CONTEMPORARY HEROES AND HEROINES DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Contemporary Heroes and Heroines: Unknown, Unsung, and Inconvenient

With the heroic story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as a biblical backdrop, the Cultural Resource unit for this Sunday honors contemporary heroes and heroines, with particular reference to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This movement provides a context to consider the subject of heroism. It allows us to ponder at least three types of heroines/heroes that are often overlooked: unknown, unsung, and inconvenient.
In light of the forty-year gap between the death of the twentieth century prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the recent historic election of the twenty-first century politician, Barack Obama, as the first black president of the United States of America, a combination of diverse and sustained heroic activism has been essential to bring about this watershed moment in history. Let us now offer brief definitions for the three categories of heroism to be covered.

**Unknown Heroes and Heroines**
Unknown heroes and heroines are ordinary, everyday men and women, boys and girls who live heroic lives, but who fail to receive heroic recognition. Day in and day out, they live their lives seeking neither fame nor fortune, but simply doing what they are supposed to do—working hard, living responsibly, loving their families, serving others, and intentionally harming no one. Whoever these people are, we do not know what we would do without them, but we do know that the world is a much better place because they have passed our way.

**Unsung Heroines and Heroes**
Unsung heroines and heroes are figures that we may or may not have heard about. They have done some remarkable things, but they have not received the press, the attention, or the volume of accolades that more well-known personalities engender. Their achievements are consistently overshadowed by the accomplishments of better-known luminaries. And yet, in a real sense, the popular heroines/heroes stand on the shoulders of the unsung heroines/heroes because, without the sacrifices of the latter, the former may never have risen to heroic prominence.

**Inconvenient Heroes and Heroines**
Finally, there are what Vincent Harding calls “inconvenient” heroes. A convenient hero/heroine is one whom we place so high on a pedestal that his/her life no longer challenges our own lives. It is one whom we commemorate, elevate, and celebrate while remaining in our own comfort zones. It is also one in honor of whom we sing songs, write poems, and designate holidays while refusing to join him/her in making the sacrifices that will liberate the oppressed and transform the world. Carl Wendell Himes, Jr. captured the dangers of this behavior in a poem he wrote shortly after the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.:

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Now that he is safely dead
Let us praise him
build monuments to his glory
sing hosannas to his name.

Dead men make
Such convenient heroes: They
cannot rise
to challenge the images
we would fashion from their lives

And besides,
it is easier to build monuments
than to make a better world.
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So, now that he is safely dead
We, with eased consciences
will teach our children
that he was a great man . . . knowing

that the cause for which he lived
is still a cause
and the dream for which he died
is still a dream,
a dead man’s dream.  

Harding contends that, at this point in time, instead of a convenient hero, we need to find in Dr. King “a truly free and inconvenient hero, one who may help us explore new dimensions of our freedom, not simply as a private agenda, but to follow his unmanageable style of seeking and using freedom to serve the needs of the most vulnerable, the most unfree among us.” In other words, we need to release King from the captivity of being packaged, marketed, and domesticated to suit our own “convenient” proclivities. Otherwise, Harding asks, “How else will we be worthy of such a magnificently inconvenient hero? How else will we discover the hero within us all?”

II. Resources for Inconvenient Heroes/Heroines: God as the Heroine/Hero Beyond

The heroism of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego discussed in today’s scripture is based not so much on what they did, as on what they refused to do, i.e., they refused to compromise their values, principles, and beliefs, regardless of the consequences. As their experience demonstrates, such defiance may have fiery ramifications. But that is often the cost of authentic heroism which, ultimately, is not about honors, accolades, and awards, but, instead, about honesty, integrity, and character.

“Inconvenient” heroes/heroines must draw on a power beyond themselves for the spiritual strength and courage to endure and triumph over such ordeals. Their heroism, therefore, is found not so much in themselves, or in others, as in God. Gospel hip-hop artist Kirk Franklin sings about this in the song “Hero.”

