

MODERN SCRIPTURE, PART 2: *From After Slavery*

A service by Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD — Dec. 2, 2007

SONG: “This Little Light of Mine”

READING:

Our reading today is taken from a 1903 book by the early and influential sociologist W.E.B. DuBois: *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which DuBois examines the results, in the South, of the first few decades after the Civil War and the formal abolition of slavery. This passage is from a chapter entitled “Of the Sons of Master and Man,” written over 100 years ago. His language reflects conventions of that time.

Now if one notices carefully one will see that between these two worlds, despite much physical contact and daily intermingling, there is almost no community of intellectual life or point of transference where the thoughts and feelings of one race can come into direct contact and sympathy with the thoughts and feelings of the other.

Before and directly after the war, when all the best of the Negroes were domestic servants in the best of the white families, there were bonds of intimacy, affection, and sometimes blood relationship, between the races. They lived in the same home, shared in the family life, often attended the same church, and talked and conversed with each other.

But the increasing civilization of the Negro since then has naturally meant the development of higher classes: there are increasing numbers of ministers, teachers, physicians, merchants, mechanics, and independent farmers, who by nature and training are the aristocracy and leaders of the blacks.

Between them, however, and the best element of the whites, there is little or no intellectual commerce. They go to separate churches, they live in separate sections, they are strictly separated in all public gatherings, they travel separately, and they are beginning to read different papers and books... (It is usually true that the very representatives of the two races, who for mutual benefit and the welfare of the land ought to be in complete understanding and sympathy, are so far strangers that one side thinks all whites are narrow and prejudiced, and the other thinks educated Negroes dangerous and insolent...

In a world where it means so much to take a man by the hand and sit beside him, to look frankly into his eyes and feel his heart beating with red blood; in a world where...a cup of tea together means more than legislative halls and magazine articles and speeches,—one can imagine the consequences of the almost utter absence of such social amenities between estranged races, whose separation extends even to parks and street-cars...

...(T)he future of the South depends on the ability of the representatives of these opposing views to see and appreciate and sympathize with each other's position,—for the Negro to realize more deeply than he does at present the need of uplifting the masses of his people, for the white people to realize more vividly than they have yet done the deadening and disastrous effect of...color-prejudice...

SPECIAL MUSIC: *Dream Variation*

Langston Hughes, 1927

Muriel Morisey, *vocalist*; David Chapman, *pianist*

In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
Dark like me-- That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.
Rest at pale evening . . .
A tall, slim tree . . .
Night coming tenderly
Black like me.

SERMON: Modern Scripture, Part 2: *From After Slavery* — Jaco B. ten Hove

[All indented *QUOTES* from W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903.]

W.E.B. DuBois opens the ninth of fourteen chapters in *The Souls of Black Folk* with a sentence that echoes still, just over a hundred years later:

The world-old phenomenon of the contact of diverse races of men is to have new exemplification during the new century.

We can and should say the same thing today. A “*new exemplification... of the contact of diverse races*” is very much on the docket in our time, in another new century. AND it could still go either way: to urge a greater sense of unity and fairness OR compound separation and injustice.

After many paragraphs of piercing insight and suggestive descriptions, DuBois concludes Chapter IX with an even stronger suggestion:

Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph.

This quality of perceptive prophecy inspired me to classify *The Souls of Black Folk* as “modern scripture.” It has substantially informed and changed my life, perhaps even more so than the focus of my first sermon in this short series [delivered the previous Nov. 4]: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*.

Dr. King knew that he stood on the broad shoulders of pioneers like W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt) DuBois, and spoke directly in honor of him in 1968, when he declared that DuBois “recognized that the keystone in the arch of oppression was the myth of inferiority and he dedicated his brilliant talents to demolish it... We cannot talk of Dr. DuBois without recognizing that he was a radical all of his life.” [Martin Luther King, Jr., “Honoring Dr. Du Bois” in *W.E.B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1890-1919* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), p. 13. Reprinted from *Freedomways*, Spring 1968, pp. 104-111.]

Authentic scripture is often attributed to radicals. (Takes one to know one, perhaps.) Notably, DuBois died in Africa at the age of ninety-five, just one day before Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963.

