

Somber, yet hopeful, Memphis afternoon

July 2, 2008

“That was somber,” my friend Brent said as we stepped out of the soft lighting of the [National Civil Rights Museum](#) into the harsh sunlight of a summer afternoon in Memphis.

For about two hours, I’d felt as if a strong hand had been planted in the small of my back, pressing me toward milestones I shouldn’t miss. When I preferred to turn away, I felt as if firm hands turned my head to fix my gaze upon signposts of shame as well as signals of strength.

Brent (who helps people every day as director of housing for [St. Jude Children's Research Hospital](#)) makes me laugh. When our children were very young, we attended the same church in Nashville and became tight friends. Even though we’ve both moved away, we’ve stayed close. And when we’re together, we usually find ways to have fun. Usually.

But that Saturday, Brent let me choose where to go sight-seeing in [Memphis](#), his hometown. Maybe because we recently remembered the 40th anniversary of [Martin Luther King](#)’s assassination. Maybe because I’d just heard [Fred Shuttlesworth](#), one of Dr. King’s lieutenants in the battle for civil rights. Maybe because this election year promises to reconfigure race in America. I can’t tell you why, but I chose the Civil Rights Museum over [Graceland](#) and [Sun Records](#).

So, we turned away from rock ’n roll toward racial reconciliation. We chose King over [Elvis](#).

Brent and I stood out in the museum crowd. Two of very few white faces in a sea of black.

I understand why every American of color would want to visit the Civil Rights Museum. It tells the story of the long, gallant, heart-breaking, courageous, violent, impassioned, noble, poignant, improbable, inexorable, valiant march from slavery to full rights at U.S. citizens.

The first panel points all the way back to 1619, when English traders began capturing Africans, shipping them to America and selling them as slaves. The last stop looks in on the very [Lorraine Hotel](#) room where King spent his last night on earth and out to the balcony where a sniper's bullet ended his life.

In between, the museum tells the tale of a monumental struggle. In a better world, emancipation would have been the end of it, but emancipation marks only the beginning. Panel after panel details the slow crawl toward equality—from “separate but equal,” to integration and boycotts, Freedom Riders and sit-ins, marches on Washington and across Alabama.

Brent got it right. Somber. No person with a shred of compassion could read words of hope and desperation and resolve without being moved. No person with an inch of empathy could stand mere feet from where King last stood and not breathe the air of longing—not just for freedom, but for equality and respect.

I understand why every American of color would want to visit the Civil Rights Museum. And I wish every white American would go there, and simply feel. Somber. Yet hopeful.