

The Legacy of Black Prophetic Moments: Dynastic Monuments versus Dynamic Movements

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The twentieth century was indeed dominated by many surges in progressive science, productive technology, and the soaring heights of the creative and artful human imagination. But it was also desecrated by waves of incalculable conflict, and painfully challenged by an almost unimaginable human carnage. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, many had made bold to suggest that the twentieth century could be termed the “American Century.” America as a whole could never have actually made such a claim, for there were millions of Americans who would have refused to do so, because of what they had to endure in America itself. What then could we actually claim about the last century? What did it portend? What did it produce? What did it bequeath? The wisdom of my Afro-Caribbean elders has always reminded me that there are three things that come not back: the spoken word, the sped arrow, and the lost opportunity. My preliminary question is simply this: Is this twenty-first century emerging as a century of lost opportunities, as far as the world of ebony grace is concerned? “Ebony grace” is my special term for God’s loving and lovely gift of Blackness.

I propose to reflect on Blackness in global terms, even though our contextual and historical realities might tend to be mainly localized. I happen to conceptualize Blackness along a two-dimensional continuum. There is *parental* Blackness, and there is *prophetic* Blackness. Parental Blackness is unconditional and essentially ontological. It is

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what it is, regardless of who says or thinks otherwise. All Black people know that there are only two things they have to do in this life—one: they have to stay Black, and two: they have to die! Prophetic Blackness is the fertile and dynamic convergence and integration of Black personhood, Black experiences, and unrelenting Black active hope for a better existence. Prophetic Blackness activates parental Blackness in calling forth, and radically responding to, a divinely inspired and wholly disruptive alternative future. It consists mainly in a radical and progressive resistance to the negation of Blackness. To put it yet another way, it means saying and living out the “No” to the “No, No” encountered in the Black experience.

Accordingly, I have chosen to entitle this presentation “The Legacy of Black Prophetic Moments: Dynastic Monuments versus Dynamic Movements.” This keynote address is given on the anniversary commemoration of the passing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4th, 1968, and within the year of observance of the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington in 1963. It seemed good for me to offer some reflections on the global century, in which the King Event shared in a symphony of Black prophetic moments that both pre-dated, and post-dated, Dr. King. For when we make bold to place King in a global milieu, in a context that is neither dominated nor controlled by anyone in particular, we may yet derive some invaluable and beneficial insights. These benefits might far transcend any hegemonic, or particularized, patterns of cultural ownership, or dynastic exclusivity, or even ideological prejudices. My continuing attitude has been to speak of Dr. King in prophetic terms, mainly because of four distinguishing characteristics that were evident in his unique biography. These were: his moral courage, his passion for justice, his personal sacrifice, and the manner of his death. My purpose here is not to focus so much on King, or on four other historical icons of the last century, to whom I shall later draw your attention, but to locate all of them in a century of prophetic moments, as the basis for my concluding questions and observations. Two conceptual issues require our immediate attention, however, and they revolve around my use of the term “prophetic moments.” One has to do with the notion of the “prophetic,” while the other deals with concepts of “time” and “timeliness.”

My use of the term “prophetic” will perhaps conjure up notions of the classical Hebrew prophets with whom we are familiar in the Holy Scriptures. Generally speaking, prophetism consisted of a pattern of special personalities who were seized by the urgings of some crisis, or series of significant events, in their society. These crises bore

the markings of some national deity or cultural gods, and called forth some deliberative responsive action from the entire community. So the crises called forth and put forward the prophets. The prophets did not contrive nor create the crises, even though they may have articulated and embodied the crises in very conspicuous and disruptive ways. Accordingly, prophets were seized by the divinely significant moments. They were called forth out of the moments by the overpowering and compelling sense of the deity. They perceived and performed the tasks which the moments demanded of them. Afterwards, they either exited the scene, or else were eliminated by the force of communal resistance. You will no doubt recall the lament of Jesus, the Nazarene prophet, who was himself eliminated by force: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (Matt. 23:37). Prophetism, then, subsisted in the convulsive convergence of the crisis, the sense of the deity, and the individuals' strong sense of being called out of the moment, toward the active embodiment of the divine mission, by means of prophetic utterances, and disruptive actions, and higher alternatives.

What then was a "prophetic moment"? We are often tempted through our familiarity with the New Testament to make some linguistic distinctions between the three Greek words for "time," namely, *chronos*, *kairos*, and *aion*. Now while *chronos* suggests the concept of time that is sequential, and *aion* normally is translated as "the age," *kairos* often carries the strongest temporal meaning, being used for "moment," or "opportunity," or "occasion." To put it in somewhat simplistic terms, while *chronos* and *aion* suggest a linear concept of time, *kairos* is clearly punctiliar, since it deals with a specific time-point, rather than a sequential time-frame. My preference on this occasion, however, is to fuse the intimations of all three Greek words, in terms of an era of sequential opportunities to be captured in moments after moments. Thus the compelling link between the times and the urgent timeliness is what connotes for me what I am calling a "prophetic moment." To answer the question, then: a "prophetic moment" is that era of sequential opportunities that calls forth divinely directed and morally disruptive responses to such human conditions that ought not so to be. It is a call to bear witness to how God can, and does, bring chaos out of human order, rather than the other way round.

