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LIVING IS NOW: A BLACK PERSPECTIVE

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For me, *good* sermons are those that touch some deep personal cord, stir some past experience or memory, and give it some new life or reality or dimension. Penetrating words and thoughts are drawn by the sermonizers, the soul poet, if you will, from the depths of his meditations and from the long thoughts and careful explorations of other men's depths.

Such sermons we often hear from Harry Scholefield - sermons that send my mind winging and checking to see where I stand - to see if this sermon is a light for my darkness, a stimulus for my joy, a clearer way to see into the *you*, the me that we are stuck with.

I found Harry Scholefield's sermon, "Living is Now," to be a source of such persona winging and checking. As I listened, I found myself reaching for my wife's hand (I should tell you, Harry, that when that happens I know you are getting to me). I reached for her hand as the sermon evoked in me wistful disagreement and sorrow tinged with hope, for it was my conclusion that black Americans cannot live fully in the present. We are ever truncated by the past. What had Dr. Scholefield said to stir these particular emotions from that great and abundant bag we all carry? It went like this. I quote him:

"We are apt to think that it is very good to be future oriented and very bad to be past-oriented, as though the future connotes life, reaching forward, moving ahead, while the past connotes looking backward, refusing to give up what is gone, standing somehow in the way of progress and life.

"I would argue that the whole relationship of the past, present and future, the nature of time, is essentially due to subjective or psychic realities, and that probably the crucial sign of health here is the capacity to take the present where it is and find in it the elements necessary to personal growth and strength.

"If we consistently avoid the present and the now, to take refuge in the past or in the future, the result is a kind of sterilization and impoverishment. It doesn't make too much difference whether we are using the future as a way of dodging the present or whether we are high tailing it off into the past as a way of dodging present realities.

“On the other hand; if we treat the present as though it was somehow completely unrelated to the past and the future, a time reality set off in a separate box, sent to us for our particular enjoyment without reference to what came before it or what will follow after it, we become afflicted with myopia, nearsightedness. The present moment becomes truncated and we put ourselves in the curious position of living as though no one else has ever lived before.”

My disagreement- itself characterized by a yearning to agree – is that the relationship of the past, present and future, the nature of time is *not* essentially due to subjective or psychic realities. The relationship and the nature of time itself, I submit, are just as heavily rooted in historical and sociological realities. Indeed I think it can be forcibly argued that subjective and psychic realities are embedded in the group and historical experience of man. For those of us who have been born black in American society, this is the massive and overwhelming essence of our lives. It is an essence we share - willingly or not - with the broken remnants of the once great Indian tribes of North America. It is an essence we share painfully with the Chicanos, who would name themselves after years of others deciding who and what they are. It is an essence of individual and group agony that we share with every group of people who have ever had to roll their race, their culture, their language, their religion, their *them*, their *us* up the slopes of majority oppression or indifference – like the rock of Sisyphus again and again and again and again. Like mirrors locked face to face, we are of an agonized past that will not let us go, will not let us move freely into the present or the future, but the past holds us as though it were a serpent binding and crushing us. For the dead hand of past and present majority oppression is ever on us in some form or another. Thus we often move in the present like Marley's ghost, all clanking chains, and mournful mien. To be more specific, how can a black person, child or adult, stand in the present when the past that ties him in the present is kept alive by others, not by him? It is the other who insists that school books teach that black slaves were inferior and happy, that Robert E. Lee was a great hero and that John Brown was a villain, that black men did not fight heroically in America's great episodes of patriotic gore, that it is our genes and not the long history of deprivations and degradation that locks us out of the great present technological society, out of the magnificent future of abstractions, mathematics and electronics.

So you see we cannot live in the present because the past of white Americans has made our black past a heavy, burdensome thing of the future. Now I am aware that your grandfather may not have been the one who sold mine into slavery. I am also aware that whatever white ancestor brought mine to this nation may have had some black African help. Then why, you might ask, am I telling you? The answer to that is that it is possible that you may even now be helping to lock my children into a degraded black past. How is it done? It is done most often by “going along.” By celebrating patriotic holidays instead of annual days of mourning for thousands of men and women, black and white, whose lives were blasted and broken in the name of progress and that economic growth known as human slavery, by mourning for the living relics of Indian genocide rather than celebrating the demise of their culture with fireworks and clanging parades. Mourning would be a good beginning because it would come from the heart, from the soul.

You may well say that this is too much to ask and oh, you are right, you are right. For while those of the majority who care and who, in the words of Lyndon Johnson, would heal this nation's history continue to increase, especially among the young they are still out-gunned by those of the

mean spirit and the cold eye. Even among those caring whites, young and old, their own present crisis of conscience (the draft, Viet Nam, ecology and pollution) looms larger and larger in their present and future than the past-present iron matrix which contains Blacks, Indians, and Chicanos in this our USA.

I find no joy or pleasure in what I've been saying. There may be some therapy in it. For much of what minorities have been saying today, no, screaming and cursing today, has an undercoating of therapy. They-we are trotting out our-your past in all its psychic reality. We-they are wrestling with the past instead of laying down before it. And like Jacob wrestling with God, we will not let it go until it blesses us. Such a match is not pretty, especially for many who are white, for you are, willingly or not, a part of that which must be wrestled with. This is the only way the present can become a time of rebirth, of renewal.

James Weldon Johnson's poem says "Let us march on til victory is won" - victory over the painful past that will free us for the present and move us toward the future. In our march from past to present let us give thanks and celebrate pathfinders such as Thaddeus Stevens, Fredrick Douglas, John Brown and Martin Luther King who almost single-handedly have moved us, blacks and whites, further away from the dark past and into the present. Pathfinders like Robert F. Kennedy whose journey from pampered past to tragic future was a bright tale of human development and spiritual growth, and Malcolm Little who became Malcolm X and finally became El Haji Malik El Shabazz. Malcolm, who wore a name that was his past, who changed his name to suit his present and changed it again to fit his future, *and still he was one.*

Herein, then, these reflections, these musing on Living Is Now , in sorrow tinged with hope. For the rock of Sisyphus is heavy and the hill is still steep. And God is strong and Jacob must wrestle *for his blessing* before yesterday can become today and we of the horrendous history can find a healthier, better now.