



CONTEMPORARY HEROES AND HEROINES DAY



CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, February 24, 2008

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Lection - Isaiah 42:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

I. Historical Background and Documents

My parents, Mama Wig and Daddy Wig, like countless number of parents today, gladly sacrificed many personal pleasures, such as new cars and expensive clothes, to ensure that my brother (Alfred) and I, and my sister, Anna, received a college education. In my mind's eye, I can still see Mama Wig punctuating the importance of earning a college degree with this family proverb that had been handed down to her from her father, Alfred Washington, who attended Hampton Institute soon after Emancipation, namely: "If Wiggins [your father] and I leave you money, you can lose it either through youthful foolishness or your falling victim to unethical business practices. But, if we give you an education, nobody or circumstance of life can take it from you." My parents were my heroes. Their firm belief in the need for education is why I have decided to focus on

contemporary African American heroes and heroines of education on this the third Sunday in African American History month.

Carter G. Woodson began Negro History Week, now known as African American History Month, in February 1926. Dr. Woodson earned his Ph.D. in history from Harvard and founded The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. He has provided an annual calendar date for African Americans to pay homage to, and draw inspiration from, past and present African American men and women of valor and vision. This period also marks the birth date of freedom fighter, Frederick Douglass.

African Americans have an ever-growing pantheon of heroes and heroines who are educators. Johnnetta B. Cole, President of Bennett College, aptly expressed this truth when she wrote: “For every hero in the world, there’s at least one shero.”¹ Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines the two figures thusly: “hero, n. 1c. a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities.” And “heroine, n. 1b a woman admired and emulated for her achievements and qualities.”

Our Love of, and Fight for, Education

Education was and remains an area in which African Americans pay honor to the courageous exploits of African American men and women educators, as is evidenced by the African American proverb: “Education is the single most consistent and powerful instrument for the advancement of an individual and a people.” On July 9, 1868 the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution was passed, and on May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court issued its unanimous decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Both documents are inextricably bound to African American heroes and heroines and the struggle by the masses for full equality in education.

Chief Justice Earl Warren, writing for the Court said:

“Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be made available to all on equal terms.

“We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other ‘tangible’ factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does.” And:

“We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and other similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. This disposition makes unnecessary any discussion whether such segregation also violates the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.”²

The section of the Fourteenth Amendment to which Chief Justice Warren referred reads:

Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

“Section 1. All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”³

II. Excerpts on Education

The image of an African American child hungry for learning is a recurrent theme in African American autobiographies and biographies.

Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington, the founder of Tuskegee Institute, wrote: “I had no schooling whatsoever while I was a slave, though I remember on several occasions I went as far as the schoolhouse door with one of my young mistresses to carry her books. The picture of several dozen boys and girls in a schoolroom engaged in study made a deep impression upon me, and I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise.”⁴

Mary McCleod Bethune

Mary McCleod Bethune, a great educator and founder of Bethune-Cookman College, recalled a bitter childhood experience with a white playmate: “She said to me ‘You can’t read that – put that down,’ it just did something to my pride and to my heart that made me feel someday I would read just as she was reading... I went away from there determined to learn how to read and that someday I would master for myself just what they were getting and it was that aim that I followed.”⁵

Howard Thurman

Howard Thurman, the distinguished theologian, recalled this conversation between his mother and his kindergarten teacher on his first day in school: “With my hair neatly combed, Mamma took me by the hand and delivered me into the hands of the teacher. She said to her, ‘I want my boy to learn’.”⁶

III. Our Heroes And Sheroes Are Somebody

The names of African American heroic figures are memorialized in Reverend William Holmes Borders's poem, "I Am Somebody."⁷ The late Reverend Borders, the former pastor of Wheat Street Baptist in Atlanta, Georgia, introduced this poem of racial praise on January 10, 1943; it was broadcast on "Wings Over Jordan." Between eight incremental repetitions of the refrain: "I am somebody," Reverend Borders praised past and present African American statesmen, sports figures, entertainers, writers, intellectuals, business tycoons, patriots, clergymen, et. al. In 1957, Congressman Charles C. Diggs, Jr. of Michigan, read the poem (with which he indicated he took liberties)⁸ into The Congressional Record to make his "colleagues. . .aware [of] the week of February 10 [which] began the annual national observance of the progress and hard-won achievements of black Americans." The poem ends with an affirmation of African American Christianity:

I AM SOMEBODY William Holmes Borders

I am somebody—

I am a poet in Langston Hughes.
I am an author in Frank Yerby.
I am a creator of rhyme in Paul Lawrence Dunbar.
I am a Christian Statesman in J.R.E. Lee.
I am a diplomat in Ralph A Bunche.

I am somebody—

I am somebody. I am a soldier in Gen. B.O. Davis.
I am courage in Crispus Attucks and Dorie Miller.
I am a humorist in Eddie "Rochester" Anderson.
I am a television artist in Nat "King" Cole.
I am a concert singer in Leontine Price.
I am a renowned baritone in Robert McFerrin.
I am a great contralto in Marion Anderson.

