

Childhood Experiences Color Routes to Civil Rights Activism-- Booker Taliaferro Washington and William Edward Burghardt Du Bois:

Different Beginnings/Different Ways

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Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) were, perhaps, the two most respected and influential African Americans of the early twentieth century. However, they supported fundamentally different approaches to the problem of civil rights. Much of the difference was based upon their respective beginnings in life. Washington, born a slave in Virginia and freed during the Civil War, was raised in the deeply racist South at a time when to be black and assertive was to risk one's very life. Du Bois, on the other hand, was born and raised in a predominately white community in New England (Great Barrington, Massachusetts), long a stronghold of anti-slavery and pro-African-American sentiments dating from before the Civil War.

Born a slave and freed at age nine, Washington did not know the month or day of his birth, did not know his ancestry, nor did he have a last name to call his own. He writes in *Up From Slavery*: "In some way a feeling got among the colored people that it was far from proper for them to bear the surname of their former owners, and a great many took other surnames," (15) as Washington, himself, did when he enrolled in school:

Before going to school it had never occurred to me that it was needful or appropriate to have an additional name. When I heard the school-roll called, I noticed that all of the children had at least two names, and some of them indulged in what seemed to me an extravagance of having three. I was in deep perplexity, because I knew that the teacher would demand of me at least two names, and I had only one. By the time the occasion came for the enrolling of my name, an idea occurred to me which I thought would make me equal to the situation; and so, when the teacher asked me what my full name was, calmly told him "Booker Washington," as if I had been called by that name my whole life; and by that name I have since been known. (22)

During the days of slavery, enslaved people were known by first name only or, even more demeaning, by a name such as "Compton's John," which clearly puts the enslaved in the inferior position and implies ownership. As history shows, there is stock put in a name and the way the name is used. For example, after the Civil War, George Pullman, the railroad entrepreneur, employed more African Americans than any other business in America as porters on his Pullman sleeping cars. When a traveler needed the porter's services, he or she called "George," the name collectively assigned to this body of diverse people. African-American author Alex Haley writes persuasively in his book, *Roots*, about the importance of names to enslaved people. In the person of Kunta Kinte, whose name was orally transmitted through the generations--an entire family obtained a sense of self and a sense of pride and connection to its roots. The importance of an authentic African name served as a rallying point in the 1960s and 1970s. Black activists began using the names of African origin instead of enslaved names principally to display a sense of "Black Pride."

Du Bois, on the other hand, was born free, had a last name, and could recount his ancestry. In *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois*, he gives a detailed family history that spans the generations on both sides of his family. Du Bois did not encounter blatant discrimination or even segregation in his early years. He writes:

I had, as a child, almost no experience or color discrimination. My schoolmates were invariably white; I joined quite naturally all games, excursions, church festivals; recreations like coasting, swimming, hiking, and games. I was in and out of the homes of nearly all my mates, and ate and played with them. I was as a boy long unconscious of color discrimination in any obvious and specific way. (74-75)

Imagine his awakening when he attended Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee! On a full scholarship provided by prominent white men from his hometown of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Du Bois was thrust into an all African-American community in the South. He tells the following story of one of the wake-up calls he received:

I quite accidentally jostled a white woman as I passed. She was not hurt in the slightest, nor even particularly inconvenienced. Immediately in accord with my New England training, I raised my hat and begged her pardon. I acted quite instinctively and with genuine regret for a little mistake. The woman was furious; why I never knew; somehow I had transgressed the interracial mores of the South. Was it because I showed no submissiveness? (*Autobiography* p.121)

Washington had labored all his life, and attended night school, both in his community and later at the Hampton Institute. Partly because of these experiences, Washington believed deeply in the value of "dignity in labor." As a product of the slave system and as a native Southerner, he was well aware of the masses of uneducated African Americans just out of slavery. He was also aware of how vehemently opposed many southern whites were to social and political equality for blacks. The thousands of lynchings, terrorist acts by vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan, and the waves of Jim Crow laws that swept the land after 1876, convinced Washington that a strategy of accommodation to white power was needed at least for the time being. Given his life experience one can understand how he became committed to the idea that African Americans needed to obtain baseline economic stability before they could achieve full integration into American society.

The first step in this direction, to him, was through vocational education. "In industry," Washington insisted, the foundation for the future must be laid. From such a foundation would grow "habits of thrift, a love of work, economy, ownership of property, bank accounts." These, in turn, would produce "moral and religious strength" and the wealth "from which alone can come leisure and the opportunity for the enjoyment of literature and the fine arts."

