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On Lift Every Voice and Sing

We understand ourselves through the stories, songs, poems, prayers, sacred texts, negations and affirmations that make the intertextuality of us. These texts connect us to our families, ethnic groups, communities, nation and all of humankind. Lift Every Voice and Sing, the Negro/Black/African-American Anthem/Hymn is one such song for me. I have heard it and sung it throughout my life.

Lift every voice and sing 'til earth and heaven ring,

ring with the harmony of liberty.

Let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies,

let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

I grew up in East St. Louis, Illinois when it was a busy diverse city, when there was industry – meat packing, manufacturing, transportation, chemicals, steel, glass, building materials. There were good jobs, a robust downtown, interesting architecture, German bakeries, Catholic churches that smelled incense and mildew. Church bells rang. There were little groceries run by Jewish merchants a brief walk from my house and from my school.

I heard this song in church and concerts and luncheons and teas sponsored by African-American sororities or by the Eastern Star. The black bourgeoisie kept a busy social calendar. It created and nourished a rich, multi-layered culture where there was an expectation to know and to master European, European-American and African-American literature and music. Choirs sang programs of European classical choral music and African-American spirituals. We stood for both Handel's Hallelujah Chorus and for Lift Every Voice and Sing. The challenges of African-American life notwithstanding, my family, teachers and community taught me and my generation that we were free. They demonstrated dignity and grace. I learned to be confident in the knowledge of my own worth by simple observation.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;

sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;

facing the rising sun of our new day begun,

let us march on 'til victory is won.

We were aware of the challenges that Black folk had already overcome and aware of those that lay ahead. I became conscious of myself as an individual during the civil rights movement. The news of this or that march or act of civil disobedience or effort to show the effects of racism or new slogan or appearance of the civil rights leaders on television were subjects for dinner table and beauty salon conversation. I was fortunate. My blackwoman mentors invited my opinions and encouraged me to challenge conventional wisdom. They insisted, however, that I defend my positions. There had to be a reason to think what one thought.

And I listened to their stories. They told me of their lost loves and of Black bravery in the face of violence and systemic oppression. They knew that their world was limited because of race, but they also knew that my world would be different. They could already see that I would have greater opportunities and the unstated expectation was that I would make the most of the opportunities I was given. I would do my best for me and for them. With greater opportunities come greater responsibilities.

*Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,
felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet
come to the place for which our father's sighed?*

My mentors made me know in casual conversation that African-American people had come a long way from the slave ship and auction block and plantation. However, even though we still had to battle Jim and Jane Crow, we were at a place for which our ancestors lived. Survival had been their revolutionary act.

*We have come over a way that with tears has been watered;
we have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
out from the gloomy past, 'til now we stand at last
where the white glean of our bright star is cast.*

East St. Louis has a tragic past. In 1917, one of the worst race riots in the nation's history occurred there. Riot is the wrong word. It was an attack by white people upon black people. It was a pogrom. African-American workers had been recruited from the south to work in the stockyards and in the various industries operating at full force. East St. Louis has always been a strong town for organized labor and white workers did not welcome the black competition for jobs, especially when blacks were hired as strike breakers. Marx's theory about the solidarity of workers breaks down in the face of this history. Racism did not allow the unity of the working class.

The brutality of the riot was horrific. The NAACP sent W.E.B. Du Bois to investigate. Ida B. Wells wrote investigative pieces about it. Ten-thousand people marched in silent protest in New York City. I grew up knowing about the East St. Louis riot, but I only learned of the magnitude of its barbarism when I studied the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois as an undergraduate. Moreover, East St. Louis was not the only city that experienced race riots in the early years of the 20th century. Chicago, Illinois; Washington, D.C.; Elaine, Arkansas; Charleston, South Carolina; Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee; Longview, Texas; and Omaha, Nebraska suffered racial violence. The most serious happened in Wilmington, North Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; Springfield, Illinois; Tulsa, Oklahoma and Detroit, Michigan.

(<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1979/2/79.02.04.x.html#c> accessed 3/5/10)

When I studied the East St. Louis riot, I learned that it happened in the neighborhood where I grew up and where I attended junior high and high school. Growing up, I sometimes climbed the tree in my back yard. I sat on the steps of my back porch, dreaming little girl dreams, gazing beyond the alley, beyond the train tracks, looking at the horizon and wondering what was behind it in time and space. Where would life take me? I planted tulips in the backyard, a junior high school science project, not knowing that the earth beneath my feet had absorbed the blood and pain of black people terrorized, maimed and murdered for no other reason than that they were black. By some estimates more than 6,000 people were made homeless when whites set their houses on fire and waited to shoot them when they ran out to escape the flames. The ashes of those houses were now deep in the earth beneath my feet. So I dreamed innocent dreams. The future was invisible and the sad past was silent.

Later, while working as a summer intern for the Metro-East Journal, I had an occasion to ask an elderly white woman about the riots. I was in her home to talk to her about another issue. Her old eyes grew dim. She said she did not remember. The pain on her face told me that she did not want to remember, and I respected that. I wonder now if there was something in the air I breathed as a little girl growing up in the area of the riots, some spiritual breath that remained from those awful days, some lingering terror and anger and shock at the depth and intensity of human hatred, some living mystery that kept urging me to learn and kept reminding me to remember. There has always been something drawing me on as Sweet Honey in the Rock sings. There was always a spirit that said speak for the voiceless. House the homeless. Stand with those suffering violence. Were all those tortured Black people leading me on, were they a great cloud of witnesses insisting that humanity evolve intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, psychologically to become truly human, beings for whom such violence is unthinkable?

