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Don't Get Mad...Get Smart

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COMMENTARY

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Don't Get Mad . . . Get Smart

By Dr. Benjamin L. Hooks
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The following was excerpted from Commissioner Hooks' address at the 107th Commencement of Howard University, May 10, 1975.

Dr. Charles Beard, one of the eminent historians of our time, was once asked this question by a reporter: "After many years and a life time devoted to the study of history, would you be able to tell our readers what has been the result of your study?" It is said that Dr. Beard replied: "It would perhaps take me two weeks to sum-up what history has taught." The reporter pulled out his notebook. As they were talking, Dr. Beard said: "No! Maybe I can sum it up in about four expressions or secular proverbs. And these four things perhaps sum-up the totality of what I've learned across these years of my study of history."

The four things that Dr. Beard gave the reporter were: 1) The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small. 2) Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad. 3) The bee, the ordinary honeybee that you see in your back yard, fertilizes the flower that it robs. 4) When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.

I would like to take those four expressions very briefly and use them as a basis for whatever message I might have—and couple it with this expression from the Old Testament: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

In 1976 we will be celebrating the 200th anniversary of the founding of this country. We remember in the hot and sultry summer of a Philadelphia summer-time that those people who had gathered to record for history their reasons for trying to establish a separate nation. Being aware of the necessity of recording for posterity their reasons, they decided to write their reasons. And they had drafted Thomas Jefferson, the young Virginia lawyer to get together the first draft, and they had debated over it. And the words from the Preamble of that Declaration are words that I suppose should still strike admiration in our hearts today so far as they are concerned, because they started us on a great adventure.

> "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Even today I can find nothing wrong with the words. The problem is that the nation, since those words were written, has not had the vision or the will and the purpose to make them really true. Because if we were to be fair today, we would have to say 200 years after those words were first to hit the air that the problem of making the idea of equality a reality is still a dream. And that Blacks and minorities, and to a great extent women, have never received the blessings of what that Preamble said. Even though it was a great dream and a great vision—it still is—you and I must decide in this year whether or not we will in fact be able to make that vision come true.

We read of the many things that happen in our world; we see in Boston, the cradle of liberty, the debate over school busing. Even though some of us knew it all the time, the question whether you were down South or up South didn't really matter, because all of this country is inflicted with a racial virus and hatred.

When I hear people talk about the concept of neighborhood schools, those of us who were raised in the South must remember when we walked by many white schools to get to the Black schools;

when we were bused by white schools or when we had to run by white schools; and you didn't hear people talking about the neighborhood school concept in those days. The sanctity and the sacredness of that idea did not become apparent until Black folk presented themselves at the neighborhood school and all of a sudden the neighborhood school became very important. But I tell you today, my brothers and sisters, "The mills of the gods may grind slowly, but they do grind exceedingly small." We have sowed the wind; we are now reaping the whirlwind.

Last year this time, or just a few months ago—and I do not wish to be vindictive or make fun of those who have fallen from power—but who can help but remember the arrogance of those who recently held national power, as they schemed and plotted. And if you would go into the loneliness of San Clemente today, or go into jails and prisons all over this country, you would have to say: "The mills of the gods may grind slowly, but they do grind exceedingly small."

The second thing I would bring to your attention, "Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad." I lived in this country all of my life. I went back to Memphis, Tennessee to practice law in 1949. So I know first hand the agonies of discrimination and segregation. I practiced law in a courthouse where I could not drink from every water fountain but only "colored water." I had to use separate restrooms. But in the midst of all of that, I began to realize that if I got mad I really wouldn't be able to make it. So the question was not *getting mad,* but *getting smart.* And I think that God gave unto us Martin Luther King, Jr. as a modern prophet just as surely as he gave Moses to the children of Israel. Dr. King tried to leave a message with us that there was a better way than hatred and getting mad. For many of you who are graduating today, you young people who are full of vitality and energy, this

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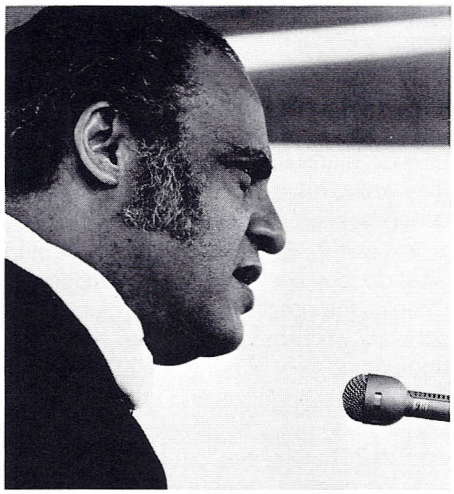

Dr. Benajmin L. Hooks

seems like something that is out of date. But I would like to take just a minute to say that I have seen the power that Dr. King talked about working—not at the "Red Sea" but in Jackson, Mississippi, Albany, Georgia, and Birmingham, Alabama. I was at the funeral of Medgar Evers and I saw the deputy sheriffs and the policemen and the National Guard, and every other white man they could deputize with pistols and rifles and shotguns; and dogs of every kind and description, telling us we could not go any further. I saw young Blacks armed with nothing but the power of the truth singing: "We Shall Overcome, make those men get up from their rifles and march back."

