

James Weldon Johnson *speaks*

As a teacher, lawyer, newspaper publisher and editor, author, diplomat, and champion of human rights, James Weldon Johnson contributed greatly to American life and world culture. The fact that he was a Negro is important, but incidental to the fact that he was a great man.

His literary productions ranged from scores of songs and Broadway hits to the Negro National Anthem and *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, and from his poems collected in *Fifty Years and Other Poems*, *Saint Peter Relates An Incident*, *God's Trombones* to such books as *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Along This Way* (his autobiography). Reports and editorials for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and articles and editorials for *The New York Age* represent another type of literary output.

In Venezuela and Nicaragua he served as Consul of the United States and brought credit to his government, his race, and himself. Trips to Europe, the Orient, the Caribbean and other parts of Latin America gave him further world experience and a world outlook.

Fourteen of his most active years were spent in defending the rights of Negroes and in eliciting better opportunities for them. As Field Secretary and later as Secretary of the N. A. A. C. P. he wrote, spoke, carried on research, and lobbied as a champion of human rights.

His death came in 1938 while he was serving as a Professor of Creative Literature at Fisk University and Lecturer at New York University.

ON A MORAL REVOLUTION . . .

"The only kind of revolution that would have an immediately significant effect on the American Negro's status would be a moral revolution—an upward push given to the level of ethical ideas and practices. And that, probably, is the sole revolution that the whole world stands in need of."

ON RELIGION . . .

"I think that the teachings of Jesus Christ embody the loftiest ethical and spiritual concepts the human mind has yet borne. I do not know if there is a personal God; I do not see how I can know, and I do not see how my knowing can matter. What does matter, I believe, is how I deal with myself and how I deal with my fellows. I feel that I can practice a conduct toward myself and toward my fellows that will constitute the basis for an adequate religion, a religion that may comprehend spirituality and beauty and serene happiness."

"The human mind racks itself over the never-to-be-known answer to the great riddle, and all that is clearly revealed is the fate that man must continue to hope and to struggle on; that each day, if he would not be lost, he must with renewed courage take a fresh hold on life and face with fortitude the turns of circumstance. To do this, he needs to be able at times to touch God, let the idea of God mean to him whatever it may."

HIS CREED . . .

"I will not allow one prejudiced person or one million to blight my life. I will not let prejudice or any of its attendant humiliations and injustices bear me down to spiritual defeat. My inner life is mine and I shall defend it and maintain its integrity against all the powers of hell."

ON CHILDREN AT PLAY . . .

"When children play to themselves they are natural, naive, ingenious, and resourceful; capable not only of devising games but the things needed for playing them. One of the greatest delights an adult can experience is to obliterate himself and watch them."

ON EDUCATION . . .

" . . . it is too easy to lose sight of the fact that not the school nor the teachers, but the student is the predominant factor in education."

"A good share of the complaint against the elementary schools rises out of the disappointment of fond and overambitious parents who look for a miracle. No kind of school can do the impossible; and any school that turns out the bulk of its students with a fair degree of developed mental and physical control may feel well satisfied with its work."

" . . . three-fourths of the art of teaching consists in the ability to rouse the pupil's interest,—at least his curiosity, in the thing he is to learn; and that ability is not imparted by a course in pedagogy."

"The time of the psychological passing over from boyhood to manhood is a movable feast. The legal date has little or no connection with it."

ON THE USE OF SPARE TIME . . .

"It was then that I discovered an explanation as good as any of whatever success that has come my way. I discovered my abhorrence of 'spare time.' I thereupon cast about to find a means of using up all I had of it in some worthwhile manner."

ON NEGRO SPIRITUALS . . .

" . . . this music . . . is America's only folk music, and up to this time, the finest distinctive artistic contribution she has to offer the world."

"I have termed this music noble, and I do so without qualifications. Take, for example, **Go Down, Moses**: there is not a nobler theme in the whole world of musical literature of the world. If the Negro had voiced himself in only that one song, it would have been evidence of his nobility of soul. Add to this **Deep River, Stand Still Jordan, Walk Together Children, Roll Jordan Roll, Ride on Child Jesus**, and you catch a spirit that is a little more than mere nobility; it is something akin to majestic grandeur. The music of these songs is always noble and their philosophy not far below the highest and purest motives of the heart."