But how do we transfer concepts of special historic personalities and their characteristics, be they religious or otherwise, to the continuing exigencies and ethical demands of our times? More particularly, how easy is it to translate ancient notions of a theocratic ordering

of society, such as we find in scripture, into the practical nodal moments that can initiate and sustain transformative historical effects? Questions of communal governance, issues relating to the social, religious, political, cultural, economic, and moral ordering of peoples in their various conditions, are all involved. There is also the problem of a general appeal to some source of transcendent moral authority. How do we come to a common agreement on what is the right thing to do, and what is the right reason for doing it? How do we appropriate such classical prophetic traditions into our modern and postmodern social and political realities?

It seems to me that, at the very least, it requires a reimagining of the role of the prophetic motif itself. While we should not abandon the insights and moral categories of classical prophetism, we should try to relocate the grounds for moral, cultural, and social outrage. It requires a radical realignment of the practical and historical meaning and respect for those principles and virtues that affirm the universal rights of humanity. For, if classical prophetism was driven by such virtues and principles as repentance (as in radical rethinking), or justice, or compassion, or redemption, or an upheaval of inhuman relations, or even by the renewal of hope itself, all of these are still to be fleshed out in the exigencies of our own contemporary prophetic moments. Such exigencies demand increasing levels of persistent moral outrage as prophetic responses to conditions and systems and attitudes that consistently reject the claims of some of us to be fully human. I yield to no one in my oft-repeated claim that Black people continue to be the only people in the world whose claims to be fully human have not yet been universally accepted, regardless of whether they live in the White House, or in the thatch-house, or in no house at all.

Black prophetic moments then emerge out of the crucible of human pain and social oppression, all rooted and grounded in a maladjusted reading of human history. They emerge out of a radical response to the perniciously integrated scales of might and right, which still revel in the brutal subjugation of Blackness. These are the specific moments that have generated not only the prophetic visionaries, and activists, and advocates for alternative historical conditions, but also the divinely inspired climate and counter-culture for a more humane and equitable communal existence. These are the moments that have provided for a legacy over time. Ours is the task to determine whether this legacy is receding or progressing, whether we have transformed legacy into lethargy. Have we in fact permitted dynasties and monuments of all sorts to trample over the dynamic calls for movements

of social change, and divine embrace, and spiritual enrichment, and moral empowerment? As we move into the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, and as we look back over the many decades and half-centuries of Black prophetic struggles, what do we profitably recall? Where have we come from? Where are we now? And where do we go from here? Perhaps we might do well to muse for a while on the past half-centuries through the lenses that are significantly Black in meaning and measure, using the year 2014 as our vantage point of temporal awareness.

Let us look selectively at some significant Black moments in years that ended with the number “4.” Two hundred years ago, in 1814, William Wells Brown was born into slavery. He was eventually to become one of the leading luminaries of Black intellectualism and literary creativity, but he was somehow overshadowed by another Black luminary of mixed race, Frederick Douglass. That was the same year in which Francis Scott Key, one of the founders of the Virginia Theological Seminary, wrote his famous poem “The Defence of Fort McHenry,” out of which emerged the national anthem of the United States of America in 1931. One hundred and eighty years ago, in 1834, my slave ancestors were granted their emancipation from slavery, and chose not to compromise their new-found freedom with any form of apprenticeship, as transpired elsewhere in Jamaica or Barbados. That was the same year in which William Wells Brown escaped from slavery. One hundred and seventy years ago, in 1844, Charles Darwin formally initiated his theory of natural selection. It was a theory that would eventually be bastardized into a malicious ideology of survival of the fittest, transferred from biology, through social anthropology, into political ideology.

That was the same year in which James Russell Lowell published his famous poem “The Present Crisis,” which includes the famous section “Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide.” This he published only after he had been heavily influenced by his new wife Maria White, who was a much more deeply committed abolitionist than he was. It is interesting to note that even though Dr. King and the NAACP often quoted from that seminal poem, Lowell himself held Blacks in rather low esteem. Listen to what he wrote about us at Emancipation-time: “We believe the white race, by their intellectual and traditional superiority, will retain sufficient ascendancy to prevent any serious mischief from the new order of things.”¹

¹ Edward Wagenknecht, *James Russell Lowell: Portrait of a Many-Sided Man* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 175.

