

Lift Every Voice and Sing

Jamaica Plain, January 14, 2007, Rev. Terry Burke

This year for Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday I'm talking about one of the great songs of the Civil Rights Movement, Lift Every Voice and Sing. I've heard colleagues say that a good hymn is more uplifting to people at worship than most sermons; for many people, Lift Every Voice and Sing has been a sung sermon for them. Today, I'm looking at the lives of the song's authors, the reactions of some to the song, and the role of our congregation on this Martin Luther King Sunday, 2007.

The words to Lift Every Voice and Sing were written by James Weldon Johnson and the music by his brother J. Rosamond Johnson in 1900. They were 28 and 26 years old and lived in Jacksonville, Florida. James Weldon Johnson was a schoolteacher, and the song, which he regarded as a "hymn," was written for a small Lincoln's birthday celebration. Later that year, a massed chorus of 500 Black schoolchildren sang the song

Though slavery had been outlawed for over 35 years, 1900 was a high water mark for Jim Crow segregation. In 1896, the Supreme Court had ruled in Plessy vs. Ferguson that segregated "separate but equal" public facilities were legal. There were 105 recorded lynchings in 1900. That year, white supremacist Senator Ben "Pitchfork" Tillman of South Carolina bragged on the U.S. Senate floor, "We have stuffed ballot boxes. We have shot them. We are not ashamed." A few years later, in 1909, on the hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's birth, race riots broke out in Springfield, Illinois. These white attacks led to the Niagara Conference and the founding of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

James Weldon Johnson became head of the Florida State Teachers' Association, but that didn't prevent him from almost being lynched in a Jacksonville park. He and his brother then left the South for New York City, performing together musically in the U. S. and Europe. Rosamond published collections of the Black spirituals, was musical director of a

London opera house, and played a lead role in the original production of Porgy and Bess. The brothers wrote the music for an all white Broadway musical, and were founders of ASCAP, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers.

James Weldon Johnson was a distinguished poet ("God's Trombones") and author as part of the "Harlem Renaissance." He wrote a first person autobiography, first published anonymously in 1912, entitled *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. The book dealt with Johnson's experiences passing as white in America. The spelling of the word "coloured" with a "u" increased its sales in Britain. At the end of his life he published another autobiography called *Along the Way*. He taught at Fisk University in Tennessee and was the first Black person to teach at New York University.

Along with his work as a person of letters, a teacher, and musician, James Weldon Johnson was also an important political leader and Civil Rights organizer. He began working as Field Secretary for the NAACP and ended up as its Executive Director. Johnson made "Lift Every Voice and Sing" the official "song" of the NAACP. After teaching the chorus of 500 Jacksonville schoolchildren the song in 1900, he'd forgotten about it. However, those children kept singing it, and when they in turn became teachers, they taught it to their classes of children around the South. Johnson said that when a gathering sang "Lift Every Voice and Sing" before he spoke, he could gauge by their singing what sort of message they needed. Johnson called *Lift Every Voice and Sing* a "hymn," and it was the NAACP's official "song;" he argued that Black Americans had a national anthem, the "Star Spangled Banner." However, he was sympathetic to those who called it an "anthem," for whom it provided comfort in the struggle.

In the year 2000, for the 100th anniversary of the song's composition, Civil Rights leader Julian Bond and Sondra Wilson, James Weldon Johnson's literary executor, created a book of 100 Americans' responses to *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. The essayists range across the spectrum of Black American life. People often remembered when and where they first heard or sang it.

Respondents cited the confidence and ultimate optimism of the song. How it combined the Biblical language of the King James Version with everyday life. It said that 'God was with you in your darkest hour.' It was like "Balm in Gilead." It was an American song that remembered the heritage of Africa, but saw victory coming in this country. Like the Jewish memorial prayer the Kadish, which doesn't mention death, Lift Every Voice and Sing, the Black National Anthem, doesn't speak of race.

Michigan Representative John Conyers saw the song as calling us to national equality of race, class, and sex. Others saw it as an anthem for all humanity, the way Tibetans now sing, "We Shall Overcome." Musician Bobby Short pointed out that, unlike The Star Spangled Banner or La Marseilles, it's 'the only anthem that's not a call to arms.' Movie stars Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis said, "you're not alone when you hear that song." Writer Amiri Barak remembered that during his childhood, when the song was sung, it seemed that there were "black angels hovering rah rahing." Bernice Johnson Reagon of "Sweet Honey in the Rock" "felt as if I could hear my grandmother and grandfather singing." Poet Nikki Giovanni created a fable that the anthem was written by Johnson to be sung for games of the Negro Baseball League.