There is a power in this world that transcends that which we can see, feel, hear and touch with our natural senses. But when Dr. King died, many of us got mad and thought we could resort to shotguns and pistols, knives and force. As I looked at many schools and colleges, I got upset with this. But you know, I have to say this to you today at the risk of being unpopular, if you really want to have a revolution, you're not going to accomplish it wearing "nob-hill shoes" and drinking J&B (Scotch). You've got to really settle down if you want to do your thing. I like to also remind you that a warfare is not like "Gunsmoke." You can't shoot all day without reloading, and reloading involves having some bullets as well as some pistols. We cannot, it seems to me, win mad and angry.

"The bee fertilizes the flower that it robs."

The great thing that I have seen happening across this country—and I see it at Howard—I've seen young people not getting mad but getting smart, and understanding that if you want to take over this world, you've got to know how to run it when you take it over. That's marvelous and I am with you on learning the history of the Nile River and the Swahilian dialect, but let us not forget how to keep the lights on and the buses running as we learn all of these other things. I see from your faces and from your minds a new determination to get smart and to learn some real sense so that you can help to remake and reshape this world. And say to white folk, "don't come down but get over because we are on our way; we've got something to work with." I will trust that you will not get angry, you will not get mad, but you will get smart.

"The bee fertilizes the flower which it robs."

When I read that statement, it seems to me—and I have to say to you—that one of the damning and besetting sins of Negroes in this country (I said Negroes not Black folk) has been our inability to understand that if we "make it" we owe something to those who are behind. Let me challenge the graduates of Howard who are going out to teach and practice medicine and law, dentistry, pharmacy and nursing—whatever you are—remember that you owe something to those young Blacks who are still in the sweltering heat of the ghetto where there is too little for too many. Don't become

"Don't forget where you came from . . ."

big so fast that you forget where you came from.

Remember what your mothers and fathers did without so that you might have; they stood back so that you might go forward. During your formative years, some of these Black mothers have labored in kitchens and done domestic work. They were determined to get you an education, and when you come out you owe something to all of the Black and white brothers and sisters who are still struggling in an environment where they don't have enough. And if God should help you make it, please don't forget where you came from, and where you might have to go back if you're not careful.

One of the things we have to watch, and I see it now and then . . . When I was a judge on the bench in Shelby County (Tennessee) and was meeting with the dignitaries in the power structure of the city, they would often come to me and say: "Judge, if all of your folk were just like you, there wouldn't be any trouble." But I knew they were lying. It is a great temptation to succumb to. On the cocktail circuits of Washington . . . the good steak circuits of Washington (you know a Baptist preacher can't talk about cocktails much but we can talk about chickens and steaks and all those things that have died so that we might live) they keep trying to entice and entrance you with what you could be if you forget momentarily that you are Black. But if I look back and remember, I am not the Federal Communications Commissioner simply because the President wanted a Black man or because the Senate decided to confirm one; I am on that Commission because Black people all over this country raised enough hell to get me there. If I have any obligation, it is to you and not to anybody else.

I shall never be satisfied until we are able to portray the totality of Black and minority life in this nation. When you look at television, remember this: by the time our children reach the age of 18 they would have spent more time watching television and listening to radio than they would have spent in the public school system. They are shaped by the sights and images that they see. And what do they see? Do they see the Jim Cheeks, the prestigious intellectual scholars who are trying to horn the fine edge of the best of our youth? Do they see our best colleges and universities? Do they see our great lawyers and doctors? Do they see that or do they see only the criminal people who have done something that they considered to be wrong—the bizarre, the unusual, those who have gone berserk?

In Washington, when the Congressional Black Caucus presented Edward Brooke (senator from Massachusetts) and Maynard Jackson (mayor of Atlanta) before 3,000 people who had paid a $100 a plate; when more than 500 elected Black officials from all over this nation came, national television didn't have one minute to say anything about it. But when two desperate Black men took over the D.C. Jail, television found time to tell that story. When Dr. Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women unveiled a statute to Dr. Mary Bethune, one of the greatest women (and I didn't say Black women) who ever lived and who happened to be Black; an adviser to four Presidents, who rose from the darkness and obscurity of the recent post-slavery era to become the president of a great college . . . when they erected a statute to her, the first statute erected for a Black on public grounds in this country, national television didn't have a minute to cover that story. When the NAACP or the Urban League meet, you never see that on television. But when a desperate young man got on top of a hotel in New Orleans and started shooting, they interrupted every news and entertainment program to talk about it.

I tell you that our young people—our children—are being shaped by what they see. You and I have the obligation, but since I am in that position, my pledge to you is that I shall use every lawful means at my command to try to change that picture so that the totality of Black life can be presented.