He wrote that freed slaves were “dirty, lazy & lying.”² It is well known that by 1868 Lowell was in full agreement with the Southerners and their passionate embrace of Negro slavery.

One hundred and sixty years ago, in 1854, William Wells Brown’s freedom was bought by the Richardson family in Britain. They had also paid for Douglass’s freedom. One hundred and fifty years ago, in 1864, Lincoln was reelected President of the United States. That was the same year in which Darwin was awarded the highest honor among British scientists—the Copley Medal from the Royal Society. Darwin was on the verge of publishing his other famous work, *The Descent of Man*, in 1871, in which he contended that the claims that one species of humanity was higher than another were spurious and unfounded. He had dismissed the theories of there being two separate species of human beings—monogenism and polygenism. He contended that some of the sub-species of manhood, such as “the Negro and the European, are so distinct that, if specimens had been brought to a naturalist without any further information, they would undoubtedly have been considered by him as good and true species.”³ Interestingly enough, Lowell served as a pallbearer at Darwin’s funeral in Westminster Abbey in 1882.

We must not overlook the challenge posed by the famous Professor of Zoology at Harvard University, Louis Agassiz (1807–1873), whose theories of polygenism—separate species, separate creations, separate origins, for the separate races—earned him the distinction of introducing “scientific racism.” It was Agassiz who propounded the view at Harvard that God created one human species in separate acts of creation, and in separate geographical areas, and that the creation stories in Genesis only referred to the creation of the white race. The commonality among humans, he said, was essentially spiritual, not biological, even though they were still equal in God’s sight, since God created them all. Monogenistic theories of evolution were an insult to the all-wise God, Agassiz contended, and so Darwin’s theories were to be rejected. So we must note, in passing, that Darwin’s natural selection theories inevitably gave rise to the pernicious ideologies of “social Darwinism,” and a dog-eat-dog mentality among the white, the wise, and the wealthy. Agassiz’s theories of separate creations inevitably

² Martin Duberman, *James Russell Lowell* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 229.

³ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1871, 2004), 678.

gave rise to a surge of scientific racism that has infected many sectors of the church and the academy, and still carries many subtle and overt vestiges right up to the present day. I believe that Black people need to be sober, and vigilant, and well informed, since their adversaries among the scientists still roam around seeking whom they may devour—with all due deference to the First Letter of Peter.

One hundred years ago, in 1914, World War I broke out, and that event was to virtually change the course of Black history. Not only did it change the geo-political configurations of power in the world, but it also accentuated the utilitarian view of Black patriotism. I grew up hearing my elders singing the song that went like this: “White man go a war a’ France, / Black man go and help dem; / Some come back with half a’ ass, / Some come back wit’ dey backside leaning; / Backside leaning.” (It was sung to the tune: “Jesus lives! thy terrors now / can no longer, death, appall us.”) This happened to be the West Indian version of the experience of the Blacks who returned to this country from the Great War, as it was called, and the dehumanizing way in which they were treated on their return. But 1914 was also significant for other Black prophetic moments globally. One hundred years ago Mohandas Gandhi, having been given the new name of “Mahatma” (meaning the Venerable, or the High-Souled One) that same year, left South Africa to return to his native India. It was in South Africa that he experienced firsthand the social agony of being a colored man in a white-dominated society, and where he developed the principles and practices of nonviolent protest. He was later to become the inspiration for several Black leaders during the course of the following century.

1914 was also the year in which Marcus Garvey returned to Jamaica from England, having studied for a while at London University, and established the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), with its motto: “One God! One Aim! One Destiny!” Its initial manifesto declared that people of Negro or African parentage should “establish a Universal Confraternity among the race” and aim “to promote the spirit of race pride and love.”⁴ The UNIA took the whole Black world by storm, and it made an enormous difference for the improvement and empowerment of the lives of Black people the world over, and most certainly in the United States, in the early decades of the last century.

⁴ Amy Jacques Garvey, ed., *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (Dorver, Mass.: First Majority Press, 1923, 1986), 38.

As we look back on the past century-and-a-half, then, we cannot help but register the incredible eruption of Black prophetic moments that generated a massive surge of actions and counter-actions, protests and programs, struggles and trials, controversies and contradictions in abundance. This was the era in which many Black women made their distinctive mark in advancing the cause of freedom not only for people of color, but also for the rights of women. They had been obviously inspired by the courage and determination of Sojourner Truth, who some one hundred fifty years ago, in 1864, had been summoned to Washington, D.C. to contribute to the deliberations of the National Freedman's Relief Association. She also had consultations with President Abraham Lincoln himself on matters related to freedom of the Negro. One of Sojourner Truth's memorable prophetic assertions must have most assuredly inspired other women in her generation and beyond. It went like this: "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again."