I am somebody—

I am somebody. I am an athlete in Harrison Dillard and Ira Murchison.
I am a basketball star in Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain.
I am an intelligent pen in the hand of DuBois.
I am a college president in Mordecai Johnson.
I am a breaker of world records in Jesse Owens and Eddie Tolan.

I am somebody—

I am somebody. I am an orator in P. James Bryant and Howard Thurman.
I am a preacher in C.T. Walker and L.K. Williams.
I am a composer in Nathaniel Dett.
I am an actor in William Marshall, Frank Silvers, Sidney Portier, and James Edwards.

I am a boxer in Sugar Ray Robinson.
I am a knockout punch in Floyd Patterson.
I am a baseball player in Jackie Robinson and Hank Aaron.
I am a home-run hitter in Larry Doby and Willie Mays.
I am a world famous pitcher in Don Newcombe and Satchel Paige.

I am somebody—

I am somebody. I am a scientist in George Washington Carver.
I am an industrial educator in Booker T. Washington.
I am a Congressman in William L. Dawson, Adam Clayton Powell, and Charles C. Diggs, Jr.
I am a skin specialist in Dr. Lawless, of Chicago, and teach what I know at Northwestern University.
I am a judge in Wade H. McCree and Elvin L. Davenport.
I am a music maker in Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald.
I am a pathologist in Julian Lewis and serve on the University of Chicago faculty.
I am the first successful operator on the human heart in Daniel Hale Williams.
I am an entertainer in Eartha Kitt and Harry Belafonte.

I am somebody—

I am an Assistant Secretary of Labor in J. Ernest Wilkins.
I am loyalty in the armed services.
I am insight in Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass.
I am an advocator of justice in Roy Wilkins and Thurgood Marshall.
I am a labor leader in A. Phillip Randolph.

I am somebody—

I am somebody. I am a molder of character in Nannie Burroughs.
I am a banker in R.R. Wright and L.D. Milton.
I am certified public accountant in Jesse Blayton and Richard Austin.
I am sculptor in Henry O. Tanner.
I am a businessman in Alonzo Herndon and Charles C.D Diggs, Sr.
I am a grand specimen of womanhood in Mary McLeod Bethune.
I am a publisher in John Sengstacke, Mrs. Robert L. Vann, and John H Johnson.

I am somebody—

I am somebody. I am an insurance executive in C.C. Spaulding.
I am a zoologist in Ernest E. Just.
I am a historian in Carter Woodson, J. Hope Franklin, and J.A. Rogers.
I am a lover of education in Charlotte Hawkins Brown.
I am a beautician in Madames Walker, Washington, and Malone.
I am a trustee in slavery. I protected my master's wives and daughters while he fought to keep the chains of slavery about my body.

I am a bishop in W.A. Fountain and George Barber.
I am a ball of fire in Richard Allen.

I am a laborer in John Henry.

I am a true Christian, for indeed, I practiced the religion of Jesus at points better than my master from whom I learned it.

I am somebody.

In 1971, Reverend Jesse Jackson recited his version of the poem on “Sesame Street” to inspire “under-privileged inner-city children” to aspire to harbor a positive self-image and to aspire to learn.⁹

I Am Somebody for 2008 And Beyond

A 2008 version of Reverend Borders’ poem would honor our contemporary heroes and heroines. Who are a few of the people that we could include?

In politics and government: Barack Obama (U.S. Senator from Illinois and presidential candidate); John Lewis (U.S. Congressman from Georgia and elder statesman of the Civil Rights Movement); Gwen Ifill (host of “Washington Week in Review”); Louis Farrakhan (former leader of the Nation of Islam and founder of the Million Man March)

In education: Joe Clark (High School Principal); Marva Collins (Genius at Educating Children); Johnnetta B. Cole (former President of Spelman and President of Bennett College); Andrew J. Foster (founder of twenty-two schools for the deaf); and John Hope Franklin (historian and author)

In religion: Vashti McKenzie (first female AME Bishop); Otis Moss Jr. (Civil rights activist and pastor of Oliver Institutional Church in Cleveland, Ohio); Martha Simmons (first female co-owner of a preaching journal and creator of the first African American lectionary); Gardner C. Taylor (Poet Laureate of the African American Pulpit); Charles G. Adams (pastor of Hartford Memorial Church in Detroit, Michigan); James Cone (author, father of modern Liberation Theology); Katie Cannon (professor and one of the mothers of Womanist Theology); Imam Siraj Wahhaj (eminent Muslim spiritual leader); Johnnie Coleman (founder and pastor Christ Universal Temple, Chicago); Wilton Gregory (first African American to head the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops); and Jeremiah Wright Jr. (pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago)

In arts and entertainment: Toni Morrison (Nobel Prize winning author); Walter Moseley (award winning mystery writer); Oprah Winfrey (television and media mogul); Spike Lee (film and television producer); Denzel Washington (Oscar award-winning actor); Tom Joyner (founding host of The Tom Joyner Morning Show); Tavis Smiley (PBS and NPR talk show host); Wynton Marsalis (Jazz great); Rita Dove (first black Poet Laureate of the United States); and Chris Rock (comedian, television producer, and actor)

In sports: Muhammad Ali (boxing's living legend); Venus and Serena Williams (tennis champions); Tiger Woods (PGA champion); LaBron James and Bill Russell (star NBA players); Vivian Springer (head coach of Rutgers University's women's basketball team); and Tony Dungy (head coach of the 2007 NFL Champion Indianapolis Colts)

IV. Traditional Songs

Three Negro Spirituals that sing the praises of heroes are "Lit'l Boy," "Little David Play on Your Harp," and "Joshua Fit De Battle of Jerico." The first two songs conjure images of little African American children yearning for learning and the opportunity to display their talents.

