God’s long summer of national commemorations

By Nicole C. Kirk
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It happened over dinner. My colleague Mark Hicks mentioned that he was thinking about traveling from Chicago to Washington, DC, to take part in one of the commemorative events for the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs. Our conversation swirled on eddies of history and present struggles. I grew increasingly excited, and I wanted to go too.

The next day Mark texted me: “You serious about DC?”

Two weeks later we flew to DC, the weekend before our school’s fall convocation. It felt a little crazy but just right.

Fifty years ago, men and women and children streamed across the country by bus, train and car to march and then gather between the Washington and Lincoln Memorials. They went to listen and to be heard—in support of civil rights but also employment, fair housing, better pay and affordable education. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech was just one part of that amazing day—the culmination of over six hours of music, singing and speeches.

As historian William P. Jones points out, King didn’t even put the March together. It was the collective work of 74-year-old trade unionist A. Philip Randolph, activist and socialist Bayard Rustin and countless others who mobilized their churches, trade unions and civil rights groups to come to Washington.

The wonder of it all is that they all showed up on a summer day in DC—250,000 people gathered to support a broad agenda bringing together groups that had not worked together before. Jones emphasizes that for Randolph and many others the march was about more than racial justice and freedom—it was about social and economic justice.

The March on Washington was one of many national events Americans commemorated this long summer. Earlier in Pennsylvania, an extravaganza of events peppered the summer with multiple opportunities and angles for

commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. The events will stretch to November to commemorate Abraham Lincoln's moving speech. The Gettysburg memorials offer another experience that serves as a tragic marker and hope maker in American history.

Just this past week, the anniversary of the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and the death of four young people there, captured the headlines with stories of that awful day. We remember the pains and the joys. We mourn the blood of soldiers and of children. And we hear, again and again, the inspirational speeches of presidents and pastors.

Each summer hosts festivals of memory, from battlefields and historic homes to larger commemorations that mark a significant passing of time. These events remind us of how ordinary space and place become hallowed ground—even if for a short while, when the history is remembered.

In the week before my trip to DC, I began to question my plans. Why go? Was it merely an exercise in memory? It was certainly far easier for me to attend the march in 2013 than it was for so many in 1963. Did it really matter that I showed up in 2013 to remember 1963 and show my solidarity for the continued fight for justice? I knew it would not be the same experience the original marchers had.

But my experience would be a genuine one in my place and time, niched in the pocket of history I sought to get in touch with that day. I would walk on the same ground; I would stand for hours in the same place. And, as it happened, I would experience the intensity of the sun and heat. I saw the crowds, and I strained to listen.

When commemorations are only read about or considered from an armchair, they are often cleansed of the visceral. Space and place are always contested, open to multiple interpretations.

Although I had walked that ground before with my son on our visits to DC, it was changed when I walked on it for the commemoration. Somehow, in that moment, my story became linked in a new way with the story of the civil rights movement. Now it was more than something I thought about and taught at my seminary. I was more than a historian reading and analyzing the texts and watching the film footage. I was, for just a moment, embodying history and thus becoming connected in a new way.

This is perhaps one of the many reasons we choose to remember with more than story. We reenact, march again and stand in the place others stood before—in a time unlike ours and yet forever connected.

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