They had been inspired by Ida B. Wells (1862–1931), whose untiring work and witness significantly challenged the status quo in her society, and who was resolutely determined to make a difference for the better. Wells was relentless in her fight against injustice in all its forms. It was she who said, "One had better die fighting against injustice than die like a dog or a rat in a trap." They would have been inspired by the pioneering work of Josephine St. Ruffin, one of the founders of the first newspaper written by a Black woman, through which she advocated for the rights of Black people and Black women in particular. This newspaper was established some one hundred thirty years ago, in 1884. They had also been inspired by the prophetic witness of Harriet Tubman (1820–1913), who has come down to us in African American history as the Moses of slaves, leading hundreds of slaves to freedom in Canada through the Underground Railroad. Who can forget her famous claim that went like this: "I was conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say—I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger"? Her selfless sacrifices over the years, her relentless and fearless determination, and her courageous altruism before, during, and after the Civil War made her life of poverty a resource of great human wealth for the cause of Blackness.

Within the Episcopal Church's history itself, we must not forget the courageous witness of those three bishops' wives—Esther

Burgess, Mary Peabody, and Hester Campbell—who in 1964 travelled to St. Augustine, Florida, in their efforts to fight against segregation. I am fascinated by the account in Gardiner Shattuck's book, *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights*. Allow me to read one extended paragraph:

The day after they arrived in the city, the women attempted to eat breakfast together at a segregated restaurant, but when the manager realized that the light-skinned Esther Burgess was a “Negro,” she was asked to leave the building. Although all three women left the restaurant together, Mrs. Burgess was arrested later in the day for “trespassing and being an undesirable guest” at the bar of the Ponce de Léon Motor Lodge. The next morning, Mary Peabody and Hester Campbell accompanied a delegation of African Americans to worship at Trinity Church, the largest Episcopal parish in the city. They were unable to enter the church, however, because the vestry of the parish had pressured the rector, Charles Seymour, to cancel the regularly scheduled service that day. Stymied at the church, but seeing the value of their being arrested as civil rights demonstrators, the two women then returned to the Ponce de Léon bar with an interracial group and were quickly taken into custody by the police. Photographs taken of the three well-dressed ladies, looking both determined and bemused behind bars in a Florida jail cell, immediately appeared in the national press and demonstrated the absurdity of the city's segregation laws. Seventy-two-year-old “Grandmother Peabody”—the “indomitable *grande dame* of an old New England dynasty” as she was dubbed in the *Saturday Evening Post*—received special attention because she was the mother of Endicott Peabody, the governor of Massachusetts, who had encouraged her action. After the three women were released on bail, they returned to Boston, where they were greeted with warm expressions of admiration and support from church officials and various SCLC leaders.⁵

All of this took place in the year of Our Lord 1964, fifty years ago this year, and what a year that was! Fifty years ago this year, Fannie Lou Hamer was appointed vice-chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, just as the famous Mississippi Freedom Summer got underway. This was the project to increase voter registration

⁵ Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr., *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 138.

among Blacks in that state, and in which three civil rights workers, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman, were brutally killed. Their bodies were later found in “an earth-filled dam outside the town” of Philadelphia, Mississippi. That was the year in which Fannie Lou Hamer was at the height of her voter registration campaign, when she spoke so eloquently and most compellingly at the Democratic National Convention, demanding full and proper representation for her Freedom Democratic Party. It is said that her contribution nearly derailed the prospects of President Lyndon Johnson’s reelection campaign, so much so that he is said to have referred to her as “that illiterate woman.”

She suffered the unjust indignity of losing her job on the plantation in Mississippi, after she had returned from her voter registration drive. The injustices meted out to her and her people drove her to coin that memorable phrase in the Black community: “I am sick and tired of being sick and tired.” Three years earlier, in 1961, Fannie Lou Hamer’s body had been grossly abused when a white doctor removed her reproductive organs without her knowledge or permission. It was believed that this medical oddity was part of the state of Mississippi’s plan to reduce the number of poor Blacks in that state. We must also be mindful to lift up the invaluable pioneering leadership of the late Dorothy Irene Height (1912–2010) and her sterling work in the National Council of Negro Women.

This is the year of Our Lord, 2014, when we observe the fiftieth anniversary of a number of historic events that have cast their special beams on posterity, right up to the present day. While the young and the not-so-young baby-boomers would place high emphasis on the arrival of the Beatles in America for the first time, some fifty years ago this year, others of us across the Afro-world would signal the fact that this is the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act by President Lyndon Johnson. So while the Beatles were entertaining America with their brand of music from across the Atlantic, people of color were rejoicing in the fact that at last the Congress had outlawed all acts of racial discrimination, whether it was in voting, education, public access, or other forms of public rights and functions. The story of the legal enforcement and social acceptance of the Civil Rights Act is indeed a checkered one, and the Act still cries out for genuine fairness and unconditional consistency in its application.

