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they ask me to remember
but they want me to remember
their memories
and i keep on remembering
mine.

why some people be mad at me sometimes by Lucille Clifton

Lucille Clifton's words have rung loudly for me since my return from Alabama. The state implores us to remember its strategically curated version of the civil rights movement, rife with players deemed palatable for the white majority; the sanitization of its depth, scope, and radicalness; and the erasure of Black women, who served as its backbone. The state needs us to accept and uplift this mythology in order to maintain the status quo, and it's our responsibility to refuse it and expose the truth at every turn.

There was one learning moment in particular that readied me even more for our continued battle for the truth. At Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, the tour guide explained how for three years Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a giant in the movement who is scarcely mentioned in popular history, repeatedly asked Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Birmingham because he knew the terrain would be a catalyst for the fight. At that time, Birmingham was arguably the most segregated city in the country with racism being, as our guide noted, not only the culture but also the law. The city's Commissioner of Public Safety, Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor, was a staunch white supremacist with a penchant for extreme violence, and it made Birmingham an ideal place to unmask the true nature of the country's anti-Blackness and the horrific lengths to which it would go to maintain white supremacy.

Shuttlesworth knew that confrontation was key if change was ever going to be made. Bull Connor and those under his command used attack dogs on Black residents, including children, and sprayed them with fire hoses powerful enough to crack their ribs and lift their bodies off of the street. The root of the conflict went far deeper than superficial political disagreements between Birmingham's state actors and its Black residents. As James Baldwin asserted, "We can disagree and still love each other, unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist." At the root of the conflict then, and now, is a complete and utter disdain for Black people and a belief that whiteness is superior.

As I write this, there are loud, constant calls for the country to unite. I believe we do need to unite, but to confront white supremacy, and the people and policies we know to be immoral and lethal to our marginalized community members. Standing in Bethel Baptist Church and reflecting on the everyday work that Shuttlesworth did there—like the movement's many other unwavering, if lesser-known leaders—reaffirmed the following truths for me:

- James Baldwin's charge that "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced."
- Our real leaders walk among us.
- If we come together and fight, we will win.

And we will do it remembering the stories the state would have us forget.