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The Dreams of Black Folk

By Charles Shelby Rooks

14 The title of this commentary is an obvious combination of thoughts from W.E.B. DuBois and Martin Luther King, Jr. It recalls marvelous and remarkable phrases in DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, and poetic drama in King's "I have a dream" speech.

What are the dreams of Black folk in this decade? What are the inmost longings of our hearts that provide strength in our daily round of duties? What are the secret hopes to which we turn when the sun in our life refuses to shine?

Those are peculiar questions for this moment of history. Black life in this nation is hard—and getting harder. Unemployment increases, crime and drugs devour our communities, our children are handicapped by awful education, and the future seems dark and foreboding.

I turn to dreams because dreaming has seemed an impossible luxury for Black folk in this generation. We lost our hope more than a decade ago. Since then, we have expressed our frustration and despair in harsh and bitter words. We have demonstrated our anger in violent deeds that destroyed our own communities. We have debated uncounted methods to acquire power. But we have not dared to believe in dreams. The present tragedy is that Black America is a ship without a rudder—moved by no powerful passion, traveling no specific direction, reaching toward no beckoning horizon. For want of a dream, Black folk have drifted on the nation's seas.

Words written by DuBois at the turn of the century (1903) seem strangely to describe our time:

... storm and stress today rocks our little boat on the mad waters of the world-sea; there is within and without the sound of conflict, the burning of body and rending of soul; inspiration strives with doubt, and faith with vain questionings. The bright ideals of the past—physical freedom, political

power, the training of brains and the training of hands—all these in turn have waxed and waned until even the last grows dim and overcast. Are they all wrong—all false? No, not that, but each alone was oversimple and incomplete, or the fond imaginings of the other world which does not know and does not want to know our power.

The "storm and stress" DuBois described so poignantly burst like a rocket above our heads in 1968. From 1954 to 1967, it seemed our time was about to come. Half-a-million, we gathered at the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963, excited and enthralled by the dream which lured us on. Martin Luther King, Jr. painted a marvelous picture of our hopes. One nation, indivisible, we would become, one people at last true to their lofty ideals. "I have a dream," he said,

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveholders will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

Hearing him, we believed that day was near. We would be free at last.

Suddenly, almost without warning, it was over. Every hero who had dared believe that dream, who had lifted our hopes and vision, who had stirred and ennobled our hearts, was killed. We watched them die—over and over—on television screens in our homes: Dallas, Memphis, Los Angeles.

Many Black folk were convinced that racist America would defeat forever the flesh and blood of the Black dream. This nation regularly murdered anyone who dared invoke the dream of liberty and justice. Or so it seemed. Small wonder

few have dared to speak of or believe the dream!

But there are deep and persistent longings in our tender hearts, and they continually call us back to dreams. Indeed, no one can live long or well without dreams. That is especially true of a people who have suffered and bled so much. You and I awake from each passing night and, behold, there are our persistent dreams again. There is the hope that in this new day life can be different, fuller, more complete. It is dreams that sustain us. It is our vision of life which provides strength for each day's need. Langston Hughes wrote:

*Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.*

*Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Covered with snow.*

I speak of dreams precisely because Black folk face such coldly bleak prospects in this historical moment. The national economy is in precarious health. Black people suffer and die as a result. Unemployment, already too high, seems certain to increase. Public education in our cities is on the brink of disaster. Black political power is divided and unsteady and weak. The Klan stalks the back roads again, and some are convinced the second Reconstruction has begun. In such a time as this, surely it is foolish to think impossible dreams. Yet, without a dream, without some clear vision of life toward which we reach, the most fragile hope is un nourished in our breasts. And, without hope, surely the people die! The time has come to speak of dreams again!

Howard University understands the importance of dreams, because, it possesses an impressive capacity to visit the frontiers of human knowledge, to generate exciting abilities and talents

The following was excerpted from a speech by the president of the Chicago Theological Seminary, on the occasion of Howard University's 114th Charter Day Convocation, March 2, 1981. Ed.

for the complex future of the world. The founders of Howard never dared dream such a dream, but those who followed did.

Howard University's unswerving commitment to excellence in faculties, facilities, educational programs, and community activities is important. But even more important for this generation is a very difficult task: to encourage, to enable, to empower Black folk to dream—not just any old dream—but to dream about what Black life in this nation should be. To do that, the faculty, staff, and students must stretch their minds and hearts with vibrant imagination toward the brightest horizons, continually expressing and articulating the noblest hopes of Black people in compelling and urgent words. For to dream is to take the first giant step from the hot desert of despair to the sustaining manna of the Promised Land.

In a word, the significant contemporary mission of Howard University is to enlarge the capacity of Black folk to dream—until the untapped power surging in dark veins yields strength to race with the world. To dream again! That's where Black freedom begins!!

The expression of Black dreams in this era requires imagination. Why imagination? Well, the language we use can hinder our dreams. Words are more important than some of us think. English is itself a problem. For many Black folk, it is a persistent and undying symbol of the long and bitter struggle in this land. As part of their enslavement and degradation on these shores, our ancestors were forced to speak its unfamiliar sounds—crusted and coated with concepts of life which derided the values and morality of their African motherland. Who today can say that the Black psyche ever recovered from the awful thoughts of enslavement? Now Black folk have no other language. We think, feel and speak in words which never fully carry the breadth of our inmost hopes.