This is the fiftieth anniversary year of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Martin Luther King, Jr. for his unparalleled witness to

the cause of justice, and the fight against all forms of discrimination. This is also the fiftieth anniversary year for Malcolm X's pilgrimage to Mecca, and his conversion to traditional Islam. This conversion not only involved a formal change in his name, but also an expansion of his sense of prophetic mission to embrace the global struggle against colonialism. He also called for greater socialism, and for a deepening of Pan-Africanism, to serve as the global umbrella for the civil rights movement in the United States.

This is also the fiftieth anniversary of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church which tried to take on again the debate of racism in the church and the country and attempted to respond to what was raging in the country as a whole. It followed on the heels of the despicable events in Florida, the Freedom Movements in the South, and the general atmosphere of racial prejudice that still pervaded Episcopal Church culture. Dr. King was invited to address a session of the House of Deputies. The Convention agreed (Canon 16.4) that every baptized member of the church was entitled to equal rights and privileges within the church, and rejected any forms of racial discrimination, segregation, or exclusion. How the Episcopal Church has attempted to engage in programs and missions to combat racism within its ranks—whether in congregations, councils, seminaries, institutions, appointments, elections, and beyond—continues to be a study of the outward and visible signs of inward and visceral grace. It may well be that the perceptive words of the late Bishop Walter Dennis still ring true, that “the Church still thinks white when it goes about its business.”⁶

Between 1914 and 2014, however, there are some signal Black prophetic moments that provide the hinges for all that has emerged in the cause of the ongoing global emancipation of people of ebony grace. These moments can justly be personalized and symbolized in the iconic biographies of five twentieth-century men, who obviously had so much in common. These five iconic prophetic figures are: Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948); Marcus Garvey (1887–1940); Malcolm X (1925–1965); Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968); and Nelson (Madiba) Mandela (1918–2013). What did they have in common?

Well, for a start, they were all blessed with ebony grace, with slight variations in complexion, however much some Indians might colorize themselves as Brown rather than Black. President Mordecai

⁶ See Shattuck, *Episcopalians and Race*, 182.

Johnson (Howard University) was said to have often referred to Gandhi as “the little brown man.” In any event, Gandhi’s sojourn in South Africa firmly located him in solidarity with those who were persecuted for Blackness’ sake. As simplistic as this may sound, their names all begin with the letters *M-A*. They were all imprisoned at some stage in their lives, and their sojourns in jail made a significant impact on their personal development and transformation, and eventually contributed substantially to the depth and authenticity of the causes to which they devoted their lives. They each propounded in their several ways the divinely-directed and religiously-significant value and measure of their causes. They were each regarded as virtual enemies and suspects in the eyes of the establishment, and adversaries of the status quo, for most of their lives. Most particularly, however, they all left behind a great surge of social, political, cultural, and ideological energy and contagious memory—all in accordance with the transformative causes for which they lived and died. Three of them—Gandhi, Malcolm X, and King—were actually assassinated; one of them (Garvey) was ignominiously deported from the United States in 1927; and the fifth (Mandela) became the first Black president of his country twenty years ago. All but one, Malcolm X, have become national heroes, and the monuments, statues, and institutions in their honored memories have all indeed been monumental (yes, pun intended!).

What were the transformative prophetic causes for which they struggled? My reading of the prophetic moments suggests that these were the compelling and consuming causes, each of which still demands of us the ongoing struggles as dynamic movements of hearts, minds, and wills, much more so than the establishment of dynasties and the construction of monuments.

It was the struggle for the cause of self-definition, self-determination, and nonviolent resistance to all forms of imperialism that made the witness of Mahatma Gandhi so important. It was a clarion call to all who genuinely struggle for their rights to assume the commanding heights of their own social, political, and cultural processes. By his leadership in the multiple campaigns on behalf of the poor, the rights of women, religious and ethnic harmony, the cessation of the status of the untouchables in India, and self-rule for his people (Swaraj), Gandhi became a global inspiration, and a magnetic embodiment of the lived out passion for freedom. Dr. Howard Thurman’s account of his meeting with Gandhi in India is indeed a very moving tribute to the man himself. Thurman recalls that “before we left he [Gandhi] said

that with a clear perception it could be through the Afro-American that the unadulterated message of nonviolence would be delivered to all men everywhere.”⁷

Dr. King said of him: “Christ gave us the goals and Mahatma Gandhi the tactics.” He was referring of course to the strategy of non-violent resistance. No wonder then that *Time* magazine named Gandhi Man of the Year in 1930, and he was carded as runner up to Albert Einstein in 1999 as Person of the Century. Listen to the tribute that Einstein paid to Gandhi:

