

Nashville, Tennessee was a bleak place in the winter of 1963/64. Along with the rest of the world we were reeling from the assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 4. The struggle for civil rights, which had crested in the summer of that year with Martin Luther King's famous "I have a dream" speech, was stagnating. To make things worse, the weather, that winter, was unusually cold and dreary.

I was a graduate student in physics at Vanderbilt University, and anxiously trying to finish my PhD dissertation. With my new little family I was surviving on a graduate student stipend in a high rise apartment building. It was a bleak existence made bearable only by the prospect of salvation by graduation.

Through friends I had joined a group of students from Fisk University and Vanderbilt active in the civil rights movement. Many of them had been involved earlier in the sit-ins at Nashville lunch counters that had attracted national attention. Our immediate objective was the desegregation of the Tick-Tock restaurant across the street. In retrospect it is amazing to recall the enormity of the cost in time and effort expended for seemingly trivial gains -- like sacrificing thousands of lives in trench warfare to capture a couple of yards of wasteland. The Tick-Tock was a greasy spoon consisting of a dozen stools in front of a linoleum lunch counter. It served coffee and donuts in the morning and hot dogs the rest of the day. In spite of the modesty of the establishment, its owner aspired to a high principle: his right to refuse service to anyone.

Carrying homemade signs with polite requests to boycott the restaurant, we walked our picket line on the sidewalk in front of the establishment.

And how we walked! Every day, from dawn to dusk, four or five us, white and black, male and female, old and young, we walked that line. Most patrons of the restaurant avoided our eyes as they stalked past us in silent anger, but an occasional one would engage us in conversation -- some friendly, some decidedly hostile. Every now and then we would succeed in convincing someone to honor our boycott. Sometimes the police came, and we would start a noisy debate about the First Amendment and other fine points of the law. Neither we nor the cops really knew what we were talking about -- it was all bluster. In any case, I was never arrested.

But I nearly froze to death on that sidewalk. Toward evening in December, when the sun was down and the wind blew and a stray snowflake or two mixed with the dead leaves whirling

down the street, we shivered in the damp cold and asked ourselves why we were there. What was the point of our suffering? To keep up our spirits we sang "We shall overcome" with thin, wavering, off-key voices, making up verses to stretch the time. And then our worst fears would be realized. The owner of the Tick-Tock, a big beefy redneck with a foul temper and a mouth to match would come out of his warm lair to berate us and ridicule us and then, pushing his chin up into our faces, he would try to step on our toes. Until you've experienced it, you can't imagine how badly a 230 pound man stomping on your toes can hurt. And oh, how discouraged we were then -- and how bleak were our prospects for victory.

Once in a while we all assembled for an organizational meeting in the basement of the local Baptist church. At one such occasion we were told to expect a guest speaker, so we squeezed into the biggest room, sitting on chairs, tables, and every square inch of floor. I found a good spot in the front row, right under the lectern.

After a long wait, the speaker strode in, and there was a collective gasp: it was Martin Luther King. Looking like a small-town lawyer in a dark suit and tie, he marched pugnaciously up to the front and without any introduction or explanation began to talk. I have forgotten his words in that basement 44 years ago, but I will never forget HOW he delivered them. Without microphone or notes or warm-up jokes, without even a smile, he stood up there and breathed new life into his rag-tag army. With his left hand behind his back he punched the air for emphasis with his right fist. His message was very simple. I know it's tough, he told us, I know it's frustrating, but don't give up: we will win. He didn't say we ARE winning, because that wasn't true, but "we WILL win, because justice is on our side." He simply didn't allow any room for doubt. And at the end he led us in a thunderous, passionate, and harmonious rendition of "We shall overcome."

That night, sitting at the feet of Martin Luther King, I learned what leadership is, and what a single human being can accomplish with courage and determination. I learned the meaning of charisma. It was my own personal version of the unforgettable scene in which Shakespeare's King Henry the Fifth sends his troops into battle on St. Crispin's Day. Dr. King sent us out from that basement with blazing spirits and bursting with confidence, back to our picket lines, oblivious to the cold and the wind and the ugly taunts. Much later, after I had obtained my PhD and started my first academic job in Montreal, a friend wrote to tell me that blacks were now served at the Tick-Tock. The spirit of Martin Luther King had won another skirmish.