

# The Freedom Writers Symposium, May 2015

*Torbjørn Ydegaard*

As a *Freedom Writer Teacher* I participated in The Freedom Writer Symposium in Washington DC in the beginning of May 2015. Date and place was chosen deliberately as May 5th was Teacher Appreciation Day and 'we' wanted to meet with policy-makers and people in power when it comes to education. Besides of that Washington host a lot of iconic buildings and monuments, also in relation to education and equal rights. Some of the highlights from the days in Washington:

## Thomas Jefferson Memorial

Jefferson was the mastermind behind Declaration of Independence with the oft quoted words:

- *We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men.*

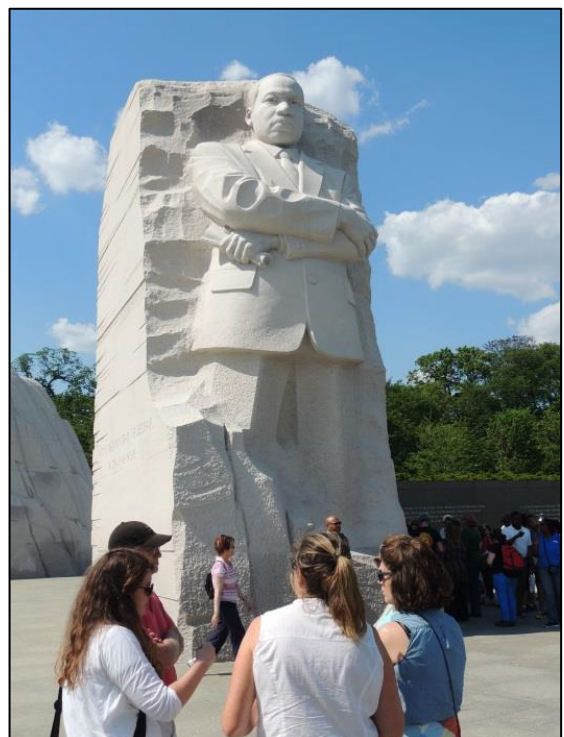
Another strong quotation from the memorial:

- *I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.*

## The Martin Luther King Memorial

A sculpture of Dr. King surrounded by several quotes from his many speeches:

- *Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.*
- *Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a greater person yourself, a*



*greater nation for your country, and a finer world to live in.*

- *Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.*
- *True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice.*
- *Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*
- *I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.*

## **International Holocaust panel**

The Holocaust panel consisted of:

- *Renee Firestone*, survivor from Auschwitz
- *Bunni Sek*, survivor from Khmer Rouge, Cambodia (portrayed as Cindy Ngor in *The Freedom Writers*)
- *Zlata Filipović* (on Skype), survivor from Sarajevo and author of *Zlata's Diary. A Child's Life in Wartime Sarajevo*
- *Tresór Rusesabagina*, son of the manager from *Hotel Rwanda*
- *Ger Duany*, survived child-soldier from South-Sudan



*Ged Duany, Tresór Rusesabagina, Bunni Sek, Renee Firestone, Andrew Carroll (moderator) and Erin Gruwell.*

Some of the things that were said during the panel:

- RF: The first thought after liberation from Auschwitz was “Who were these Germans?”
- RF: It took me a long time to realize that no country came to the help of the Jews!
- ZF: I often wondered why so many people connected to my book. Now I know it is because I wrote about the small moments of humanity in the midst of the war
- GD: The pain makes connections between people. That’s why I tell my story
- TR: Because Holocaust happens even today – with ISIS and Boko Haram. Do something!
- BS: I came to a greater understanding through the history of my family. It gave me a whole new view of my father, whom I came to love
- RF: Teachers have an obligation to teach for a better world. That means also to teach in the darkest hours of humanity
- GD: It was a teacher that gave the dream of leaving the refugee-camp and search for a better life somewhere else
- ZL: We are often afraid to tell our children about the sufferings of other children. We are protecting our children. But the stories have to be told!
- TR: How can we not tell, when children of today live under those conditions? Even though it is scary!
- RF: I tell about the cruelties, but also about the small hopes there are to be found
- ZF: We have to understand both the pain and the goodness. We can do the right things, even in the small
- GD: *When you follow a path through the high grass, it always leads you to another human!*

### **Patrick Kennedy**

Son of Edward Kennedy and nephew to John F. and Robert Kennedy. Former US Representative.



Kennedy quoted John F.'s *Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country* and Robert's *One person can make the change*. And then he told that John F. was the first President to talk in public about human rights in a moral or ethical way – and that all legislation regarding education should be based in ideas and practices like The Freedom Writers. Only then can the moral test pass: Will the whites change seats with the blacks?

And to Obama, or any coming President, a small hint: Health Care should include Brain Fitness!

## **John Lewis, US Representative**

Afro-American legend and icon! Worked together with Dr. King. Founder of Freedom Riders that challenged interracial laws of segregation in the early 1960's. Held a speech side by side with Dr. King that day in Washington, when King held his *I have a dream*-speech. Walked that bridge in *Selma*! And still a member of the House.

Lewis told about his childhood, about always being taught “*Don't get in trouble!*” – meaning “*Don't get in trouble with the whites!*” – about fighting his way to an education and about meeting Dr. King and joining the Civil Rights Movement. And he told us about a long life always getting in trouble with injustice. His advice therefore, to all teachers, were: *Get in trouble!*, fight for each child treated un-fair and un-right whatever the reason! *Get in trouble!* whenever you have a moral obligation to fight! As he said: *We all came to this country in different ships, we are all in the same boat!*



*John Lewis, Patrick Kennedy and former Speaker of the House Dick Gephardt*