Mahatma Gandhi’s life achievement stands unique in political history. He has invented a completely new and humane means for the liberation war of an oppressed country, and practiced it with greatest energy and devotion. The moral influence he had on the consciously thinking human being of the entire civilized world will probably be much more lasting than it seems in our time with its overestimation of brutal violent forces. Because lasting will only be the work of such statesmen who wake up and strengthen the moral power of their people through their example and educational works. We may all be happy and grateful that destiny gifted us with such an enlightened contemporary, a role model for the generations to come. Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this walked the earth in flesh and blood.⁸

It was the struggle for the cause of Africans in the New World, and in the Motherland itself, that carved out the prophetic leadership of Marcus Garvey in such a dramatic and effective way in the United States, Britain, the West Indies, and Africa. His was the struggle for the cause of Black pride, and the sustained appropriation and elevation of Pan-Africanism. Laying a wreath on Garvey’s grave in Jamaica in 1965, Dr. King commented on Garvey’s witness in these words: “He was the first man, on a mass scale and level, to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny, and make the Negro feel that he was somebody.” One of the major speeches of the last century was Garvey’s speech entitled “Up You Mighty Race, Accomplish What You Will!” As if to set the precedence for Dr. King’s own Birmingham

⁷ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979), 132.

⁸ Albert Einstein, unpublished note, quoted in Cynthia Randy, *Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: Unabridged Guide* (Dayboro, Queensland: Emereo Publishing, 2012), 21.

Jail experience some decades later, Garvey wrote his "First Message to the Negroes of the World from Atlanta Prison." He wrote: "Look for me all around you, for, with God's grace, I shall come and bring with me countless millions of black slaves who have died in America and the West Indies and the millions in Africa to aid you in the fight for Liberty, Freedom and Life."⁹ It was Garvey who argued strongly for Blacks to see themselves as being made in the image of God, and thus to understand God as being Black as well. This was the forerunner of Black theology in the Western world. Some may consider it ironic that a petition for a posthumous pardon for Garvey was denied by the Obama Administration in 2011.

It was the struggle for the cause of Black consciousness and nativist patriotism that became so fully embodied in the life and evolution of Malcolm Little, or Malcolm X, or El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. Malcolm's father was a prominent and passionate member and worker in the UNIA in Nebraska and Michigan, and Malcolm grew up with that formative sense of Black consciousness and Black pride. Innumerable scholars and other writers have formed a variety of approaches to the place of Malcolm X in the hierarchy of Black leadership in the last century, especially as he was a virtual contemporary of Dr. King. They obviously had similar hopes, dreams, and aspirations, especially for people of ebony grace, but the contrast of approaches created its own unwelcome dynamics, so much so that Dr. King was once quoted as saying, "I feel that Malcolm has done himself and our people a great disservice."¹⁰

Yet Malcolm X was sounding a loud and persistent call for Black power and Black freedom. He affirmed: "Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you're a man, you take it."¹¹ It was also Malcolm X who had expressed the view that "power in defense of freedom is greater than power in behalf of tyranny and oppression because power, real power, comes from conviction which produces action, uncompromising action."¹² The African American historian Vincent Harding offered us this assessment of Malcolm X: "The love he bore to his people, the overwhelming power

⁹ Garvey, *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, 239.

¹⁰ Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 266.

¹¹ George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 111.

¹² Quoted in Peter J. Paris, *Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 215.

of black consciousness, and the force and integrity of his spirit offered a powerful testimony to the possibilities of human transformation. Meanwhile his words and ideas were still sweeping through the nation's black communities, especially the explosive urban centers, connecting with many forms of black nationalism, helping to roil the deep waters of disaffection, anger, rebellion, and pride."¹³

We owe much to the hard work of the late Dr. Manning Marable, whose epic biography of Malcolm X was released on the eve of his own death and who shared these sentiments at the end of his scholarly enterprise:

Impoverished African Americans could admire Dr. King, but Malcolm not only spoke their language, he had lived their experiences—in foster homes, in prisons, in unemployment lines. Malcolm was loved because he could present himself as one of them.

One great gift of such remarkable individuals is the ability to seize their time, to speak to their unique moment in history. Both Martin and Malcolm were such leaders, but they expressed their pragmatic visions in different ways. King embodied the historic struggles waged by generations of African Americans for full equality. He established predominantly black political organizations, such as the Montgomery Improvement Association in 1955 and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957, but their emphasis was the achievement of desegregation and interracial cooperation. King never pitted blacks against whites, or used the atrocities committed by white extremists as a justification for condemning all whites. By contrast, throughout most of his public career Malcolm sought to place whites on the defensive in their relationship with African Americans. He keenly felt, and expressed, the varied emotions and frustrations of the black poor and working class. His constant message was black pride, self-respect, and an awareness of one's heritage. At a time when American society stigmatized or excluded people of African descent, Malcolm's militant advocacy was stunning. He gave millions of younger African Americans newfound confidence. These expressions were at the foundation of what in 1966 became Black Power, and Malcolm was its fountainhead.¹⁴

¹³ Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981), xiv–xv.

