

Keeping Our Memory Accurate

Department of Afro-American Studies Thirtieth Anniversary Celebration

April 8, 2000

I RETURNED TO HARVARD in 1991, and can speak at first hand only about this past decade. But I would still like to glance backward a few decades to remember how sparse was the formal knowledge of – and real education in – any aspect of the African American experience. I want to use myself as an example of the kind of ignorance that prevailed at the time.

I entered secondary school in the fall of 1948. It was a very small school – a total of ninety students and eleven teachers – on a remote hillside in rural Connecticut: high academic standards, a demanding curriculum, and an astonishingly dedicated faculty.

Nonetheless, during my four years there, I did not read a single work by an African American, or a single book *about* African Americans, and there were very few references in our American history course textbook to African Americans. Nor were there any African American students in the school.

I do not say this in any spirit of criticism of the school or its teachers. I'm only describing a situation that must have been typical then of hundreds of thousands of students, in thousands of towns throughout the entire United States. I knew essentially

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nothing about this absolutely central aspect of our collective heritage. In fact, not only did I not know anything, I didn't even (as was once said of a legendary benighted student) suspect anything.

How far had I progressed, if at all, by 1958 or 1968? A little, but not very much. Reading about major events in the press, such as the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the entire unfolding of the civil rights movement, was one thing. But serious study, actual knowledge in any depth, was a totally different thing. And in that arena, I moved incredibly slowly.

By the 1960s, I had been reading Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and others. But if you had asked me who Zora Neale Hurston was, or Alain Locke, Sojourner Truth, James Weldon Johnson, or even Frederick Douglass and Phillis Wheatley, I would have drawn a complete blank. If there is any solace to be drawn from my own situation (and it is, of course, of no solace), the only explanation I can offer is that schools and colleges at the time provided us with little or no help of any kind.

But here it is essential to be honest. Neither I – nor countless others like me – reached out, or sought with energy on our own to find out more; to understand not only the *terribilità* of our society's past, its history and experience, but also to recognize how little that history had changed. As a result, we failed to see – or acknowledge – how much responsibility we ourselves bore for the continuation of circumstances that remained unjust. Ignorance there was, but also a devastating blindness.

In Martin Luther King's last book, *Where Do We Go from Here?*, published in 1967, he wrote:

The history books ... have almost completely ignored the contribution of the Negro in American history. ... All too many [people] are unaware of the fact that the first American to shed blood in the revolution which freed this country from British oppression was a black seaman named Crispus Attucks. [They] are almost totally oblivious of the fact that it was a Negro physician, Dr. Daniel Hale Williams,

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*who performed the first successful operation on the heart, . . . and that another Negro physician, Dr. Charles Drew, was largely responsible for developing the method of separating blood plasma and storing it on a large scale, a process that saved thousands of lives in World War II.*¹

Similar points could easily have been made about the nation's lack of knowledge concerning the brilliant contributions of African Americans to the music not only of our own country, but of the world. And Ralph Ellison began to construct, at least as early as 1970, a new genealogy for the American language, American speech, and American literature.

In his stunning essay, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," Ellison reminded us that Walt Whitman

viewed the spoken idiom of Negro Americans as a source for a native grand opera. Its flexibility, its musicality, its rhythms, free-wheeling diction, and metaphors as projected in Negro American folklore, were absorbed by the creators of our great nineteenth-century literature even when the majority of blacks were still enslaved. Mark Twain celebrated [that same idiom] in the prose of Huckleberry Finn; without the presence of blacks, the book could not have been written. No Huck and Jim, no American novel as we know it. For not only is the black man a co-creator of the language that Mark Twain raised to the level of literary eloquence, but Jim's condition as American and Huck's commitment to freedom are at the moral center of the novel.

*In other words, had there been no blacks, certain creative tensions arising from the cross-purposes of whites and blacks would also not have existed. Not only would there have been no Faulkner; there would have been no Stephen Crane, who found certain basic themes of his writing in the Civil War. Thus, also, there would have been no Hemingway, who took Crane as a source and guide.*²

These few examples only touch the surface of all that was still either unnoticed, or unknown, or consciously omitted and there-

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fore uncelebrated, concerning the history and contributions of African Americans – and of African American experience – to the large pattern of the national and international history in which we all share, and through which we are all so deeply related to one another, through so much of the dreadfulness of the past, as well as through moments of close kinship and love.