Television star Bill Cosby remembered growing up in the Philadelphia projects and, shortly before an elementary school performance, having his beloved teacher, Miss McKinney, give the class a talking to. "You are never to sing that song again. If they tell you to sing that song, don't open your mouth." Instead, they sang, Lift Every Voice and Sing at the program, Miss McKinney conducting with tears in her eyes, refusing to sing Old Black Joe.

General Colin Powell described our national anthem, The Star Spangled Banner as the "promise" of our nation and the Black National Anthem Lift Every Voice and Sing as the struggle for that promise. Actress Victoria Rowell described her saintly foster parent as "my Lift Every Voice and Sing." President Bill Clinton wrote on a photograph given to Vernon Jordan, "from the only white man in America who knows all the words."

The song was sung by Greek letter fraternities and sororities, at schools, in church, for political meetings, and by Scout troops. Business executive Sylvia Woods remembered the women of her family singing songs while quilting. When they sang Lift Every Voice and Sing, they stopped quilting and let themselves truly sing the song. At its conclusion, they would praise God for having brought their family "thus far on the way." Retired business leader Chauncey Spencer remembered how, also in the 1930's, his family in Lynchburg, Virginia had provided home hospitality to Black leaders including Howard Thurman and W.E.B. DuBois. Southern white motels were off limits to those Black scholars in their travels. The morning of their departure, the whole family would gather outside with the guest and form a circle holding hands. Then, as a prayer for safety for those Southern bound, they would sing Lift Every Voice and Sing.

Today, we sing Lift Every Voice and Sing on Martin Luther King Sunday in Jamaica Plain. The overwhelming majority of those murdered in our city last year were young Black men. A 14-year-old was killed on New Year's Eve. We have too many of what Jonathan Kozol calls "Apartheid schools," public schools that are more than 90% people of color. As I wrote in this month's newsletter, last December I drove from giving Christmas financial assistance in Dorchester to helping out a family in Brookline. That twenty-five minute drive went from roadside shooting memorials to comfortable suburb; our metropolitan area is still largely segregated. This week, our president has called for an escalation - "surge" of over 20,000 more troops in Iraq. Dr. King paid a heavy political price for saying that the Vietnam War oppressed people abroad as robbed the poor of America.

Still, I find hope this year in the inauguration of our new governor, Deval Patrick. Growing up in Chicago, where Dr. King was unsuccessful against entrenched racism, Patrick's life is an America success story. I was honored to be invited to the interfaith worship service preceding his inauguration. In the Old South Meeting House, Rev. Peter Gomes of Harvard preached how Patrick had "converted him" from the "party of Lincoln." When filing out the form to change his party registration at the town clerk's office in Plymouth, Gomes was asked, "Does your mother know about this?" Gomes is

regarded as one of the best preachers of our time, but as a mainline Protestant, not necessarily as a great Black preacher, in the style of Dr. King or Jim Forbes of Riverside Church. Afterwards, I saw prominent Boston Black clergy talking to Gomes, a gay Black man. "That was great - I've never heard you preach." Patrick's magic had created some reconciliation.

For the inauguration, I stood in a large and excited crowd before the state house, a congregation that was truly mixed by race, class, and age. Upon seeing the former governors walk down the state house steps, one man remarked, "I've never seen those guys before." This was something new, energizing, and open. A television reporter kept refilming his sound bite, "Among the young, Patrick has virtual rock star status..." Taking the oath of office on the Amistad Bible, presented to President John Quincy Adams for successfully defending the slave ship revolt, had a powerful, heartfelt symbolism reminiscent of President Clinton.

This week, a documentary film on Jonestown that a colleague helped produce is showing at the Kendell Square theater in Cambridge. Jim Jones was a liberal Midwestern minister with progressive politics, an urban minister who wanted to bring Black and white together. That's a lot like me. And he went very, very wrong. One of the reasons I wanted to be the minister of this congregation was that in JP we had the potential to be a Black and white church. We've got a ways to go to be a Black and white church. As we think about our church vision in the recovenanting process, how do we sing Lift Every Voice and Sing and make it our song? Do we do work with the public schools? Do we try to do work with youth, a desperate need, when, admittedly, we have a hard time getting things together for our own youth? This is something important to me, and I hope it's important to you. How do we sing this song? I ask you, help us to sing, in this strange land, this ultimately optimistic song of equality and justice.

Please join me in saying together the closing prayer from Governor Patrick's worship service, found on the back of your order of service:

May God shine upon us, and be gracious unto us.
May God give us grace never to sell ourselves short;
Grace to risk something big for something good;
Grace to remember that it is wise to be generous
To the poor at home and the poor around the world;
Grace to remember that the world now is too dangerous
For anything but truth, and too small for anything but love.
So, may God take our minds and think through them;
May God take our lips and speak through them,
May God take our hearts and set them on fire.
So we pray this Martin Luther King Sunday, Amen.

Lift our voices and sing, and risk something big for something good.