Langston Hughes, author of the “Dream Variation” piece Muriel just sang, also claimed DuBois as an important influence, dedicating to him one of his greatest poems, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Indeed, all three of these courageous leaders expressed important dreams about how the lives of African Americans can and should be improved.

W.E.B. DuBois was born in western Massachusetts in 1868, three years after the end of the Civil War, and raised there “near the edge of poverty” [Raymond Wolters, *Du Bois and His Rivals*. Chptr. 1. Univ. of Missouri Press, 2002]. His mother Mary was descended from an African slave who was freed after serving in the Revolutionary War; her family had long roots in the Berkshire Mountains. His Haitian-born—and very light-skinned—father Alfred soon abandoned wife and child, never to be seen or heard from again.

Although Alfred didn’t have a good track record of stability, there had also been some threatening behavior toward him by the men of his wife’s darker-skinned family. One biographer explained how “the story of (his father’s) desertion alerted Du Bois to the importance of color consciousness and discrimination within the black community” [ibid].

Young DuBois was clearly brilliant and something of a community prodigy. (He also insisted on the more phonetic pronunciation of his last name—“do-**boyz**”—instead of the “du-bwah” suggested by its French origin.) He first attended the black college Fisk University in Nashville, funded largely by his town’s Congregational Church. He was “thrilled at the prospect of being for the first time among so many people of his own race” [ibid], although it was also his first venture out of the northeast.

As described by another biographer, in Tennessee DuBois “encountered the White South (where) the achievements of Reconstruction were being destroyed by white politicians and businessmen who had gained political control. Blacks were being terrorized at the polls and were being driven back into the economic status that differed from institutional slavery in little but name” [Kerry W. Buckley, “W.E.B. Du Bois: A Concise Biography.” Online: <http://www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/collections/dubois/biography.htm>]

DuBois spent some of his early student teaching assignments in the hills of Tennessee, trying for any toehold he could gain in the eyes and minds of rural black children, often in spite of their suspicious parents. One vivid chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* [IV] tells of

his rugged wanderings, farm to farm, until finally acquiring a tiny shack of a schoolhouse and a small, unsteady population of students. From firsthand experience of the suffering and the dignity of rural blacks of the East Tennessee countryside, DuBois cultivated a commitment to fight against racial and economic oppression.

One time, well after graduation from Fisk University and following a decade of study elsewhere, he returned to Fisk for a visit...

There swept over me a sudden longing to pass again beyond the blue hill, and to see the homes and the school of other days, and to learn how life had gone with my school-children; and I went.

It was a moving and bittersweet reunion with some of the people he had known earlier, who seemed mired in even worse economic conditions than before. He heard about the often sad fates of his former students, including the death of one vibrant young girl who had been so earnest about learning. After some days of this close encounter with the lengthening effect of debt and oppression, he got on a train going back to the University setting in a pensive mood.

My journey was done, and behind me lay hill and dale, and Life and Death. How shall man measure Progress there where the dark-faced Josie lies? How many heartfuls of sorrow shall balance a bushel of wheat? How hard a thing is life to the lowly, and yet how human and real! And all this life and love and strife and failure,—is it the twilight of nightfall or the flush of some faint-dawning day? Thus sadly musing, I rode to Nashville in the Jim Crow car.

After graduating from Fisk, DuBois was accepted into Harvard, although that institution wouldn't recognize the Fisk degree, so he had to start as an undergraduate junior. Two years later, with a bachelor *cum laude* in hand, he got to study for an important period in Berlin, Germany, and subsequently became the first African-American to earn a Harvard Ph.D.—in 1895.

He went on to spend nearly a quarter century on the faculty of Atlanta University, where he first taught history and economics and later established the department of sociology.

Among many other achievements, DuBois was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910, and edited its journal for 24 years.

One of his lifelong efforts was, indeed, to discredit theories of Black racial inferiority and argue that disparities between Whites and Blacks were more a consequence of the poorer economic, social, and sanitary conditions facing African Americans. His was one of the first and loudest voices articulating this illumination. It was quite prophetic.

The recent three-part PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] documentary, “Race: The Power of an Illusion,” further strengthens such an abiding analysis, and I encourage everyone to experience this pivotal program, which we’ve shown twice here in the past year and hopefully again soon.