The heavens were silent
The earth wept [sic] in pain
Nations were trembling and hope never came
A terror filled the air
and it wouldn’t go away
We needed a hero to come and save the day

Famine and hunger,
disease in the land
The hatred the killing taking lives from your hand
Creation waits through the darkness we pray
Tell me where is the hero to come and save the day

Through the nails
Through the thorns
From the hill to the grave
Was a voice in the distance the lamb that was slain
My soul had no song and my debt I couldn’t pay
When I needed a hero you came and you saved the day.\(^5\)

Freedom songs appropriate for “inconvenient” heroes/heroines, and related to “God as the hero/heroine beyond,” include, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ‘Round ;” “We Shall Overcome Someday; “God Will See Us Through;” and, “Woke Up This Mornin’ With My Mind Stayed On Jesus . . .” Fitting gospel songs include, “I Don’t Feel No Ways Tired;” “God Is;” and “The Lord Is My Light.”\(^6\)

III. Unsung Heroes/ Heroines: The Other as the Heroine/Hero Without

Progress is rarely the product of isolated individuals and events but, instead, the accumulated result of a multiplicity of people, events, historical factors and the providence of God, all working together. A fresh example of this truth may be seen in the circumstances leading to the recent election of Barack Obama as the first African American President of the United States of America.

If President Barack Obama is a twenty-first century Joshua, then Martin Luther King, Jr. was the twentieth century Moses. On the evening before he was slain, King said:

\[
\ldots \text{I’ve been to the mountaintop. } \ldots \quad \text{And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land.}\]

Obama, in his election night victory speech, revised King’s words to fit the mission of a Joshua:

\[
\text{The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America – I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you – we as a people will get there.}\]

These words from Obama reflected a theme he had voiced from the early stages of his campaign. A few weeks after he announced his candidacy for President, Obama explicitly inserted himself in the time line of American racial politics. At the Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in Selma, Alabama, he joined older civil-rights leaders and churchmen in commemorating the voting-rights marches of a generation ago. From the pulpit, Obama paid tribute to “the Moses generation”—to Martin Luther King and John Lewis, to Anna Cooper and the Reverend Joseph Lowery—the men and women of the movement, who marched and suffered but who, in many cases, “didn’t cross over the river to see the Promised Land.” He thanked them, praised their courage, and honored their martyrdom. But he spent much of his speech on his own generation, “the Joshua generation,” and tried to answer the question “What’s called of us?”

In Selma, Obama evoked a narrative for what lay ahead and, in that narrative, Obama was not a patriarch and not a prophet but—the prophesied. “I’m here because somebody marched,” he
said. “I’m here because you all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants.” [Italics mine.]

Obama’s expressed indebtedness to “the Moses generation” sends a clear message, not only to “the Joshua generation,” but to every successive generation. It informs all of us, young and old alike, that we are remiss if we do not intentionally expose ourselves and our children, not only to well-known heroes and heroines, but also to unsung heroes and heroines such as the following, whose names we rarely hear:

Emmett Till
Ella Baker
Septima Clark
E. D. Nixon
Bayard Rustin
John Lewis
Diane Nash
James Bevel
Hosea Williams
Bernard Lafayette

Clara Muhammad
Fannie Lou Hamer
Shirley Chisolm
Barbara Jordan
Lawrence Guyot
Fred Shuttlesworth
Bob Moses
Dorothy Cotton
Daisy Bates
Joseph Lowery

C. T. Vivian
Charles Cobb
Ruby Doris Smith
Robinson
Nannie Helen Burroughs
Cordell Reagon
Bernice Johnson Reagon
James Lawson
Kelly Miller Smith
Viola Liuzzo
James Reeb    Jimmy Lee Jackson
Charles Cobb    Charlayne Hunter Gault
and many, many more . . .

The song, “Hero (Wind Beneath My Wings),” expresses well the debt of appreciation that contemporary heroes/heroines like Barack Obama owe to countless forerunners on whose shoulders they stand and by whose “wind” they soar:

It must have been cold there in my shadow
To never have sunlight on your face
You’ve been content to let me shine
You always walked a step behind

I was the one with all the glory
While you were the one with all the strength
Only a face without a name
I never once heard you complain

[Chorus]
Did you ever know that you’re my hero
And everything I’d like to be
I can fly higher than an eagle
With you as the wind beneath my wings

It might have appeared to go unnoticed
But I’ve got it all here in my heart
I want you to know I know the truth
I would be nothing without you.

IV. Unknown Heroes/Heroines: The Self as the Heroine/Hero Within

As I think of untold ordinary heroines and heroes down through ages, most of whose names we will never know, my thoughts begin with the Middle Passage. No one offers a better hint at what this unimaginably horrific experience must have been like for our African ancestors than Howard Thurman in his classic reflection, “On Viewing the Coast of Africa:”
From my cabin window I look out on the full moon, and the ghosts of my forefathers rise and fall with the undulating waves. Across these same waters how many years ago they came! What were the inchoate mutterings locked tight within the circle of their hearts? In the deep heavy darkness of the foul-smelling hold of the ship, where they could not see the sky, nor hear the night noises, nor feel the warm compassion of the tribe, they held their breath against the agony.

