

By: Melissa B. Carrasco  
Egerton, McAfee, Armistead & Davis, P.C.



## DANGEROUS UNSELFISHNESS

It was cold and rainy that day, but Memphis in February is usually cold and rainy.

It was a fairly normal workday for Robert Walker, Jr., Echol Cole, Elester Gregory, and Willie Crain. They spent the day driving their garbage truck from house to house picking up bags of household waste and keeping the city of Memphis clean.<sup>1</sup>

But, it was cold and rainy, and so, rather than riding on the outside of the truck, Robert and Echol took refuge inside the barrel of the truck, with the garbage, so they could at least keep dry while they drove from house to house.<sup>2</sup> As dirty and smelly as that sounds, there really were not other options. At the time, the city had a policy that prohibited workers from stopping in residential neighborhoods to take shelter in inclement weather.<sup>3</sup> Apparently people complained about the black workers holding, “unsightly ‘picnics.’”<sup>4</sup>

The truck was old – very old. Workers had complained and even asked that they not be required to use it. They had to jump-start the motor every morning, and they had already replaced the motor that operated the trash compactor.<sup>5</sup> But, they got in that truck each and every day, getting paid \$1.75 an hour (\$12.67 in 2018 dollars), which at the time, meant they weren’t eligible for workers’ comp.<sup>6</sup>

Willie was driving the truck with Elester in the cab. This meant Robert and Echol had a choice: they could hang onto the side of the truck in the pouring rain, or they could stand in the barrel of the truck with the garbage. They picked the second option, and they were standing in the back when something happened. No one knows why, but the hydraulic compactor started to move, and before Willie could stop the truck to hit the emergency shut off in the back, the relentless machine had crushed them to death.<sup>7</sup>

Both men had wives and children. Robert’s wife, Verline, and their five (5) children received Robert’s two final paychecks totaling \$200.<sup>8</sup> The city also agreed to pay \$500 for the funeral expenses of each.<sup>9</sup>

Their coworkers had enough. Robert’s life was worth more than \$700. Echol’s life was worth more than \$700. The sanitation workers had been demanding higher wages and better working conditions for awhile with no progress. A few days after the funeral services, the workers began what is now known as the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike of ‘68.<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. joined them in March, and on April 3, 1968, Dr. King stood before a crowd of thousands and gave what no one realized at the time would be his final speech. By evening on the next day, Dr. King would join Robert, Echol, and the other casualties of the civil rights movement.<sup>11</sup>

But, for Dr. King, April 3, 1968, was not a time to be concerned about personal comfort or safety, and he was very clear about that in what is now known as the *I’ve Been to the Mountaintop* speech. Its most quoted excerpt is at the end:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!<sup>12</sup>

This excerpt is famous largely because it is so prophetic in light of the assassination of Dr. King the next day. However, it comes at the end of a lengthy segment about something which Dr. King called “dangerous unselfishness.”<sup>13</sup> Dangerous unselfishness is a way of thinking about other people who are different from us, whether they are a different race, from a different origin, have a different socio-economic status, or have a different perspective or set of beliefs.

According to Dr. King most people ask this question about the people around them: “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” It focuses on all of the reasons not to take action. Dr. King listed a few: “I am too busy”; “it would be awkward”; “maybe we should get a committee to look into that.” In Dr. King’s mind, all of these reasons stemmed from a fear of the danger of getting involved. That fear asks the question, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” That is the wrong question.<sup>14</sup>

The right question is, “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”<sup>15</sup> That question focuses on the well-being of the other person. The answer requires the kind of dangerous unselfishness that recognizes the risk in the unfamiliar, but still takes action.

In the legal profession, we often talk about increasing diversity within our firms and our Bar Association. But, we may not realize that the word, “diversity” comes from the Old French word *diversite* which is derived from the Latin *divertere* meaning to “turn aside.”<sup>16</sup> The idea is that we actively turn aside from what is familiar and safe to embrace what is unfamiliar and perhaps risky. That is the kind of “dangerous unselfishness” that separates the thermostats from the thermometers.

<sup>1</sup> Kevin McKenzie, *Sanford: Deaths of Cole, Walker set ‘68 Strike in Motion*, COMMERCIAL APPEAL (Feb. 1, 2018), available at <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/opinion/columnists/otis-sanford/2018/02/01/deaths-cole-echol-set-68-strike-motion/1081984001/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Wendi C. Thomas, *Memphis had Another Shameful Tragedy in 1968. It could have been Avoided*, MKL50, <https://mlk50.com/memphis-had-another-shameful-tragedy-in-1968-it-could-have-been-avoided-ef828f0f5091b>, last visited May 10, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, quoting Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> City of Memphis, *Comparing 1968 Sanitation Workers’ Conditions to Today*, [https://memphistn.gov/news/what\\_s\\_new/comparing\\_1968\\_sanitation\\_workers\\_conditions\\_to\\_t](https://memphistn.gov/news/what_s_new/comparing_1968_sanitation_workers_conditions_to_t), last visited May 10, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Kirsten West Savali, *1300 Men: Memphis Strike ‘68*, <https://www.theroot.com/watch-the-tragic-deaths-of-robert-walker-and-echol-col-1822619781>, last visited May 10, 2018.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Otis Sanford, *Sanford: Deaths of Cole, Walker set ‘68 Strike in Motion*, COMMERCIAL APPEAL (Feb. 5, 2018), available at <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/opinion/columnists/otis-sanford/2018/02/01/deaths-cole-echol-set-68-strike-motion/1081984001/>.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, *supra*.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Stanford, *Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike*, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/memphis-sanitation-workers-strike>.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *I’ve Been to the Mountaintop*, transcript available at American Rhetoric, Top 100 Speeches, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Online Etymology, *Diversity*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/diversity>, last visited May 10, 2018.