In 1899, after two years of unprecedented urban sociological study, DuBois published his first book: *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. One reviewer called it “the first, and perhaps still the finest, example of engaged sociological scholarship—the kind of work that, in contemplating social reality, helps to change it.”

[From online blurb: <http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/516.html>]

Then in 1903, DuBois published his second book, *The Souls of Black Folk*—which is both a reflective and descriptive portrayal of Southern life in the first generations after slavery was formally abolished. It is a rich and at times stunning narrative that varies widely in tone and subject matter. It is never overwrought or unduly strident, but pointedly hopeful even as it chronicles the specific abuses and overall injustice of an unmercifully unregulated post-slavery era, which was, he said,

the triumph of brute force and cunning over weakness and innocence.

Chapter II, titled “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” opens with perhaps the most quoted line from this formative work:

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races...

DuBois frames this separation as an insidious Veil that effectively hides one sector of America from another. He goes on to examine how things got to this state, how the woefully inadequate and often inept governmental response to emancipation made matters worse, especially for the freed slaves and their families.

In a time of perfect calm, amid willing neighbors and streaming wealth, the social uplifting of four million slaves to an assured and self-sustaining place in the body politic and economic would have been a herculean task; but when to the inherent difficulties of so delicate and nice a social operation were added the spite and hate of conflict, the hell of war; when suspicion and cruelty were rife, and gaunt Hunger wept beside Bereavement,—in such a case, the work of any instrument of social regeneration was in large part foredoomed to failure... So the cleft between the white and black South grew.

Freedom had been won officially, yes, but ongoing life in the South brandished a fierce reality check about this alleged liberation. Some well-intentioned white people tried to help manage positive change, but they were swamped by many more who merely hoped for the best, while even larger numbers of malevolent whites either actively resisted change or flooded in to manipulate the inexperienced and largely unprotected former slaves. Federal efforts at deeper institutional change were ineffective, to say the least.

In Chapter IX, “Of the Sons of Master and Man,” DuBois eloquently documents the harsh Southern circumstances in which “The Souls of Black Folk” struggled. He also tries to project a future that might hold some sort of promise, a dream of true liberty and equality, even. But the task *is* Herculean:

The crop-lien system which is depopulating the fields of the South is not simply the result of shiftlessness on the part of Negroes, but is also the result of cunningly devised laws as to mortgages, liens, and misdemeanors, which can be made by conscienceless men to entrap and snare the unwary until escape is impossible, further toil a farce, and protest a crime.

...(W)e have a mass of workingmen thrown into relentless competition with the workingmen of the world, but handicapped by a training the very opposite to that of the modern self-reliant democratic laborer. What the black laborer needs is careful personal guidance, group leadership of men with hearts in their bosoms, to train them to foresight, carefulness, and honesty. Nor does it require any fine-spun theories of racial differences to prove the necessity of such group training after the brains of the race have been knocked out by two hundred and fifty years of assiduous education in submission, carelessness, and stealing...

Accepting with pain the obvious fact of “race prejudice in the South,” DuBois suggests a “remedy” for this situation: new leadership must come from among the blacks themselves.

For some time men doubted as to whether the Negro could develop such leaders; but to-day no one seriously disputes the capability of individual Negroes to assimilate the culture and common sense of modern civilization, and to pass it on, to some extent at least, to their fellows. If this is true, then here is the path out of the economic situation, and here is the imperative demand for trained Negro leaders of character and intelligence... But if such men are to be effective they must have some power,— they must be backed by the best public opinion of these communities, and able to wield for their objects and aims such weapons as the experience of the world has taught are indispensable to human progress.

—Like voting rights, a franchise effectively withheld from black citizens until 1965.

What in the name of reason does this nation expect of a people, poorly trained and hard pressed in severe economic competition, without political rights, and with ludicrously inadequate common-school facilities? What can it expect but crime and listlessness, offset here and there by the dogged struggles of the fortunate and more determined who are themselves buoyed by the hope that in due time the country will come to its senses?

“In due time the country will come to its senses.” One still has to wonder what that will look like. After viewing the PBS series, “Race: The Power of an Illusion,” I constructed a parallel historical analogy that helps me to imagine a path toward such hope.