That is why in recent times some of us travelled a harshly rebellious road against this language that we speak. On that road, young militants—and some not so young—sought to destroy all the old words, even those that once conveyed some commendable dream. Integration was one of those words. Integration died a hard, but timely death. It no longer expressed the breadth of the new dream. Its power to lead fled like a rapist in the dark. But not yet have we found an acceptable new word or phrase that compels our hearts, that empowers our deeds. Every word or phrase we have devised is flawed: Black vis-a-vis Negro, Black nationhood, Black power, Pan-Africanism, even freedom and liberation. Imagination is needed to put our dreams into words.

I am convinced that Black folk still share a dream today, a dream that has never changed. It is a dream of freedom *with justice*, the compelling, irresistible hope that some day in this fair land—*this* land, not some other place—in this land we shall be truly free. Like our ancestors, we recall the beckoning words of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. They were certain those lofty words applied to them. And so are we. Black folk have flirted with seductive ideas: Repatriation in Africa, establishing a separate nation within these borders, Communism and Socialism, riot and revolution. But deep beneath the well-springs of frustration and anger and defeat, that dream is there. It is a people's dream of freedom—here in America and nowhere else. Freedom here. Freedom now. Langston Hughes was right:

*America is a dream.
The poet says it was promises,
The people say it is promises—that
will come true.
The people do not always say things
out loud,
Nor write them down on paper.
The people often hold
Great thoughts in their deepest hearts*

*And sometimes only blunderingly
express them*

.....
*But there is, somewhere there,
Always the trying to understand,
And the trying to say,
"You are a man. Together we are
building our land."*

Never be misled by the terrible anger and frustration because the dream has never come true. Black folk in 1981 still yearn for freedom—liberty, as this nation's ideals bespeak it—but freedom *and* justice, not merely liberty alone. Once it was freedom from the chains of slavery. At another time it was freedom from laws that dehumanized and oppressed. Today we dream of doors and hearts completely open, with Black folk never shut out by law, custom or racism, by fear, hate, spite, selfishness or greed. From that daring dream we have never escaped.

We also dreamed of freedom *with respect*, and that dream is even more daring and complex. This is the hope that one day we can be both American *and* Black.

I am a product of both Africa and America, and I never forget that fact of my being. I don't want others to forget it either! The new Black hope is neither to be excluded because of color nor accepted and respected only because our color is ignored.

Outspoken Black voices have done this nation a great service over the past 15 years. We have been reminded that unless all Black folk are free, none are truly free. Those of us who have "made it," who have escaped the terrible destruction of mind and spirit in the ghetto, dare not forget our brothers and sisters mired in hopelessness and despair. Our dream is a vision of freedom for a whole people, not just a fortunate few. One sweet day this nation will light a new lamp in the Statue of Liberty for the "tired, the hungry, the poor" who are Black. On that great day we shall all be free! □

Like food and shelter, decent health care is one of the foremost priorities of people everywhere. In the developed nations, enormous sums of money, energy and expertise are devoted to satisfying this basic human need. This is not always the case in most countries of the underdeveloped world, particularly Africa, where on each passing moment hundreds of thousands are affected by the lack of accessible health care; where those charged with its delivery often are hampered by a myriad of shortages and limited expertise.

This brings us to the birth, last August, of AAPNA in the District of Columbia (5701 16th Street, N.W.).

AAPNA, which stands for the Association of African Physicians in North America, had its formal inaugural this past May. Among its founders are a number of African physicians, dentists and medical students affiliated with Howard University.

The overwhelming presence of guests with Howard connection at the inaugural was hard to overlook, especially the grandfather of all . . . the grand old man of medicine, literature, philosophy and civil rights . . . W. Montague Cobb. And the renowned LaSalle D. Lefall, Jr., professor and chairman of the Department of Surgery at the College of Medicine, keynoted the event, imparting a bit of his knowledge and wisdom in the medical field.

Back to the purpose of AAPNA. The need for such an organization at this particular period, and the impact it is bound to make in the future, was outlined as follows:

Over the past few decades, we have become increasingly aware of the true myth of the "brain drain" especially its effects on the health delivery services in Africa. It is true today that far more health professionals of African descent at the post-doctoral levels are being trained abroad in greater numbers than within Africa itself. Upon completion of this valuable training only a few quali-

fied Africans return to the motherland to transfer the technology, thus acquired, to the most needy and underserved areas in today's world. It was with this vision that the association was founded in August 1980 as an integral body uniting African physicians and dentists both in practice and training in North America.

To accomplish its lofty goal of tapping the talents of specialists in the health field as well as professors, lecturers and consultants, AAPNA hopes to establish chapters in major metropolitan centers throughout North America. Also, it will soon start efforts to forge a bond with health-related facilities in Africa in order to lend a healing hand to the needy people back home.

Consider these objectives:

1. To organize efforts and mobilize the African physicians and dentists in North America.
2. To facilitate the smooth transition from the training and practice of medicine in North America to the African setting.
3. To emphasize the cultural significance of the medical profession as it is perceived by the African societies.
4. To encourage and develop professional, educational and cultural activities among members.
5. To provide expert and consultant services to African institutions in research, licensure, and training of medical support personnel.
6. To form liaison with professional African medical associations and other organizations providing services for the welfare of Africa.

With the support of like-minded individuals, and above all hard work, AAPNA stands to make a lasting impact.

The fact that membership in the organization is also open to lay persons of all nationalities (as associate members) is indicative of the foresight inherent in the collective thinking of AAPNA's founders.

"AAPNA will provide leadership in the search for the solution to the African health problem," promises its president Okenwa Nwosu.

In the past few years, *New Directions* has had a chance to blow its horn.

This is our way of sharing with the rest of you the news that the magazine has won another award for Excellence in Periodical Writing from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) in a contest sponsored by Harper's magazine.

On with our work.

