her

husband throughout a stormy fifteen-year marriage that included four inevitably neglected children). What King really seems to mean here is that he was driven by a kind of inner compulsion, a moral imperative that for him and others overrode strictly personal considerations. He was a free man, but he was exercising his freedom in the most profound way a human being can: choosing to give it up by committing to something, or someone, else.

And for what did King exercise his freedom? To a great extent, the answer is an American Dream of Equality. Toward the end of his 1958 book *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, he made this point, as he often would in the coming years, by invoking the charter of the Dream and noting the gap between what we say and what we do:

Ever since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, America has manifested a schizophrenic personality on the question of race. She has been torn between selves—a self in which she has proudly professed democracy and a self in which she has sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy. The reality of segregation, like slavery, has always had to confront the ideals of democracy and Christianity. Indeed, segregation and discrimination are strange paradoxes in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal.

Slavery, which was now dead, was conquered by freedom. Segregation, which remained alive, could only be conquered by equality.

Over the course of the next five years, King was one figure in an extraordinarily diverse movement that fought a series of (nonviolent) battles for equality across a broad front. In places like Little Rock in 1957 and Birmingham in 1963, civil rights leaders won smashing victories by dramatizing the American dilemma, revealing to white America the jeering, ugly, repressive racism whites themselves found repulsive. In others, such as Albany, Georgia, in 1962, the movement was stymied by wily racists who denied leaders the opportunity to make their case quite as vividly. In still others, like the heroic voting rights campaigns of Bob Moses, the movement waged an excruciatingly slow and violent war of attrition that only bore fruit a decade or more later. Ella Baker taught young people leadership skills and helped launch the pivotal Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, which launched Freedom Rides; Septima Clark, the daughter of a former slave, taught literacy at her "citizenship schools" designed to create informed voters.

King, who raised money, led protests, and founded the Southern Christian Leadership Council to aid such enterprises, was above all the voice of the movement.

One of the key themes in his repertoire was the American Dream, which he invoked again and again in a series of contexts, all of them relating to equality. "I should like to discuss with you some aspects of the American dream," he told the graduates of Lincoln University, a historically black institution in Chester County, Pennsylvania, in June of 1961. "For in a sense, America is essentially a dream, a dream as yet unfulfilled. It is a dream of a land where men of all races, of all nationalities and creeds can live together as brothers." The following month, in a speech to the National Press Club, he sounded a similar, but more pointed, note. "We are simply seeking to bring into full realization the American Dream—a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men no longer argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character" (emphasis added). That fall, he saluted student protesters against segregation: "In sitting down at lunch counters, they are in reality standing up for the best of the American Dream." King would repeat versions of this line throughout the coming decade, most notably on the last night of his life. And in December, in an address to an AFL-CIO convention, King spoke of "a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few."

The most famous of these invocations was King's celebrated "I Have a Dream" speech, which he delivered at the Lincoln Memorial as part of the March on Washington in August of 1963. "I still have a dream," he said toward the end of the speech, departing from his prepared remarks and improvising freely. "It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." The speech culminated in a rhapsody demanding that freedom ring—a freedom defined by, not against, equality.

In some sense, "I Have a Dream" was the high-water mark for King and his American Dream. The coming years would bring victories—notably the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, two of the most important laws in the history of American egalitarianism—but more defeats. King would encounter more subtle but

intractable resistance when he tried to take the movement to northern cities like Chicago, and the movement itself was increasingly splintered. King himself was a target of criticism. Younger blacks derided him for his imperious manner and imperial style; secretly mocking him as "Da Lawd." Some colleagues, like Ella Baker, chafed at his thoughtless sexism, his difficulty in taking women seriously as peers. Others were dismayed by his gluttonous appetites, sexual and otherwise.

King was increasingly unpopular in white America as well, but for different reasons. The FBI under J. Edgar Hoover hounded him mercilessly, tapping his phone lines and spreading as much innuendo as it could without drawing attention to the bureau's role in spreading it. President Lyndon Johnson, who worked with King far more sympathetically and successfully than John F. Kennedy had, was furious at King for his growing opposition to the Vietnam War; metaphorically comparing that opposition to King raping his daughter. But the disenchantment was more widespread than that. In 1967 King failed to make the Gallup Poll list of the ten most admired Americans for the first time in a decade, a telling indication of moral fatigue.