One could look back and see that there have been at least two particularly large moments in time when coming to our national senses on this subject was actively possible, when doors to productive change opened up for us as a nation of undeniable diversity. The post-Civil War era was a time when rebuilding on a new foundation of equality was on the table, including the official effort known as Reconstruction. President Lincoln’s legacy could have inspired a national reformulation of freedom for all.

But he was assassinated for his trouble and further leadership to those ends was sorely lacking. There were some advances, of course. But the net effect was far from sufficient, and, as DuBois has chronicled, a differently insidious separation of the races began to grow. It was now without blatant enslavement, per se, but it enabled a nonetheless disabling prejudice and oppression. To only slightly overstate a complex historical flow, the nation reneged on its promise, the door swung back and a Jim Crow reality continued the injustice in harsh and lasting ways.

About a century after the Civil War era, the modern Civil Rights movement returned a heightened level of national attention to the issue of justice for the generations of descendants of slaves and others. Again, some critical advances were accomplished as a new national door opened with another promise of equality and fairness.

It may be only barely possible for us and history to judge a period still so close in time, and there are positive developments, to be sure. But it is also fair to at least say that the door that was cracked open 40-50 years ago has also not really swung wide or truly embraced the vision of equality.

As the PBS documentary explains, one need only examine the simple yet profound statistic of *net family wealth and worth* to see how inequality continues to fester. The average total

net worth of a family—assets minus debts—has steadily grown for white families and shrunk for African Americans, to the extent that today black families have, on average, *one eighth* the net worth of white families. And the “cleft” continues to grow, visible as the widening gap between rich and poor.

The telling effects of decades of continued systemic unfairness have been mostly disguised and covered over, so that many of us on the white side of the cleft need not face the realities that nonetheless strip our black neighbors of dignity and opportunity. We and our leaders have failed to address the structures of inequality that continue to keep some Americans on the fringes of prosperity.

So, in my analogy, a national negligence and ineffectiveness similar to that which followed the Emancipation Proclamation has helped to largely shut the door opened by the Civil Rights movement. Both times, great promise at first gave great hope to a dream of equality and true freedom for all, but both times our otherwise great nation has not been able to fully deliver, and the dream became, in the words of Langston Hughes, a “dream deferred.”

I want to believe that we may be at the cusp of another such great opportunity today, with white allies growing enough in awareness and courage to adequately support the renewed goals of a society that honors, celebrates, even rewards human diversity, so that the dreams of all people can be fulfilled—not just for some at the expense of others. Success in this will depend on how we all attend to the challenges before us here in 21st century America, challenges that are at once structural, political *and religious*.

I suspect W.E.B. DuBois defiantly titled his manuscript *The Souls of Black Folk* because at the turn of that previous century there was widespread belief among the dominant whites that if you didn't look like them you didn't even *have* a soul. His eloquent ode to the struggles and hopes of a besieged people has opened my eyes to a powerful and frightful historical momentum that I knew about only in theory, really.

His early work continues to resound in our culture today, as an abiding question lingers: **how can we possibly hope to promote the great American dream and ideal of equality of opportunity without also ensuring an equality of basic living conditions and economic fairness?** Greatness as a country, if we wish to claim it, requires more than we have done so far. Freedom, if we are to give it more than lip service, was a dream, then an illusion for many people who deserved and still deserve better.

Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? ...Would America have been America without her Negro people?

Even so is the hope that sang in the songs of my fathers well sung. If somewhere in this whirl and chaos of things there dwells Eternal Good, pitiful yet masterful, then anon in His good time America shall rend the Veil and the prisoned shall go free. Free, free as the sunshine trickling down the morning into these high windows of mine, free as yonder fresh young voices welling up to me from the caverns of brick and mortar below—swelling with song, instinct with life, tremulous treble and darkening bass.

SONG: “Oh, Freedom”

CLOSING WORDS

“...(I)n a world where...a cup of tea together means more than legislative halls and magazine articles and speeches,” let us get together, dream together and act together to embody the depth and breadth of freedom, oh freedom.

Let our little lights shine to illuminate a common path to the Eternal Good so that “in this critical period of the Republic justice and right (shall) triumph.”

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