How does the human spirit accommodate itself to desolation? How did they? What tools of the spirit were in their hands with which to cut a path through the wilderness of their despair? . . . Nothing anywhere in all the myths, in all the stories, in all the ancient memory of the race had given hint of this tortuous convulsion. There were no gods to hear, no magic spell of witch doctor to summon; even one’s companion in chains muttered his quivering misery in a tongue unknown and a sound unfamiliar.

O my Fathers, what was it like to be stripped of all supports of life save the beating of the heart and the ebb and flow of fetid air in the lungs?  

V. Remembering

Let us remember countless other unknown heroes and she-ros, such as:

- Family members separated by slavery who never saw each other again
- All persons lynched
- Slaves who built the U.S. Capitol building
- Perpetrators of numerous slave revolts and other acts of slave resistance
- The women who began the Montgomery Bus Boycott
- The Little Rock Nine (Minniejean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Thelma Mothershed, Melba Pattillo, Gloria Ray, Terrance Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, and Carlotta Walls) who faced angry white mobs as they desegregated the Little Rock Public Schools
- Students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College who began the lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina
- Children and youth of the Movement who were attacked by police dogs and sprayed with fire hoses during protest marches
- Four little girls (Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins) killed by a bomb while attending Sunday School at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama
- James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner (three civil rights workers slain in Mississippi)
- Freedom Riders who were brutally beaten
- Protesters (including John Lewis) who were also brutally beaten on the Edmond Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama
- The heroes and heroines of Hurricane Katrina

VI. Conclusion: The Key to Change Is the Hero/Heroine “Within Us All”
Diane Nash, one of the young, unsung heroes of the Civil Rights movement, once observed:

I think it’s really important that young people today understand that the movement of the sixties was really a people’s movement. The media and history seem to record it as Martin Luther King’s movement, but young people should realize that it was people just like them, their age, that formulated goals and strategies, and actually developed the movement. When they look around now, and see things that need to be changed, they should say, “What can I do? What can my roommate and I do to effect that change?”

Interestingly enough, when Obama was born in August 1961, Nash was but a 23 year old Civil Rights activist and King himself was only 32 years old.

While Diane Nash was talking about change that was needed almost a half century ago, Barack Obama’s campaign for the presidency was based on change we need right now. And yet, both of them—Nash, a member of “the Moses generation,” and Obama, a member of “the Joshua generation”—understood that the necessary change required an effort that was spiritual, communal, and personal, all at the same time. We need heroines and heroes who are spiritually courageous enough to be inconvenient, communally committed enough to be unsung, and personally humble enough to be unknown. In stressing that the Kingdom of God is both beyond and within, Jesus Christ reminds us that, not only can we find a hero/heroine in God, as well as in each other, but, as Vincent Harding asserted above, we must also be willing “to discover the hero[heroine] within us all.”

This idea is beautifully expressed in the following song, “Hero,” by the recording artist, Mariah Carey:

[Verse 1:]
There’s a hero if you look inside your heart.
You don’t have to be afraid of what you are.
There’s an answer if you reach into your soul
and the sorrow that you know will melt away.

[Chorus:]
And then a hero comes along
with the strength to carry on
and you cast your fears aside
and you know you can survive.
So, when you feel like hope is gone
look inside you and be strong
and you’ll finally see the truth
that a hero lies in you.

[Verse 2:]
It’s a long road when you face the world alone.
No one reaches out a hand for you to hold.
You can find love if you search within yourself
And the emptiness you felt will disappear.

[Chorus]

[Bridge:]
The Lord knows dreams are hard to follow,
But don’t let anyone tear them away.
Just hold on, there will be a tomorrow.
And in time you’ll find the way.

[Chorus]
. . . a hero lies in you.22

Notes

2. Ibid., pp. 28-29.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
6. Each of these songs, with the exception of one, can be found in the African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 2001. “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ‘Round” and other Freedom Songs from the Civil Rights Movement can be located at the following web site: http://www.cocojams.com/freedom_songs.htm accessed 27 December 2008


16. For this and other episodes of the Civil Rights Movement listed here, see Williams. Eyes on the Prize.


19. Williams, Juan. Eyes On the Prize. P. 131

20. Harding, Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero. P. x.