King himself was increasingly disenchanted. His biographers agree he was a depressed man in the final years of his life, which may explain some of his personal excesses. He was particularly dismayed by the ebbing commitment to nonviolence in the movement, a development he understood even as he lamented it. He was even more dismayed at the depth of resistance to change in white America, which belied their—and his—faith in the Creed. Perhaps as a result, King seemed to speak less of the American Dream after 1963.

What he *didn't* stop speaking about—indeed, what he spoke *more* about, and what may explain his sagging popularity—was equality. It is a kind of poetic justice that he was killed in Memphis while working on behalf of striking sanitation workers, engaged in what was often viewed as the lowliest of professions. At the end of his life, King decided he could no longer be silent about things he had held his tongue about, among them the disproportionate impact of the Vietnam War on African Americans—and the immorality of the war in general. His last major organizing effort, the so-called Poor People's Campaign, explicitly widened its scope to cross racial lines, and not only white-black ones. And he became less inspirational, more explicitly challenging, to his national audience. The opening chapter of his final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (1967), is revealing in this regard:

Negroes have proceeded from a premise that equality means what it says, and they have taken white Americans at their word when they talked of it as an objective. But most whites in America in 1967, including many persons of good-will, proceed from a premise that equality is a loose expression of improvement. White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap—essentially it seeks only to make it less painful and obvious but in most respects to retain it. . . . A good many observers have remarked that if equality could come at once the Negro would not be ready for it. I submit that the white American is even more unprepared.

His irritation at white hypocrisy is apparent in "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," his final Sunday morning sermon. In it, King suggested disgust with the false pieties of the American Dream of Upward Mobility:

In 1863 the Negro was told he was free as a result of the Emancipation Proclamation being signed by Abraham Lincoln. . . . It simply said "You're free," and left him there penniless, illiterate, not knowing what to do. And the irony of it all is that at the same time the nation failed to do anything for the black man—through an act of Congress it was giving away millions of acres of land in the West and Midwest*—which meant that it was willing to undergird its white peasants with an economic floor.

But not only did it give the land, it build land-grant colleges to teach them how to farm. Not only that, it provided county agents to further their expertise in farming; not only that, as the years unfolded it provided low interest rates so that they could mechanize their farms. And to this day thousands of these very persons are receiving millions of dollars in federal subsidies not to farm. And these are so often the very people who tell Negroes that they must lift themselves up by their bootstraps. It's all right to tell a man a man to lift himself up by his bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to tell a bootless man that he ought to lift himself up by his own bootstraps.

Freedom is not enough. Nor is an equality of opportunity that is nothing more than an empty abstraction. For the Dream to live, it has to be more than that.

* King is referring to the Homestead Act.

How much more? Is the solution equality of condition? Not even King went this far, and even if he had, it is abundantly clear the country would never have gone along with him. If anything, such a possibility is even less likely now. There is something in our collective imagination that refuses to accept it. As libertarians are fond of reminding us, equality can restrain freedom, depriving people of the possibilities of achieving their potential, of achieving their dreams (thus the frequent arguments in favor of "gifted and talented" programs in public schools). But even if we cannot, or should not, demand equality of condition, it is clear that the very imprecision, even vagueness, of equality of opportunity demands a vigilance that we tend to resist out of laziness or fear. Equality without freedom may be a totalitarian nightmare. But freedom without equality has been an oppressive reality for much of American history—and that's the "better" half. To survive in a new century, the American Dream must be more than an excuse to ignore or forget.

The Negroes of this country may never be able to rise to power, but they are very well placed indeed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American Dream.

This has everything to do, of course, with the nature of that dream and the fact that we Americans, of whatever color, do not dare examine it and are far from having made it a reality. There are too many things we do not wish to know about ourselves. People are not, for example, terribly anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?) but they love the idea of being superior.

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

"I didn't like him much," Jack tells me.

I've been describing my latest book project and my recent reading about Martin Luther King at a dinner party in Providence, Rhode Island, with a small group of septuagenarians hosted by my graduate school mentor, Jack Thomas. But then one of the guests, the kindly widow of another one of my teachers, Bill McGloughlin (himself a much-beloved political activist), mentions that she had actually met King some thirty-five years before when he gave a talk at Brown University. She found him a man of great bearing and dignity, even intimidating. "But I liked him very much," she says.