



*Fannie Lou Hamer  
Freedom Fighter, (1917-1977)*

## CONTEMPORARY HEROES AND HEROINES DAY

### CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Sunday, February 15, 2009**

**Dennis W. Wiley, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator**

Pastor, Covenant Baptist Church, Washington, DC and Adjunct Professor of Theology, Howard University School of Divinity, Washington, DC

#### **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.<sup>1</sup> 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.:

**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.**

**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.<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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?”<sup>4</sup>

## 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup>

### **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:

. . . I've been to the mountaintop. . . 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>7</sup>

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

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.]<sup>9</sup>

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:



Bayard Rustin



Emmett Till



Daisey Bates



Kelly Miller Smith



Diane Nash



Ella Baker

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  
Charles Cobb  
and many, many more . . .<sup>10</sup>

Jimmy Lee Jackson  
Charlayne Hunter Gault

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.<sup>11</sup>

#### **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:”



*Howard Thurman*

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?<sup>12</sup>

## **V. Remembering**

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

- Family members separated by slavery who never saw each other again
- All persons lynched<sup>13</sup>
- Slaves who built the U.S. Capitol building<sup>14</sup>
- Perpetrators of numerous slave revolts and other acts of slave resistance<sup>15</sup>
- The women who began the Montgomery Bus Boycott<sup>16</sup>
- 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<sup>17</sup>
- 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 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama<sup>18</sup>
- 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<sup>19</sup>

## **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?"<sup>20</sup>

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/requires an effort that was/is 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."<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

### Notes

1. Harding, Vincent. Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.
2. Ibid., pp. 28-29.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Franklin, Kirk. "Hero." For complete lyrics, see <http://www.sing365.com> accessed 27 December 2008
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](http://www.cocojams.com/freedom_songs.htm) accessed 27 December 2008
7. King, Martin Luther, and James Melvin Washington. "I See the Promised Land." A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986. p. 286.
8. See "Full Text: President-Elect Barack Obama, Victory Speech, Grant Park, Chicago | November 4, 2008." Online location: <http://www.clipsandcomment.com/2008/11/05/full-text-president-elect-barack-obama-victory-speech-grant-park-chicago-november-4-2008/> accessed 27 December 2008
9. Remnick, David. "The Joshua Generation: Race and the Campaign of Barack Obama." The New Yorker. 17 Nov. 2008. Online location: [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/11/17/081117fa\\_fact\\_remnick?printable=true](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/11/17/081117fa_fact_remnick?printable=true) accessed 27 December 2008
10. There are numerous books that have been written about the Civil Rights Movement. One of the most user-friendly texts for the novice is Williams, Juan. Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965. (A Companion Volume to the PBS Television Series.) New York, NY: Viking, 1987. One might also want to visit the "Eyes on the Prize" web site for a comprehensive introduction to the major events and personalities of the movement. Online location: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/> accessed 27 December 2008. Other helpful resources include Morris, Aldon D. The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change. New York, NY: The Free Press, 1984; Powledge, Fred.

- Free At Last? The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1991; Raines, Howell. My Soul Is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1977.
11. "Hero (Wind Beneath My Wings)." Online location: <http://www.metrolyrics.com/hero-wind-beneath-my-wings-lyrics-gladys-knight.html> accessed 27 December 2008
  12. Thurman, Howard. "On Viewing the Coast of Africa." Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975. pp. 105-106.
  13. Books on lynching include: Cameron, James. A Time of Terror. Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1982; Dray, Philip. At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America. New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2003; Ginzburg, Ralph. 100 Years of Lynchings. Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1988; and, Wells-Barnett, Ida B. On Lynchings. New York, NY: Humanity Books, 2002.
  14. See Robinson, Randall. The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks. New York, NY: A Dutton Book, 2000. pp. 1-10.
  14. Aptheker, Herbert. American Negro Slave Revolts. New York, NY: International Publishers, 1983.
  15. Garrow, David J., Ed. The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987. For more on the role of women in the movement, see Ransby, Barbara. Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003; Riggs, Marcia Y., Ed. Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology. Maryknoll, New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1997; and, Ross, Rosetta E. Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003.
  16. For this and other episodes of the Civil Rights Movement listed here, see Williams. Eyes on the Prize.
  17. Four Little Girls. Dir. Spike Lee. Documentary, 1997. For more details, go to <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118540/>
  18. When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts. Dir. Spike Lee. Prods. Sam Pollard and Spike Lee, 4 CD set. HBO Documentary Films, 2006.
  19. Williams, Juan. Eyes On the Prize. P. 131
  20. Harding, Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero. P. x.
  21. "Hero." Mariah Carey. Online location: <http://www.mp3lyrics.org/m/mariah-carey/hero/print.htm> accessed 27 December 2008 at