¹⁴ Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 480.

It was the struggle for the cause of social, economic, and constitutional justice that created the role for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to emerge as the strongest prophetic voice in the story of the civil rights movement. The contrast between King and Malcolm X to which we have just referred continues to raise some very interesting questions about preferences and prejudices. A careful comparison between the monumentalism surrounding the King biography, and Malcolm X's biography, would seem to suggest that the hopes and dreams of people of ebony grace were to be assessed more on the basis of how they were proclaimed, and by whom, than on what they actually meant for social transformation and Black liberation as a whole. King's family background and educational stature do indeed stand somewhat in contrast to that of Malcolm X, but the capacity of Dr. King to fully empathize with the deeply held pathos of the Black under-classes should never be in any doubt.

Dr. King's leadership in the struggle for voter's rights, racial integration, worker's rights, and even the opposition to the war in Vietnam marked him out as a bright and shining star in the constellation of Black prophetic movements. In any event, let the record show that in the twentieth century the only person for whom a national holiday was established in law was for an African American, Martin Luther King, Jr. What we do with such a fact as a nation still begs for dynamic progression, rather than for dynastic stagnation. To quote from Dr. Harding again:

Martin King felt the anguish of the Vietnamese people and readily identified it as part of the same pain he met daily in the broken black cities of America. At great cost to his standing with the black and white liberal establishment, he eventually insisted on joining his voice with that minority of activists who linked the war in Indochina to this country's refusal to deal adequately with its own racism and gross economic inequalities.¹⁵

The *New York Times* journalist Frank Bruni has recently said of Gandhi and Mandela that "they were spiritual leaders minus the Catechism. The world has no glut of these."¹⁶ Indeed, it was the global outpouring of solidarity and concern for Mandela's long imprisonment,

¹⁵ Harding, *There Is a River*, xv.

¹⁶ Frank Bruni, "A Pope You Can Eat," *Sunday Review, The New York Times*, February 8, 2014.

his subsequent release, his election to the highest office in his country, and the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that marked him out as a twentieth-century prophetic icon. In the aftermath of the dismantling of official (if not actual) Apartheid, and by his eventual designation as a global Elder, he earned the massive universal adulation that virtually erupted at the time of his passing. Not only was he the drum-major of the century in the fight for racial equality, he was also the prophetic symbol of the struggle for Black empowerment and racial harmony in the world. Millions spoke of him in messianic terms. He himself refused to be regarded as such. He said: “I was not a messiah, but an ordinary man who had become a leader because of extraordinary circumstances.” His most frequently quoted affirmation of his mission went like this:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against White domination, and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.¹⁷

With such a rich and enriching heritage of Black prophetic moments entrusted to us by the blood, sweat, tears, and struggles of an innumerable host of persons whom God had so powerfully blessed with ebony grace, then, from 1814 to 2014, where do we go from here? What shall we do with the moments, not the monuments, that we have inherited in our own times and spheres? Moments propel us forward, while monuments beckon us backwards. Monuments are constructed and sustained by dynasties that eventually exclude, but moments respond to the fresh inclusive surges of the creative human spirit. What shall we build in the stratospheres of our moral, spiritual, and socio-cultural constellations of hope and freedom? How might we ensure that we steadily, faithfully, and forcefully embrace some fresh prophetic moments, moving toward the radical transformation and deeper humanization of our common lives today?

¹⁷ Nelson Mandela, *Conversations with Myself* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 121–122.

How might we reclaim the sharp edges of resistance, revulsion, renunciation, and reconstruction that might still marshal our spiritual and moral energies? Where can we find the social capital to invest toward the dismantling of structures and systems that continue to thrive on such vices as racism, classism, ageism, sexism, colorism, homophobia, heterosexism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism? These are among the most vibrant evils of our times. Should we lull ourselves into blissful admiration of the edifices of historical memory, or should we reach forward together with all the passionate persuasions we can muster, and so bring into our new experiences those prophetic expressions of a more just and equitable future? Ours is the choice to either linger with the dynastic memories of multiple monuments, or to leap forward with the dynamic bursts of collective and convulsive movements of the empowering Spirit of God's re-creative freedom.

This is the major challenge for all whom God has blessed with grace of any color, whether it is ebony, ivory, or otherwise. If we are not in solidarity with those who suffer the underside of our current history, then we may well be on that other side, where, in so many subtle and insidious ways, people prefer that things should remain as they are. In any case, those who have not been created with ebony grace have, either wittingly or unwittingly, maintained the instinctual gratitude for that other gift that can never be taken away from them. But that should never exempt them from joining in solidarity with all those who must relentlessly resist the systemic and structural modes of suppression, alienation, and the negation of God's gifts of ebony grace. Let me then conclude by pointing to a few possible rumblings of the convulsive Spirit of a just and loving God.

