

The Pastor's Pen

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He burst into the American psyche as a glib, cigarette smoking ultimately cool dude. He was urbane, sophisticated and funny as all get out. Once he got our mouths open in laughter, he jammed the truth in our throats. He was the one and only Dick Gregory. Martin Luther King Jr. called America's attention to the blatant unfairness of America's Jim Crow system, through his marches and sit ins. Dick Gregory, in his own inimical way, called the absurdity of segregation by making the nation laugh at itself.

In those days, long before Johnny Carson, Stephen Colbert or Jimmy Fallon, the talk show host everyone watched was Jack Parr. Gregory was a frequent visitor on that program sending studio audiences, musicians and production staff off into gales of laughter. As the people behind the cameras were howling, Dick Gregory was the modicum of cool, never moving a muscle unless punctuating one of his quips through the raising of an eye brow.

We must not forget what was going on in the nation at this time. Segregation was not just a philosophical principle up for debate, in the South it was the law of the land. Although, segregation was de facto in the South, its Northern version, de jure segregation was deeply ensconced in the Northern mindset. The broadcast world of television had become a cash crop for the Networks. The South wielded a huge influence over this new medium, and if they resisted any show, it was a foregone conclusion that program would not make it. The legendary Nat King Cole had his weekly show cancelled because Southern states refused to air it. Dick Gregory, with enormous courage marched into the belly of the beast, refused to blink, and in spite of enormous pressure, saw his stand-up comedy become some of the most popular on the airwaves.

According to the Detroit Free Press, Gregory got his start when, although penniless, he received a call to fill in for Irwin Corey at the Playboy Club in Chicago. He borrowed a quarter for the bus fare to the sight and the rest is history.

I remember his biting satire and stinging social commentary. One of his best-known lines was, "Last time I was down South I went into a restaurant and this white waitress said to me: we don't serve coloreds here. I said that's alright, I don't eat them. Bring me a whole fried chicken".

Roughly two years ago Mr. Gregory was at Shiloh when he attended a rally led by Louis Farrakhan. Although I had only met him briefly before, he embraced me like a long lost friend. Dick Gregory was a man who never met a stranger.

Last week, Dick Gregory was called home to be with God. He was 84 years old. Although America may not remember, he was one of the giants on whose shoulders the Civil Rights Movement rested. For Mr. Gregory, the words of the old hymn provide a fitting tribute, "O when you give the best of your service, telling the world that the Savior has come, be not dismayed when men won't receive you, He understands and will say well done."