

If we had been gathered together 250 years ago we would have assumed that some people are born different. We would have taken for granted that some people are born kings, that some people are born princesses and queens, that some people are born as dukes and earls and counts. We would not have questioned whether these people had the right to rule over us as monarchs, and we would not have questioned that their children would rule over us too. We would have ordered ourselves in society by our proximity to these people, and by whether they favored us. If they did, they might have made us their governors, they might have made us their tax collectors, they might have bestowed upon us some means of becoming gentlemen and ladies. And if they did not favor us, they might have prosecuted us, they might have made us their indentured servants, they might have enslaved us.

Something about the American colonial experience made us question this assumption. At least in part it was being taxed without representation in the British parliament. At least in part it was being restricted by the king in the ways we communicated with each other. At least in part it was that the king would not let us pass our own laws unless the king personally approved of them. At least in part it was that the colonists in Massachusetts tried to abolish the slave trade in 1771 and 1774 and the king wouldn't let them. At least in part it was that the king abolished our colonial legislatures when we disagreed with him and when we protested against the writs of assistance, which allowed customs officers to search our homes and buildings for smuggled goods and even compel assistance from bystanders to force entries. At least in part it was that when British loyalists committed crimes, they were set free, but when we were accused of crimes, our cases were heard by a biased judge who served at the will of the king, and whose employment and salary depended upon remaining in the king's good graces. At least in part it was that, even worse, we would be returned by ship to Britain to have our punishments decided by British courts, far away from our families and friends. At least in part it was that, when we protested against these intolerable acts and conditions, the king sent soldiers into our cities for the ostensible reason of keeping the peace but really for the purpose of suppressing us and protecting the loyalists and the customs officers. At least in part it was because, on the afternoon of March 5, 1770, British soldiers opened fire on protestors in Boston and killed five of us and wounded six. At least in part it was because, in ensuing clashes, the British armies killed 49 of us at Lexington and Concord, and another 140 of us at the Battle of Bunker Hill, and that they burned down our towns in Charleston and Falmouth and Norfolk.

It was all of these things, at least in part, that contributed to the revolution, but what made the Americans commit treason (in the eyes in the king) and declare their independence was a deeper moral commitment to a new idea, a new truth that we now hold to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

In other words, the American promise is that we are all born equal, that all political and governmental power comes not downward from kings and queens but rather upward from us, and that the role of our government is not to govern over us but rather to govern for us.

Every American generation has had to ask itself what this promise means to them. For the founding generation, the promise of the declaration led them upon a project to create a more perfect union, first in the Articles of Confederation and then in the Constitution, in which they sought to give expression to their ideals of equality and to the idea that government comes from we the people. Instead of the tyrannical accumulation of powers in the hands of one monarch, they separated the responsibilities of government into three separate and coordinate branches. Instead of having provincial governors appointed by the king, they gave us elections, and the right to vote, and the right to decide for ourselves who from among us should serve as our representatives and as our president. And in order to preserve our individual and unalienable rights, they provided for our freedom of speech, our right to read what we want, our right to petition our government for redress of grievances, our right to the free exercise of the religion of our choice and our right to be free from the establishment of any state-sanctioned church, our right to bear arms, our right not to have soldiers quartered in our homes, our right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures, our rights to due process and to speedy and public jury trials, and our right to be confronted in criminal trials with the witnesses against us, our right to be free from cruel and unusual punishments, and our right to retain all the power that we have not chosen to bestow upon our government. For our founding generation, therefore, the Declaration of Independence was the moral promise that gave rise to the American Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Yet the America the founders created did not necessarily live up to the declaration's promise. Frederick Douglass asked what it meant to a slave to say that all men are created equal, and he pointed out the hypocrisy of men like Jefferson who extolled the idea of birth equality for some while also enslaving others, including his own sons and daughters whom he fathered with Sally Hemings. Men like Washington who performed valiant acts of public service but who made their fortunes with the coerced and enslaved labor of others. Men like Calhoun who openly claimed that they would never relinquish the institution of slavery and that the declaration should be understood as protecting only white men. But the hypocritical failures of these men did not lead Frederick Douglass to suggest that we should walk away from the promise of the declaration but rather that we continue walking towards it: that we see the promise of birth equality as meaning something to all men, both free and enslaved, and that we read the declaration as something aspirational, and as a promise demanding abolition. Frederick Douglass's vision of the declaration was realized a little more than a decade later in the Emancipation Proclamation.

Abraham Lincoln referenced the declaration many times during his political career, including during a speech he gave while dedicating a battlefield cemetery in Gettysburg four score and seven years after 1776. He centered the declaration's promise as the moral guiding light of the American nation. In that declaration, he explained, the founders brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. He went on from there to reenvision this statement as an anti-slavery promise not only in the sense that there could be "no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another," but also in the sense that Black men should be entitled to the equal protection of the American government and to the privileges and immunities of citizenship, and that the right to vote should not be denied to any man on account of their race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Abraham Lincoln's vision of the declaration gave rise within the decade to the 13th, 14th, and

15th Amendments to the Constitution, and in this way, the moral promise of the declaration—that all men are created equal—led us directly towards a more perfect union.

Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony asked why the declaration should not mean that all men and women are created equal, and whether women as well as men were guaranteed the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They asked whether the promise of equality could be fulfilled without providing to women the right to vote, the right to attend college and pursue higher education, the right to own property, and the right to practice the profession of their choice. If political and governmental power comes from the people, they asked, shouldn't it come from all people, both men and women alike? Their vision of the declaration's promise of birth equality gave rise to the protection of women's suffrage in the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke from the steps of the Lincoln Monument in 1963 during a time of systematic segregation, voter suppression, economic discrimination, and racial violence. He described the declaration as a moral covenant whose promises remained unfulfilled, and he called upon us to see the obvious truth that America had failed insofar as her citizens of color were concerned, and that instead of honoring its sacred obligation, American had given its people an empty promise, a bad check, a check which had come back marked insufficient funds. But like Frederick Douglass before him, he did not suggest that we as a nation walk away from the promise of the declaration, or that we walk away from the promise of equality. He refused to believe, as he put it, that the bank of justice was bankrupt. He instead called upon Americans to see equality not only as desegregation but as equal access to education, voting, employment, housing, and public life. He asked Americans to envision our children holding hands with each other and judging each other not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character. Dr. King's work led in part to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Generations before you have asked what it means to say that all men are created equal. Does it mean something legal? Does it mean something moral? Does it tell us something about our shared humanity? It is a question that so far has produced no definitive answer, but it has given us the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Emancipation Proclamation, the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 19th Amendments to the United States Constitution, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

It will soon be your turn to ask what this promise means to you.

What will it mean for your generation to say that all men are created equal?

Who will be included within your promise?

What will be your measure of equality?

How will you think society should address inequalities rooted in race, gender, wealth, sexuality, disability, or immigration status? What else will you see in our country today that looks like inequality or injustice? In what ways might you see the promise of the Declaration of Independence still unfulfilled? In what ways will you think that our union can become more perfect?

I look forward to seeing how you and your generation might answer these questions.