

THE DARK IS LIGHT ENOUGH

Speech By
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As editor and publisher of four magazines that grew out of the same vision that brought Frederick Douglass to Rochester in November of 1847, I am honored by this opportunity to participate in this commemoration of this great American's birth.

In the course of his remarkable rise from slavery to freedom, Frederick Douglass illuminated the whole American social order and made all Americans his debtors. And he remains today and will always remain a beacon of hope and light reflecting for all times the hidden possibilities of the disadvantaged of all races, creeds and colors.

All Americans are indebted to the University of Rochester for this imaginative remembrance of Douglass' life and hope. For all Americans need

Douglass' example to enrich their own lives and to fulfill their own hopes.

Although this seminal figure died 72 years ago, he speaks with uncommon authority and eloquence to the needs of this hour. He speaks not only to the disadvantaged, who can see in him what they themselves can become, but also to the biased and privileged, who can see in him how much America is losing by its failure to utilize the full range of available human resources.

For more than 20 years, Johnson Publishing Company has been active in the struggle to bring about a wider appreciation of Frederick Douglass and the historical tradition he represents. Over the years, Negro Digest, Jet and Ebony have printed scores of articles on Douglass' life and work. It was in the September, 1953 issue of Ebony Magazine, for example, that Mary Church Terrell made the widely-quoted statement that Douglass was the "most illustrious Negro and to my mind the greatest of all Americans." Ten years later, when we published a special issue commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, we could think of no one more worthy of the cover space than Frederick Douglass.

As a publisher and as a man, I have been deeply influenced by Douglass' image and his ideas. I am indebted to him, of course, for his pioneering efforts in journalism and for the high standards he maintained as an editor and publisher. But beyond all that, I and millions of other dark-skinned Americans are indebted to Douglass for proving, in tight and dangerous places, that Christopher Fry was right when he said that "the dark is light enough."

There was little light in Arkansas City, Arkansas, where I was born on January 19, 1918. There were few opportunities for Negro Americans in Arkansas City and fewer Negro models to guide and shape the aspirations of the young. To make matters worse, we were poor -- my father was a sawmill worker and my mother was a domestic who ran a personal laundry business on the side. But there is poverty, and then there is poverty. Poverty of the first kind is a matter of the absence of certain things deemed necessary for physical and spiritual health. When this kind of poverty is endured too long, when it foils every effort to escape, it robs the victim of the only thing that can get him out of poverty: hope. My parents lacked material things, but they didn't lack hope. On the

contrary, they had a deep and abiding faith in what philosophers call "the silent power of the possible." I don't know how or why that deep faith lived on in my parents' hearts; I only know that it was there and that it guided me in my blind groping for a way out and a way up. At that time there were only two Negroes in Arkansas City with a college education, and they were the only Negroes who wore dress suits and ties on week days. This fact impressed me greatly and I adopted these two men -- one was a minister; the other was an elementary school principal -- as models of hope and aspiration. My aspirations were sharpened later when the minister and principal told me that the road to dress suits and personal advancement ran through places called high school and college. It was in this way that I made my first tentative connection between education and power. This was, in a sense, a small thing, but it is of such small things that dreams and ladders of hope are made.

But dreams, as Frederick Douglass pointed out 100 years ago, must be grounded on a plan and a willingness to see things through. Here again I was

helped enormously by my mother who became the head of the family after the death of my father in my sixth year. I recall vividly the day in the twenties when we sat down and surveyed the situation and mapped out a plan of action.

Since there was no high school for Negroes in Arkansas City, we decided to move to Chicago where there were wider vistas and larger opportunities. Under the original plan, we were going to leave Arkansas City after I finished the top grade -- the eighth grade -- in the only Negro school. But when that day came, there was not enough money to finance a trip north. My mother, who had a horror of young men loitering on street corners, made me return to the school from which I had just graduated while she continued to save money for the trip to Chicago.

By the time I finished the eighth grade for the second time, the money was in hand and we entrained for Chicago where we arrived on Friday, September 1, 1933. I immediately enrolled in a high school named for Wendell Phillips, who was Douglass' colleague in the abolitionist movement. When Wendell

Phillips High School burned down, I transferred to the new DuSable High School which bore the name of a bold Negro explorer who was the first permanent settler and the first businessman in the Chicago area.