"As yet, the Negroes themselves do not fully appreciate these old slave songs. The educated classes are ashamed of them. . . . This feeling is natural; they are still too close to the conditions under which the songs were produced; but the day will come when this slave music will be the most treasured heritage of the American Negro."

"This recent reawakening of the Negro to the value and beauty of the Spirituals was the beginning of an entirely new phase of race consciousness. It marked a change in the attitude of the Negro toward his own art material; the turning of his gaze inward upon his own cultural resources. Neglect and ashamedness gave place to study and pride. All the other artistic activities of the Negro have been influenced."

LIFT EV'RY VOICE AND SING . . .

"Lift ev'ry voice and sing,
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list'ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of faith that the dark past
has taught us
Sing a song full of hope that the present has
brought us;
Facing the rising sun
Of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chast'ning rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers
sighed?

We have come over a way that with tears
has been watered

We have come, treading our path thr' the
blood of the slaughtered.

Out of the gloomy past
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is
cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on our
way;

Thou who has by Thy might,
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever on the path, we pray,
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God,
where we met Thee,

Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the
world, we forget Thee;

Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land."

ON THE RACE PROBLEM . . .

“ . . . in large measure the race question involves the saving of Black America's body and white America's soul.”

“If the Negro is made to fail, America fails with him. If America wishes to make democratic institutions secure, she must deal with this question right and righteously. For it is in the nature of a truism to say that this country can actually have no more democracy than it accords and guarantees to the humblest and weakest citizen.”

“Which would you rather have us? Dark shackles round your feet or strong wings to bear you up?”

“Negroes in the United States are prone, and naturally, to believe that their problem is the problem. The fact is, there is a race and color problem wherever the white man deals with darker races. The thing unique about the Negro problem in the United States, a uniqueness that has its advantages and disadvantages, is that elsewhere the problem results from the presence of the white man in the midst of a darker civilization, and in the United States, from the presence of the Negro in the midst of a white civilization.”

“This term ‘social equality’ is, at the same time, a most concrete and a most elusive obstacle in the Negro's way. It is never defined; it is shifted to block any path that may open; it is stretched over whole areas of contacts and activities; it is used to cover and justify every form of restriction, injustice, and brutality practiced against the Negroes. The mere term makes cowards of white people, and puts Negroes in a dilemma.”

ON SOLVING THE RACE PROBLEM . . .

"I here stress the South not under any misapprehension that it is the only section of prejudice and discrimination against Negroes, but because it is in the South that the race problem must be solved; because it will not be completely solved in any other section of the country until it is solved there; because essentially the status of the Negro in all other sections will depend upon what it is in the South."

"For no condition under which he struggles oppresses the Negro more than the refusal of a fair and equal chance to earn a living—to say nothing of earning it in ways in which he is able to prove himself fitted. It is at once unfair, unreasonable, and cruel to declare to the Negro that, when he has grown to the stature of a full American citizen, he will be acknowledged as such. and at the same time to deny him the basic means of accomplishing the very thing demanded. And of this unfairness, this unreasonableness, this cruelty, the American people as a whole are guilty."

" . . . in the core of the heart of the American race problem the sex factor is rooted; rooted so deeply that it is not always recognized when it shows at the surface. Other factors are obvious and are the ones we dare to deal with; but, regardless of how we deal with these, the race situation will continue to be acute as long as the sex factor persists. Taken alone, it furnishes a sufficient mainspring for the rationalization of all the complexes of white racial superiority. If it be innate; I do not know. But I do know that it is strong and bitter; and that its strength and bitterness are magnified and intensified by the white man's perception, more or less, of the Negro complex of sexual superiority."

ON A WORLD POINT OF VIEW . . .

"When one has seen something of the world and human nature, one must conclude, after all, that between people in like stations of life there is very little difference the world over."

"The art of letters, of poetry, of music, of sculpture, of painting, of the drama, of architecture, the science of mathematics, of astronomy, of philosophy, of logic, of physics, of chemistry, the use of metals, and the principles of mechanics, were all invented or discovered by darker races and what we now call inferior races and nations. We (Anglo-Saxons) have carried many of these to their highest point of perfection, but the foundation was laid by others. Do you know that the only original contribution to civilization we can claim is what we have done in steam and electricity and in making implements of war more deadly? And there we worked largely on principles which we did not discover. Why, we didn't even originate the religion we use. We are a great race, the greatest in the world today, but we ought to remember that we are standing on a pile of past races, and enjoy our position with a little less show of arrogance."

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