Lit'l Boy

The Word: "After three days they found him in the Temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors. . . ." Luke 2:41-50

Lit'l Boy, how old are you?
Lit'l Boy, how old are you?
Lit'l Boy, how old are you?
Sir, I'm only twelve years old.
This Lit'l Boy, had them to remember
That he was born the twenty-fifth of December.
Lawyers and doctors were amazed
And had to give the Lit'l Boy praise.
Lit'l Boy, how old are you? Lit'l Boy, how old are you?
Say, Lit'l Boy, how old are you?
Sir, I'm only twelve years old.
Lawyers and doctors stood and wondered
As though they had been struck by thunder
Then they decided while they wondered,
That all mankind must come under
Lit'l Boy, how old are you?...
This Lit'l Boy had the key
To all the hidden mysteries.
The lawyers decided, as wise as he,
They'd better let that Lit'l Boy be.
Lit'l Boy, how old are you?...
The last time the Lit'l Boy was seen
He was standing on Mount Olive green
When He'd dispersed of the crowd,
He entered up into a cloud.
Lit'l Boy, how old are you?...¹⁰

Lit'le David Play on Your Harp

Lit'le David play on your harp

Hallelu, hallelu
Lit'le David play on you harp
Hallelu
David was a shepherd boy
He killed Goliath and shouted for joy
Joshua was the son of Nun
He would never quit till his work was done¹¹

Joshua Fit De Battle of Jerico

Joshua fit de battle ob Jerico, Jerico, Jerico
Joshua fit de battle ob Jerico
An' de walls come tumblin' down/

You may talk about yo' king ob Gideon
You may talk about yo' man ob Saul
Dere's none like good ole Joshua
At de battle ob Jerico

Up to de walls ob Jerico
He marched with spear in han'
'Go blow dem ram horns', Joshua cried,
Kase de battle am in my han'.'

De de lam' ram sheep begin to blow,
Trumpets begin to soun'
Joshua commanded de children to shout
An' de walls come tumblin' down
Dat mornin'

Joshua fit the battle ob Jerico, Jerico, Jerico
Joshua fit de battle ob Jerico
An' de walls come tumblin' down.¹²

V. Possible Illustrations for Church Bulletins and Other Uses

Henry O. Tanner's painting, "The Banjo Lesson"
Augusta Savage's sculpture, "Lift Every Voice and Sing"
Tuskegee University sculpture, "Booker T. Washington Lifting the Veil of Ignorance"

Notes

1. Cole, Johnnetta B. Dream the Boldest Dreams And Other Lessons of Life. Atlanta, GA: Longstreet Press, 1997.
2. Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). National Park Service Historic Site, U.S. Dept. of the Interior online location:

- <http://www.nps.gov/brvb/historyculture/decisions.htm>. accessed 12 December 2007.
See additional info. on the other cases which played an important role in resolving discrimination in schools, <http://www.nps.gov/brvb/>
3. Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Rprt. National Park Service Historic Site, U.S. Dept. of the Interior online location:
<http://www.nps.gov/archive/malu/documents/amend14.htm> accessed 12 December 2007.
 4. Washington, Booker T., and W. Fitzhugh Brundage. Up from Slavery With Related Documents. The Bedford series in history and culture. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003.
 5. Bethune, Mary McLeod, Audrey T. McCluskey, and Elaine M. Smith. Mary McLeod Bethune Building a Better World: Essays and Selected Documents. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999.
 6. Thurman, Howard. With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.
 7. Borders, William Holmes. "I Am Somebody," 1914.
 8. Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles C. Diggs, Jr. of Michigan. In the House of Representatives, Cong. Rec. 14 Feb. 1954: H2073-2074.
 9. Although he did not write the poem, "I Am Somebody" became almost a calling card for Reverend Jesse Jackson. He has recited the line in movies, and others in movies and in songs have used his recitation of the poem.
 10. Hayes, Roland, and Reginald Boardman. Roland Hayes Sings The Life of Christ. New York: Vanguard Recording Society, 1976.
 11. Little David Play on Your Harp. Lyrics online location:
[www.negrosprituals.com/news-song/lit le david play on your harp.htm](http://www.negrosprituals.com/news-song/lit_le_david_play_on_your_harp.htm) accessed 31 January 2008
 12. Joshua Fit De Battle of Jerico. Lyrics online location:
http://www.negrosprituals.com/news-song/joshua_fit_de_battle_of_jerico.htm accessed 12 December 2007