In the meantime, in the deepening Depression crisis, my mother was struggling to make enough money to feed me and keep me in school. These were desperate days, especially for Negro Americans. Jobs were at a premium and millions of men and women were walking the streets seeking employment. My mother, like millions of other Americans, tramped from employment office to employment office and from kitchen to kitchen. Like millions of other Americans, she was turned down and turned away. And she, like millions of others, was forced to seek public relief. There is a rather romantic notion abroad that Negroes seek relief out of a hatred of work. Speaking from experience, I can say that that view is totally unfounded. My mother and I, like millions of Negro Americans, accepted public welfare for several years, not because it was the height of our ambition but because it was the only way to keep body and soul together.

But, as Ralph Waldo Emerson has said, "Every wall is a door." And what that means in the context of the deprived is that every disadvantage contains the seeds of a potential advantage. But to find and exploit that advantage one must retain a sense of expectancy and hope. Above all else, one must control one's motion. The man who sits down and waits in adversity is doomed. "If we find," Frederick Douglass said, "we must seek." If we want the door to open, we must knock. Whether the door opens or not, we must lean against it with all our might.

My mother and I were aware of the great white walls surrounding the Chicago ghetto but we never stopped looking for a door. And, in time, certain doors opened. One of these doors, in fact, opened as a direct result of motion stimulated by disadvantages. Since I lacked the money and clothes to support a vigorous social life, I concentrated on extracurricular activities, serving as editor of the school newspaper and yearbook, president of the senior class and president of the Student Council. As a direct result of these activities, I won a scholarship to the University of Chicago and was honored by a local civic group. And it was

at this meeting that I met a man who changed the whole course of my life. I refer here to Harry H. Pace, who was then president of the Supreme Life Insurance Company, the largest Negro business in the North. Mr. Pace, who was familiar with my work on the school newspaper, urged me to continue my education and arranged for me to work part time while attending classes at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University. I later became a full-time employee of the company, serving successively as assistant editor and managing editor of the employee publication, and assistant to the president.

This, as I have often said, was the great turning point in my life. For, unlike so many of my contemporaries, I was brought into direct contact with bold and imaginative Negro businessmen -- graduates of Harvard, Yale, Northwestern and the University of Illinois -- who were handling and investing large sums of money and managing and directing trans-state business operations.

One of the major problems in motivating young Negro Americans is their lack of direct exposure to large-scale business operations. For motivation is concrete: it grows out of what one can feel, see, touch. Unable to see or even

imagine large-scale business operations, many young Negroes naturally lose interest in independent business activity. I am sure that I would not have entered the business world had I not been exposed to that world at an early age. My early exposure to the inner workings of a large corporation influenced my whole business career. And it led to my election in April, 1966, as Chairman of the Board of Directors of Supreme Life Insurance Company, where I began my business life as a lowly apprentice. One of the major problems of the future will be the creation of conditions that provide concrete business exposure for ambitious young Negroes. At the same time bright young Negroes must push their way into industries and associate with and observe leading businessmen in the business environment.

Because of my work on the company magazine, it was necessary for me to attend meetings and conferences with the leading executives of the company. This was an excellent opportunity to study the mechanics of decision-making and high-level business operations and I made the most of the opportunity. As I worked I kept my eyes open for business opportunities. For by that time I was thinking in terms of running my own business.

The opportunity I was seeking grew out of my work at the insurance company. The president, who was advanced in age, asked me to read all periodicals and prepare a digest of Negro-oriented articles. From time to time I would discuss these digests with friends and relatives. And their response prompted me to publish Negro Digest, a monthly condensation of Negro-oriented articles in magazines and newspapers.