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
 thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
 thou who hast by thy might led us into the light,
 keep us forever in the path, we pray.*

I come from a people who speak of God as another person in the room. God is present, and God is a presence with power. God is sovereign, and no matter the problem facing us on any given day at any given moment, God has the might to see us through it. God is an individual, and, at the same time, God is Being acting. God is act and consequence. God is justice unfolding, commanding and expanding. God leads us from confusion to clarity. God is the force and the love that is able to keep us on a straight and narrow path.

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee;

Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee;

East St. Louis is no longer the city of my youth. Like many inner cities across the United States, the industry and businesses are gone. The inter-state highway system came through and destroyed neighborhoods. Black people started to move into white neighborhoods, white flight happened and later much of the black middle class moved. Buildings that once housed stores, the local daily newspaper, the movie theater are empty shells. The interesting architecture is hollow. The bank that I visited with my mother when I was a girl still stands, and my father still does business there. There is marble and gold with an antique elevator that as a child I thought was very cool. It stands now with a worn nobility. The cheerfulness and courtesy of the people who work there make its magnificence now. There is a hole at the intersection of Ohio Street and Vogel Place that as I write has gone unrepaired for months. Now the street around it is starting to give way. Where is the stimulus money? This is a shovel ready project.

Yet, in the face of the blight, there exists a faith in the future. There is faith in a God that can make dry bones live again. There is faith in a God of resurrection. There is faith that a better day is coming because there is a God who hears and who answers prayer. And people are praying for the city. People who live in poor cities such as East St. Louis all over the world cannot afford to forget God. They cannot afford to forget that there is a transcendence that sees beyond sight and beyond the blight, that sees beyond the moment, that sees beyond the horizons of our own limited vision and is the intelligence and the determination to help us believe that crucified cities can rise from the dead.

shadowed beneath thy hand, may we forever stand,

true to our God, true to our native land.

The truth to which we are called to stand for and to stand upon is the truth of our own faithfulness. God is faithful to us, so we ought to be faithful to the God of justice and peace.

James Weldon Johnson wrote Lift Every Voice and Sing in 1900 for a Lincoln's birthday celebration at the Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida. Later, his brother, J. Rosamund Johnson wrote music for the poem. They wrote the song and forgot about it, going on to do other things, including writing songs for the Broadway stage. However, African-American people did not forget about the song. Teachers taught it to their students who became teachers and taught it to their students. People started to sing it in churches, pasting mimeographed copies of the song on the inside covers of hymnals.

The Johnson brothers had touched a chord deep inside the soul of a people. They were able to pluck this chord, make poetry and music from it, because the faith and the hope that breathes through this song breathed through the people and breathed through them.

Writing in the 1922 Preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry, James Weldon Johnson writes of the relationship between the people and the artist.

The fact is, nothing great or enduring in music has ever sprung
full-fledged from the brain of any master, the best he gives the
world he gathers from the hearts of the people, and runs it through
the alembic of his genius.

(http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/johnson/preface1.htm accessed 3/5/10)

Johnson lived during the period of American history when Plessy v. Ferguson, the U.S. Supreme Court decision that established the principle of separate but equal as constitutional, ruled the land, especially the south. Lynchings of African-American were common. Many African-Americans lived just one step up from slavery in share-cropper serfdom. African-American soldiers returning home from Europe after having fought in World War I still found little respect, and they were in no mood to swallow racial insults. Yet, Johnson's song has come to be known as the Negro National Anthem because of its patriotic commitment: "True to our God, true to our native land."

Johnson understood that no matter the bloody past, no matter the difficulty of African-American life, no matter our untiring efforts to name and to address the injustices of a political economy that does disproportionate structural violence to people of color and to poor people, African-Americans still consider themselves Americans. The bones of our ancestors rest under this country's soil and their spirits linger in the air. Johnson thought that Black adaptability has a transfusive quality that is universal. It injects joy, pathos, wit, laughter, determination, blues, gospel good news, funk, hip-hop, jazz and a fierce will to survive and to thrive into any place where we put our feet. Lift Every Voice and Sing expresses all of this.

I write this essay about this wonderful song because I worry that we might forget its seriousness and its purpose. I worry that it will be commercialized to sell this or that product. I worry that people who ought to know the words of the song do not. I worry that our young people do not know it and will not know to teach it to their children and forget to stand when it is sung. I worry that if African-Americans forget it and its meaning that all of humanity will lose the inspiration that it contains.

Further, I wonder. I wonder if the gang of young people that beat Derrion Albert to death on a Chicago street knows the words to this song. I wonder whether knowing this song would have made them see Derrion Albert as a brother to whom they owed protection, not as an object of murderous violence. In his first inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln spoke of the mystic chords of memory. For Lincoln such reached from battlefield and patriot grave to living hearts and hearthstones. I say, the mystic chords of memory are those texts that make the intertextuality of us. They go from the living to the living. From voice to ear, and it is this living offering, this gift of memory that connects us. It is a pure gift that we can only pay forward. It is the ligature of religion and of obligation. We have a duty to hold onto the songs and other texts that define us. We owe it to our ancestors, to ourselves to the present world, and to the beautiful ones who are not yet born. We owe it to all of humanity.