When they talk about double digit inflation I don't want them only to have those who have Ph.D. degrees but get some of the mothers who live on welfare who can take a dollar and make it do ten dollars and let them tell you how to meet the threat of inflation because they know from first hand experience. And while I like to see our stars of the basketball world and our great singing stars have all of the time that they deserve on television, I also want them to see the people who come from the universities and colleges who are slaving in the vineyards of this country to make it responsive to the poor and the dispossessed. And I shall keep on telling that story at the risk of being misunderstood and called the "One Issue Commissioner." In other words, I'm going to fight until hell freezes over.

Those of us who have come up through the agony of many years of experience during the Depression and hard times and good times, know something of this suffering. And even though you are young, if you should live but a few more years, you will know something about the darkness in your life, midnights when you cannot sleep, an itch that you can't scratch, a tear that you can't stop. But I would like to suggest to you that God today is still on the throne.

After 50 years of living in this world and having all kinds of experiences, I believe there is a God who rules above with a hand of power and a heart full of love; and somehow if we are right, he will fight our battles.

When I see those of us who talk about Black power, I believe in it, when I hear

those of us who talk about Black pride and our heritage, I believe in it, when I hear those of us who talk about Black is beautiful, I believe in it. I want to tell you that Black being beautiful is more than a handshake, it's the quality of the soul, a reality of life. And if you do all that talking about blackness and then have to look for the book to sing the Black National Anthem, I count you out. And I would like to say that I am not a Black separatist; I recognize that this is an integrated university, my heart has been cleansed of hatred, and in spite of all the things that I have had to endure, I think Black and white together we shall overcome some day. So I believe in white allies, those who are willing to join with us in this fight.

When I practiced law in Memphis, it was a strange thing about the courthouse. In the criminal court, there were white judges, white juries, white prosecutors, white defense lawyers. Everything in the courthouse was white except the second row, and that was Black defenders on their way to jail and the penitentiary. So we decided that we ought to have some (Black) public defenders. After a great deal of agitation, I was appointed assistant public defender and served for a number of years.

One day the man who headed the office came and said the legislators have appropriated enough money to have two public defenders in each courtroom. I thought that was fine. He said *another lawyer* will be in charge of the courtroom. I didn't think that was so good but I held my peace until I could get back to the office and find out who the lawyer was. I found out that the lawyer who would take charge of the courtroom was a young white lawyer who had finished law school a scant six months before and had never tried a case in anybody's court in his entire life.

At that time I had been practicing law for 15 years and had tried every kind of case you could think of. But because he was white and I was Black he would be in charge, I would be his assistant. Not only that, he would be making more money than I was making, and have a secretary. To be frank with you, I didn't get angry about it—I got MAD. I got so mad that when I went home to tell my wife about it I found words coming out of my mouth that I thought I had forgotten after my military days.

Even though I was a Baptist preacher, when I got down that night to pray I couldn't pray at all. Every time I tried to pray I saw that man's face telling me I couldn't be in charge. This is why I can understand why people sometimes want to bomb or destroy. Had I had my way, I would have gotten some dynamite or gasoline and burned down the courthouse. That's precisely how I felt. But something kept saying there must be a better way. You can't tell folk in the pulpit on Sunday that God would fight your battles, that he will protect you, if your don't believe it. And you're not the first Black person to whom that has happened. There have been hundreds, thousands and even millions of Black folk who have trained white folk and ended up being the stock boy when their trainees became the stock clerk; and finally the managers. Maybe God wanted me to have that bitter experience to enable me to better understand the bitterness that people feel. I kept on trying until I prayed and then I sat down and wrote a nice letter of resignation in which I pointed out all the reasons why I couldn't serve under those conditions.

A few weeks after I had resigned, the Governor of the state called me at my office and asked me if I wanted to be a judge. This was almost unheard of. But when I consented, I shall not forget that on the first day of September 1965 in that very courtroom where I could not be the chief public defender, I put on a Black robe, raised my right hand and swore to uphold the laws of the State of Tennessee and the United States of America.

"When it is dark enough, you can see the stars."

There were old people crying and weeping because they never expected to see this day come in their life time. There were young people rejoicing. There were flowers everywhere. The room was cleared and I went back to my chambers and was getting ready to relax. The bailiff knocked on the door and said, "Judge"—I hardly recognized the title—"you've got to go to work, you have court today." I replied, "court today? I just got started." He said, "but you've got a lot to do."

When I opened the door, it happened for me what I had been hearing all those years: "Hear ye!, hear ye!, hear ye!, this honorable criminal court, division of Shelby County, Tennessee, is now open for business . . . the Honorable Benjamin L. Hooks presiding . . ." There I sat with my gavel and my black robe on. And as God would have it, paradoxical as it may seem, but truthful I tell you, the very first lawyer who stood before me and said "Your honor please" was that same lawyer who told me I couldn't be the chief public defender. I tell you, "When it is dark enough, you can see the stars." □