The need for African Americans to be able to compete skillfully and shrewdly is the basis of Washington's philosophy. The child of his philosophy was the Normal School for Colored Teachers, today known as Tuskegee University. Over the years, Tuskegee gained support from wealthy white benefactors, which enabled Washington to hold tremendous influence in the black community because of the patronage he could distribute to those who supported his approach to civil rights. The speech he gave at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895, known as the "Atlanta Compromise," enraged many of his black supporters while it won him support from many whites everywhere in the nation. In that speech, he appeared to renounce civil rights and racial equality for blacks in favor of separate or segregated economic development. Speaking directly to the issue of equality he said:

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of and constant struggle rather than artificial forcing. (*The African-American Archive: The History of the Black Experience* pp. 423-426)

Washington's approach did not go uncriticized both during his lifetime and after his death within the African-American community. His critics attacked him, especially after 1903, for appeasing whites and for not addressing the need for black-based political power, for not insisting on civil rights, and for not demanding higher education for African Americans. But given the context of his life and the hostile world in which he lived, his accommodating approach won him the means with which to fund black colleges, support talented young men and women as teachers, and channel resources to support civil rights activities and individuals under cover and out of sight.

When one looks at the buildings constructed by students at Tuskegee and compares them to its modern campus of 3700 students, it is clear that the Tuskegee vision has endured the passage of time. Tuskegee today grants bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees, and is considered one of the most outstanding universities in the nation. Nor was Washington's vision far out of step with what white society believed should then and still today be a goal of higher education for the sons and daughters of working class families. Today, vocational, or job-oriented and career-focused education for all races is an important part of the American public school system and post-secondary community colleges and colleges. This fact in itself is a testimony to the practicality of his vision and legacy.

W.E.B. Du Bois, like Washington, fought an uphill battle against great odds for African Americans. Like Washington, his background influenced his approach, which was very different from Washington's. From his first encounter with the social injustices he observed in the South while a college student at Fisk University, Du Bois vowed to devote his life to the struggle for civil rights for African Americans: "...for this group I built my plan of study and accomplishment. Through the leadership of men like myself and my fellows, we were going to have these enslaved Israelites out of the still enduring bondage in short order." (*Autobiography* p.112) Unlike Washington, Du Bois was more interested in civil rights, social and political equality for blacks, and black pride.

Du Bois, a scholar and brilliant Harvard-educated intellectual, believed first and foremost that suffrage for African-American males was a fundamental right that had been stolen from them by a racist, white society. In addition, he believed that African Americans should not compromise their right to achieve their full human potential by solely focusing on vocational education and the goal of economic stability. He insisted on civil rights in all areas for African Americans, and he believed that vocational as well as a liberal arts education were essential needs for the black community. His essay in *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903 but actually written earlier, probably around 1900, takes Washington to task in no uncertain terms:

Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission; ...and Mr. Washington's programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races. (67)

As the first African American to obtain a Ph.D. from Harvard, he contributed greatly to the fields of history, sociology, and literature. His brilliant book *The Souls of Black Folk*, perhaps the most influential book ever written by a black American, presented the blueprint for challenging segregation and discrimination for much of the twentieth century. His founding, along with William M. Trotter, of the Niagara Movement (1905), an all-black and anti-Washington organization, helped set the stage for the NAACP, which he helped establish in 1909. For over 24 years, his editorship of *The Crisis*, the Association's monthly newspaper, made him the most influential black man in the nation, especially within the black community. Du Bois eventually broke with the NAACP in the 1930s when he disputed its focus on ending legalized segregation instead of promoting black pride and economic gains for blacks within their autonomous societies. His legacy, nevertheless, was profound and far-reaching. In his own words: "As a result of my work and that of others, the Supreme Court began to restore democracy in the South and finally outlawed discrimination in public services based on color."

Du Bois lived for forty-eight years after Washington's death. We have no way of knowing if Washington would have eventually joined with Du Bois to promote civil rights. We do know that each man, informed by his beginnings, took a path he believed would benefit African Americans the most. And, we do know that each man helped move a group of brutally marginalized, disfranchised people closer to "the dream" of full equality and civil rights. In looking back, it is clear how the early roots, or childhood experiences, of each man helped to shape their different approaches to civil rights.

For more information on Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, go to the **encyclopedia**. For more information on lynchings, **click here**.

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