

Walking with Courage

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by Cynde A. Bimbi

History shapes us. It's a lesson we know intellectually but often fail to grasp in its deepest, most transformative sense. Yet, understanding history — truly understanding it — opens a pathway to understanding ourselves, our communities, and our shared humanity. This conviction underpinned the journey of our 30 pilgrims to Montgomery and Selma, guided by the West African concept of **Sankofa**: *to go back and get it*. In the Akan tradition, Sankofa symbolizes the importance of retrieving the wisdom of the past to forge a better future. Our pilgrimage invited us to do just that — to confront the legacy of slavery, racism, and the Civil Rights Movement with courage, humility, and open hearts.

The experience wasn't merely about visiting landmarks or studying history through glass cases and plaques. Instead, it was about immersing ourselves in a living history that still breathes in the streets of Montgomery and Selma. Through personal stories, spiritual reflections, and moments of collective reckoning, we began to grasp the profound weight of the struggles that have shaped — and continue to shape — our nation's journey toward justice and equity.

As we moved through sacred spaces of history, it became clear that this was no ordinary trip. The pilgrimage demanded more of us than passive observation; it asked us to engage deeply, to feel the pain of the past, and to recognize its echoes in our present. It was an invitation to listen to the stories of those who stood on the frontlines of justice — people whose courage and faith transformed a nation.

One of the most profound aspects of the journey was the way it brought history to life. At each site, the narratives of individuals who resisted oppression were shared with us not as distant, abstract figures but as vibrant, flesh-and-blood people. Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Jonathan Daniels, Jimmie Lee Jackson, the Rev. James Reeb, and the many unnamed heroes of the movement became part of our circle as we stood in the places where they had lived, worked, and sacrificed. Their struggles took on a new immediacy as we walked in their footsteps, from the steps of Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma to the streets of Montgomery where the bus boycott began.

The concept of **merism**, shaped our reflections. Merism calls us to see creation as God does, embracing all parts of creation as integral to the whole. This offered a lens through which to view the events and figures of the Civil Rights Movement. These individuals, like the mosaic of humanity itself, were complex and multifaceted — filled with fear and courage, doubt and faith. Seeing them through this lens of divine inclusivity allowed us to honor their full humanity, as well as the divine purpose they fulfilled in their struggle for justice.

This perspective also reminded us of our own roles in the ongoing work of reconciliation. The pilgrimage did not present history as something confined to the past but as a living, breathing narrative that continues to unfold in our communities today. We saw this vividly in the memorials and museums that told the stories of slavery, segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement. These spaces were not simply repositories of memory; they were calls to action, urging us not only to confront the ways these systems of oppression persist but also to work toward justice in our own time.

The emotional impact of the journey was undeniable. Walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, standing at the Civil Rights Memorial, navigating the halls of the Legacy Museum, or witnessing the stark reality of lynching memorialized at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice brought many of us to tears. Yet, even in our grief, there was hope. These spaces not only commemorated pain but also celebrated resilience, faith, and the power of collective action.

One pilgrim reflected, “I’ve read about these events and seen them portrayed in movies, but nothing compares to standing in these places. It feels so real now.” This sentiment was shared by many. The pilgrimage deepened our understanding of history in ways no book or lecture could. It forced us to confront uncomfortable truths — about our nation, our communities, and even ourselves — and to ask what it means to live out our faith in a world still scarred by injustice.

Throughout the journey, the bonds between us as pilgrims grew stronger. The shared experience of bearing witness to history created a profound sense of connection. In our evening Circle of Trust groups, we processed the emotions of the day together, sharing tears, laughter, and moments of profound insight. These conversations reminded us that the work of reconciliation is not only external but also internal and communal. We must support one another as we navigate the complexities of justice, forgiveness, and healing.

The journey left us with a renewed sense of responsibility. The words of one pilgrim echoed this sentiment: “We know what we know, and we have seen what we have seen.” These words carried a weight that none of us could ignore. We witnessed truths that demand action — truths about the enduring legacy of racism and the necessity of confronting it with honesty and courage.

As we returned home, we carried with us not only the memories of what we had seen and heard but also a commitment to act. Sankofa teaches us that going back to retrieve the wisdom of the past is not an end in itself but a means of moving forward. This pilgrimage was a Sankofa moment — a journey back to the roots of the struggle for justice so that we might carry its lessons into our lives and communities.

The pilgrimage did not offer easy answers to the complex questions of racial justice, nor did it resolve the pain of history. What it did offer was a deeper understanding, a renewed sense of purpose, and a call to live out the lessons of the past in tangible ways. It reminded us that the work of justice is ongoing, that reconciliation is both a process and a practice, and that the fight for equality requires the courage to face hard truths with faith and love.

Empowered by what we had learned and experienced, we returned with a commitment to challenge systems of injustice, to educate others about the realities of history, and to build communities grounded in equity and inclusion. This is the true meaning of Sankofa: going back to retrieve the wisdom of the past so that we might move forward with clarity, purpose, and hope.

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