The major problem, of course, was money. How was I going to finance the magazine? I approached several potential investors and got the same response Douglass got in 1847 when he was organizing The North Star. I was told, in other words, that I was crazy and that no one needed or wanted such a magazine. Many reminded me, as many reminded Douglass, of the long string of failures by Negro-oriented magazines. And I told them, as Douglass told his doubters, that the only answer to a long string of failures is a stunning success. I was convinced, as Douglass was convinced, that my magazine would be a success. My view, unfortunately, was a minority view. I finally went to a finance company and pawned my mother's furniture for \$500. With that as a capital base, I

persuaded a printer to extend credit; and by working nights, my wife and I prepared the copy for the first issue of 5,000 copies which appeared in November, 1942. Within a week, all copies were sold. Within a year, we were selling 150,000 copies a month.

With Negro Digest solidly established, I turned my attention to a new and larger venture. At that time, few publications presented the Negro personality in all its ranges and dimensions. Negro newspapers were oriented primarily around protest; and white-oriented periodicals ignored Negro marriages and social events. I decided therefore that there was room for a picture magazine which would concentrate on Negro achievement and the little-noted social and cultural activities of Negro Americans.

The new magazine, which was called Ebony, appeared on the newsstand for the first time in 1945 in November -- which we selected as our magic month. It was an immediate success and was soon selling 200,000 copies a month. Today, it has a circulation of over one million and is the largest-circulated Negro-oriented periodical in the world.

From the beginning I considered Ebony as a vehicle for building and projecting the image of the Negro in America -- an image that had been shattered and distorted by media oriented primarily to white Americans. I felt then -- and I feel now -- that every man must have a wholesome image of himself before he can demand respect from others.

Ebony was born with the task in mind of changing the negative self-image of Negro-Americans. We believed that once that image had been correctly altered, Negro Americans would, by their own new-found strength, force others to look upon them with greater respect.

Over the years, Ebony has changed with the changing aspirations of the people it serves. Negroes have become more aggressive in all areas and Ebony has broadened its format to reflect the contemporary aspirations of its readers.

We have also added additional magazines to reflect varying facets of Negro life. Tan, our woman-oriented magazine, was founded in November, 1950.

Jet, a pocket-sized news and picture magazine, founded in November, 1951, is now the largest circulated Negro newsweekly.

Frederick Douglass, who anticipated so many of the major problems of our day, put his finger on the two major weaknesses of the Negro Press: 1) subscriptions, and 2) advertisements. One notes with appreciation that Douglass' first paper stated that the subscription rates were two dollars a year, "always in advance." And he deplored the fact that he was forced to depend on advertisements for "ointments," "all kinds of pills," and "all sorts of horse medicines."

The publication of Ebony forced us to grapple with these historic problems. The first problem, subscriptions, was relatively easy. Ebony appeared 98 years after the publication of The North Star. The Negro market at that time was larger and better educated. Our mission was to provide a good product and a good subscription department to service it. At Ebony, as at Life and Look, most of this work today is handled by computers.

The second problem was more complex. In the beginning, Ebony's ads were marginal. There was great resistance on the part of advertising agencies who were skeptical about risking their client's dollars in a new field. We met this resistance in three stages. First, we outsold white-oriented publications 10 and 15 to 1 in Negro areas. Secondly, we hired research statisticians to prove it. Finally, in a last-ditch effort, I personally called on the presidents of major American corporations. This approach yielded results. Liggett & Myers was our first big national advertiser. The second was Zenith Radio Corporation. Others quickly followed and today Ebony has more than 200 of the largest advertising accounts in the nation.

As in every other field, growth has brought new problems and opportunities. There is increasing competition from white-oriented publications for personnel and feature-space advantage. In the face of this competition, Negro publishers must motivate more young people to enter the field and we must offer our employees the same benefits offered by white companies. We

must meet the challenge from electronic media and white-oriented print media in the same spirit, for ultimately the competition will redound to the benefit of the consumer.

We are moving into a spacious future, a future which will undoubtedly open new areas of usefulness for Negro-oriented media. We look forward to the day when all media will reflect the total aspirations of all the people all the time. But until the millenium arrives, we intend to do the very best job we can in reflecting the total human aspirations of a people who do not find an image of their hope and an image of their condition in other media.

We feel that only by meeting our tasks in this area can we bring about the great day of which Frederick Douglass dreamed -- the day "in which there shall be no North, no South, no East, no West, no black, no white, but a solidarity of the nation..."