

Readings from
CROSSROADS OF HISTORY: THE IMPROBABLE JOURNEY
The Brooklyn Friends School 14th Annual African American Celebration
February 6, 2009

I remember, in the vessel in which I was brought over, in the men's apartment, there were several brothers who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion, to see and hear their cries at parting. O, ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you - Learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends, to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations, now rendered more dear by their separation from their kindred, still to be parted from each other, and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery, with the small comfort of being together, and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely, this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery.

- *Olaudah Equiano, enslaved African who later bought his freedom and published his autobiography.*

No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck.

- *Frederick Douglass, escaped slave and abolitionist*

I have no idea of submitting tamely to injustice inflicted either on me or on the slave. I will oppose it with all the moral powers with which I am endowed. I am no advocate of passivity.

- *Lucretia Mott, Quaker antislavery advocate and women's rights activist*

... that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain. . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom. . . and that government of the people. . .by the people. . .for the people. . . shall not perish from the earth.

- *Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States*

I have lived on through all that has taken place these 40 years in the anti-slavery cause, and I have pleaded with all the force I had that the day might come that the colored people might own their own soul and body. Well the day has come, although it came through blood. It makes no difference how it came--it did come.

- *Sojourner Truth, former slave, abolitionist, preacher and advocate of women's rights.*

Go out and be a center, a life -giving power, as it were, to a whole community, when an opportunity comes, when you may give life where there is no life, hope where there is no hope, power where there is no power. Begin in a humble way to build up institutions that will put people on their feet. It is that kind of life that tells.

- *Booker T. Washington, educator and founder of Tuskegee Institute*

If I am as educated as the next man, if I am as prepared as the next man, if I have passed through the best schools and colleges and universities as the other fellow, why should I not have a fair chance to compete with the other fellow of the biggest position in the nation? I have feelings, I have blood, I have senses like the other fellow, I have ambition, I have hope.

- *Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League*

O, let America be America again--
The land that never has been yet--
And yet must be--the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine--the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME--
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.
- Langston Hughes, Poet and Activist

I knew someone had to take the first step and I made up my mind not to move.
- Rosa Parks, civil rights activist

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character... Let freedom ring... And when this happens, when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!
- Martin Luther King, Jr., clergyman and civil rights leader

Let's begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately menaced, not by Khrushchev, but from within. To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible - and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people, must be prepared to "go for broke"...it becomes thoroughly clear, at least to me, that any Negro who is born in this country and undergoes the American educational system runs the risk of becoming schizophrenic. On the one hand he is born in the shadow of the stars and stripes and he is assured it represents a nation which has never lost a war. He pledges allegiance to that flag which guarantees "liberty and justice for all." He is part of a country in which anyone can become president, and so forth. But on the other hand he is also assured by his country and his countrymen that he has never contributed anything to civilization - that his past is nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured.
- James Baldwin, Author and Activist

We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights...It is time now to write the next chapter - and to write it in the books of law.
- Lyndon B. Johnson, 36th U.S. President

I was the first American citizen to be elected to Congress in spite of the double drawbacks of being female and having skin darkened by melanin. When you put it that way, it sounds like a foolish reason for fame. In a just and free society it would be foolish. That I am a national figure because I was the first person in 192 years to be at once a congressman, black and a woman proves, I think, that our society is not yet either just or free.
- Shirley Chisholm, first black female Congressperson, Presidential candidate in 1972

... Our time has come. Suffering breeds character: character breeds faith; and in the end, faith will not disappoint. Our time has come. Our faith, hopes, and dreams will prevail. Our time has come. Weeping has endured for the night. And now joy cometh in the morning. Our time has come.
- *Jesse Jackson, clergyman, civil-rights activist, political leader, and Presidential candidate in 1984 and 1988.*

...Now that you've realized the prides arrived
We got to pump the stuff to make us tough
from the heart
It's a start, a work of art
To revolutionize make a change nothin's strange
People, people we are the same
No we're not the same
Cause we don't know the game
What we need is awareness, we can't get careless
You say what is this?
My beloved lets get down to business
Mental self defensive fitness
(Yo) bum rush the show
You gotta go for what you know
Make everybody see, in order to fight the powers that be
Lemme hear you say...
Fight the Power
- *Public Enemy, Hip Hop Artists*

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners - an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible....

I would not be running for President if I didn't believe with all my heart that this is what the vast majority of Americans want for this country. This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation - the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.

- *Barack Obama, as a 2008 Presidential Candidate*

Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America: They will be met.

On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord... We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness...Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America. For everywhere we look, there is work to be done...Now, there are some who question the scale of our ambitions -- who suggest that our system cannot tolerate too many big plans. Their memories are short. For they have forgotten what this country has already done; what free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose, and necessity to courage. What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them...Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends -- hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism -- these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history.

- Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,
picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.
Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.
Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself,
others by first do no harm or take no more
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?
Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.
In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,
praise song for walking forward in that light.

- Elizabeth Alexander, 2009 Inaugural Poet