Therefore, if we want to grasp at least part of the impact and significance of what has happened since 1970 – shortly after Dr. King wrote his last book, when Ellison wrote the essay from which I just read, and when Harvard's Department of Afro-American Studies was founded – we need to visit the stacks of Widener Library, or bookstores, or visit any number of Web sites, or read our University's course catalogue to see that there has been nothing less than an incalculable expansion, a massive seismic shift with continuous reverberations, in terms of the extent of new knowledge, and the capacity for greater self-knowledge, that now exists in this nation because of the powerful growth of African American studies as a central field of learning during the past three decades.

When we think about major progress in most spheres of life, it is not surprising that we tend to focus on political, legal, economic, societal events – on achievements arrived at through great struggle, conflict, and pain. But there are other very profound, if less dramatic, victories that are also difficult, and every bit as vital (indeed, essential) to our ability to make even elementary sense of our world, of ourselves, of our values, and of our purposes.

From this point of view, new illuminating knowledge gained through persistent, deep research – research that can so often seem fruitless and inconclusive while it is in process, knowledge gained through careful analysis, through imaginative as well as incisive scholarship: these are among our most precious resources. Very few things are as powerful in helping our quest to understand other individuals and groups, or grasp the substantiality of what they have experienced or created. Little else will equip us so well in our effort to keep the human record honest, straight, and

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clear; to keep memory *accurate* as well as *fresh*; to make the present comprehensible, or to endow the future with potential meaning and hopefulness.

This form of knowledge and understanding, with its own kind of saving power, is what research and teaching – what faculty and universities – can at their best provide to us, so long as we come to the enterprise with minds and hearts that are open and yet disciplined, responsive but also discerning.

Of course, this task never ends. There is always so much more to do. From one perspective, we have barely begun – in the many fields that encompass Afro-American and related studies, and in our human and institutional conditions – the process of genuine education that needs to take place before knowledge becomes understanding, and understanding is transformed into increasingly humane and communal relationships.

From another point of view, however, the distance traveled from the ignorance and blindness of 1970 is immense. And a large proportion of the pioneering work and many of the landmark studies and changes, have come from Harvard's superlative faculty in its Afro-American Studies Department, as well as from a number of the University's cognate departments and programs.

It is not a boast, but rather a simple fact, that Harvard's department leads all others in its brilliance, in its magnetism, in its contributions to learning as well as to public life, in its rich variety, and in the sheer abundance of its inspiring human qualities.

The list of the department's faculty in this year's course catalogue includes a large portion of the world's most distinguished scholars in Afro-American studies, including Anthony Appiah, Lawrence Bobo, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Barbara Johnson, Randall Kennedy, Jamaica Kincaid, Lorand Matory, Marcy Morgan, Orlando Patterson, Werner Sollors, Cornel West, William Julius Wilson, and of course our extraordinary chair, leader, force of nature, and friend, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

If the Department of Afro-American Studies is now embedded in the heartland of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, as well as in

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our professional schools, all of the faculty I have just mentioned, and many others from Harvard's past and present, are responsible for that great transformation in knowledge and understanding.

If Harvard undergraduates and graduate students, and so many younger people throughout the world, can now learn and even take for granted far more than I had ever "suspected" half a century ago, then these are the teachers and scholars who have made that possible.

Is there more to be done? Yes – far, far more – and at times the journey ahead can often seem more difficult than the distance traversed, if we mean progress in real understanding, and therefore in the conditions of life for so many African Americans and others in our society. There is still ignorance and blindness – and too often the pathology of hatred and violence – to be overcome.

At the same time, I want to assure you that this university is fully dedicated to the continuous building and expanding of Afro-American studies, in all their richness and complexity.

And Harvard will continue to take ethnicity and race into account, along with many other factors, as it admits students. We will also continue to provide whatever amount of financial aid is required to keep the doors open at the College to talented students from all backgrounds and circumstances.

Finally, if I may speak to our graduates among you, we look forward to seeing you and welcoming you here, again and again, whenever you come: anniversary or no anniversary; in season and out of season; in the best of times or the worst of times. This is your Memorial Church. These are your quadrangles, pathways, and halls of learning. This is your Harvard.

1 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 41–42.

2 Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 109.