



IN THE WORLD WHAT IS A MONUMENT TO JUSTICE? (Spring 1989)

By James W. Skillen

This past January I had the opportunity to attend a conference in Memphis, Tennessee, on the weekend of the celebration of Martin Luther King's birthday. At one break in the conference proceedings, several of us set off to find the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. King had been shot and killed in 1968.

Certainly my motives for going to the Lorraine were mixed. Simple curiosity would have been enough to drive me there. But I also wanted to catch a sense of that important moment in history. Most northern, white, evangelical Christians of my age were slow to appreciate the great civil rights movement that King inspired and helped to lead. That wasn't my culture. I had grown up in rural America where we only heard about racial tensions.

By the time I realized the impact of the civil rights movement in the late '60s, it had already won its biggest battles. I was thankful that blacks could finally get equal treatment under the law, but clearly I would never be able to appreciate how much they had to endure to gain that privilege.

So in Memphis, with eager anticipation, I set off with the other out-of-towners to find the Lorraine Motel. When we first saw its old rusted sign, we thought we had made a mistake. A chain-link fence surrounded the buildings, and the dilapidation had progressed so far that we thought it must have been closed for more than two decades.

What a monument! What a disgusting sight. Surely Dr. King deserved something better than this. Soon we saw the balcony where he had stood the day he was shot. A few memorial signs and symbols were on display in the windows and out on the balcony, but no one could go inside the fence to see it close at hand. Why didn't Memphis or Tennessee or the United States government put up a proper memorial?

As we walked around the block to look at the motel from a different angle, we almost stumbled over someone huddled in a homemade tent—some kind of protestor, we figured. Indeed, Jacqueline Smith was a protestor, but not the kind I expected to meet. It turns out that Ms. Smith, once a promising

contralto who auditioned for the Metropolitan Opera and studied French and acting, went to work at the Lorraine, to provide for herself at a low point in her aspiring career. She didn't leave it until they threw her out when the city closed the motel last year.

From Jacqueline Smith we learned that the city and state were indeed planning to establish a grand monument to Dr. King. A civil rights museum costing \$8.8 million dollars is supposed to be erected on that very spot. "Well, that is good news," I thought. "Ms. Smith must be sleeping out on the street to make sure the government fulfills its promise."

But, no, that was not Ms. Smith's purpose. She was, in fact, opposed to the museum, because, as she explained, "Dr. King would have wanted the Lorraine and the money to be used to help the poor people of Memphis. The motel is going to be turned into a high-tech tourist trap that will concentrate largely on the actual murder of Dr. King."

That is when it hit me. I had come to the Lorraine because I had wanted to see where Dr. King had been killed. To be sure, I was motivated out of respect and a desire to show honor. But would I have come to see a modest building that featured only a soup kitchen or temporary housing shelter? Would I have bothered to come to town if I knew that I

would not see the reconstructed motel balcony where King had been killed? Didn't I, in fact, want to see a nice-looking monument rather than a run-down motel or a functional center serving poor people?

Jacqueline Smith refuses to leave the street. She has become a kind of living monument to Dr. King's dream as she saw it. Perhaps she is wrong about how that place should be memorialized. But her vigil to protest building a hightech monument in favor of a facility that would help poor people represents greater righteousness than my casual search for a historical landmark.

As we walked away from the disintegrating, locked-up motel, I could not stop asking, "Can humans build any appropriate monuments to justice? Is anything capable of meeting the test other than

lives offered up in service to others?” Now I’m on the search for monuments to justice. Remembering Dr. King’s birthday in subsequent years will take me back to Jacqueline Smith, the Lorraine Motel and the idea of service offered up as a human monument to justice.

Spring 1989 QUARTERLY

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