There is a strange sort of global innocence and courageous energy among our millennial generation that we might well make bold to recognize and fearlessly embrace. By their widespread use of social media and instantaneous revulsion of perceived social deficits, they are bringing to bear their re-imaginative and refreshing collective social power. They are innovatively seeking to implement, in sometimes uncomfortable ways, their vision of a more just and equitable society, while at the same time not generally being held captive to the social and cultural anemic inhibiting reluctances of the past. Intergenerational solidarity and mutual empowerment are opportunities that we cannot afford to ignore; for while old men dream dreams, and young men see visions, according to the prophet Joel, God will still pour God's Spirit on all who are enslaved, whether male or female, whether slaves or slavers (Joel 2:28–29).

While the evolution of the civil rights movement has in several respects been enhanced by other struggles—gender, sexuality, and disabilities, for example—these alliances, beyond the inequities of race, can be re-embraced by the social and religious groupings of our times. Churches, seminaries, faith-based agencies, and issue-focused caucuses should embrace the possibilities for assuming new linkages. Additionally, fresh movements for moral and cultural rights could readily be initiated in response to the prevailing climate of systemic and institutional violence that continues to assault our just demands and inherent rights and freedoms. Further, the traditional patterns of missionary movement from the light-skinned peoples to the dark-skinned in the religious, educational, health-related, and organizational sectors of our communities could become more authentic, and more mutually enriching, by some creative strategies of missions-in-reverse, without any patronizing and disingenuous modes of acceptance and support.

It is an incontrovertible fact that our social capital is vastly underused, and often misdirected. Entertainment tramples on Enlightenment. Individualism lauds it over communalism. Corporate greed crushes social compassion. A renewing Spirit for the mobilization of our social capital could be redirected in a more just and equitable manner, so that civil society and the public sectors of our times could be encouraged to be more effective toward the protection and empowering of the oppressed and marginalized among us. In this way, we could begin again to stimulate a conscious and conscientious collective effort to reconstruct the meta-narrative of our racial and cultural relations—between the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, the powerful and the powerless, the minorities and the non-minorities. Issues of racial ascendancy, when linked with notions of divine destiny and design, have continued to turn our world upside down. We are still to be in search of that liberating meta-narrative that will transcend all our ethnic proclivities, and that can somehow begin to turn our contemporary world right side up.

The year 2014 is the year of many anniversaries, many recollections, and also many possibilities. The past century has given us a Gandhi in piloting a wave of self-determination for oppressed peoples of the Earth. The past century has given us a Garvey who ushered in a fresh and refreshing surge of the beauty and blessings of Blackness. The past century has given us a Malcolm X whose personal transformation over time showed us how fertile and fruitful the gift of Black consciousness can become, especially for those who are despised and

rejected because of that very gift. The past century has given us the immense vista and value of moral courage and the vision of social justice through the witness of Martin Luther King, Jr., as we have struggled toward some form of national unity, with the passionate pursuit of freedom. Dr. King's immortal words still hover around us, and maybe even within us, as we deal with two very strong emotive forces in our lives—lingering guilt and indomitable fear. His words were: "The Negro needs the white man to free him from his fears. The white man needs the Negro to free him from his guilt." Today, we are still striving to recognize that there can be no unity with equality, nor can there be any true love without real justice. This past century has given us the unparalleled prophetic witness of Nelson Madiba Mandela, who has been well spoken of as "a colossus of unimpeachable moral character and integrity," and as "the world's most admired and most revered public figure" in his day.¹⁸

Freedom, justice, Black pride, equality, racial reconciliation—these are the fruits of the legacy of the Black prophetic moments. We can nail them to a cross, fixed firmly and immovably in the ground, or we can run with their transforming flames that can burn more brightly, more potently, and more creatively in our contemporary world. Whatever paths we choose, my hope and prayer is that the legacy of all these Black prophetic moments will in fact neutralize all our lethargic spiritual, cultural, and moral attitudes enshrined in our dynastic monuments. My hope is that our vision of human freedom and our thirst for moral courage, as gifts from God, will draw us all into those dynamic movements of God's re-creative activity. I happen to remain unalterably committed to the belief that God is still determined to make all things new, either with us, or without us.

Let those who have eyes to see and ears to hear take heed, take heart, and take action. In the words of Kalu Ndukwe Kalu, "The things you do for yourself are gone when you are gone, but the things you do for others remain as your legacy."

Thank you.

¹⁸ Desmond Tutu, "Nelson Mandela: A Colossus of Impeachable Moral Character," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2013.