

The Negro Question

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I come here with some reluctance this evening; because I do not wish to be obliged to make up my mind about the race question. In making up one's mind, one closes one's mind; and this race question, – which is no more than the struggle between Good and Evil put into visible shape, – can only be settled from moment to moment by any one of us. In so far as we ourselves are perfect, we settle it for the moment.

The history of the United States down to about 1870 is a history of this particular struggle between good and evil. Our constitutional questions, Secession, the Civil War, Reconstruction, – all the heat and agony of our political life during seventy years, came out of this negro question. Since 1870, the negro question has ceased to be the pivot upon which our whole civilization turned, and has sunk to the position of being the chief among the great problems before us. It is a problem that has been clearly recognized and is being nobly met by the whites and by the blacks alike. Christianity, training, and education – these things are the solution, these things are the need of all of us. If we keep our individual minds clear of all rancor, time will do the rest.

I believe that no race ever had a better hero than the colored race has to-day in Booker Washington. He is the embodiment of what all of us ought to be in regard to this question: not only the negro but the white man looks upon him with reverence, and learns from him to be patient, to put away animosity, to have faith in God, to pursue inflexibly processes which operate slowly.

The two races in America are spiritually in contact and can only improve in unison. Therefore when an Association of this kind is formed for “the advancement of the colored race,” it might just as well be called “for the advancement of the white race.” I suppose that you all understand this.

There is a great law governing the meeting of races. When a powerful race meets a helpless race, two things happen. First there is a carnival of crime. Cruelty and oppression take place: some men in each race become evil and hard-hearted. But the reverse also happens thereafter; goodness and mercy are developed: certain men become saints and heroes. Now in America we had two hundred and fifty years of the epoch during which both races were being injured by contact with one another, both were being made miserable, both brutalized, and in consequence of this very epoch of slavery our whole land to-day is still full of hard, hard hearts.

But the tide seems now to be running the other way, and the pressure created by the living together of the two races seems to be generating virtue. The educators and missionaries, the philanthropists and thinkers have sprung up in America and have devoted themselves to the negro question. They form a sort of army. There are apostles and servants of Christ among us who have been called into being through this very question, and whose existence gives dignity to our whole civilization. They have not solved the question as yet. The depravity of the blacks and the lynchings by the whites have not ceased. Burnings of negroes at the stake still draw upon our nation the contempt and horror of mankind. But the spirit that is to put an end to these things has already been born.

True reform comes slowly; and no race was ever freed except by its own efforts, – no man saved except through himself. Therefore, when I hear of the struggles which the poor negroes are making in the South, to civilize and to educate themselves, when I hear of how they eke out illiberal public grants with mites saved out of their poverty, of how they are long suffering and reasonable, – I say to myself, This was worth waiting for. These people are saving themselves. They will obtain the money which they need, and will use it rightly. The same thought is of harder application to the lynching question. The communities where lynching occurs can only recover their power of self-government through their own efforts. The flower must grow out of the soil. The man on the spot who is a part of the community where lynching is threatened, must risk his life or lay his life down freely in defense of law. A mere willingness on the part of one man to do this will generally

stop a lynching. And you will observe that this spirit is beginning to manifest itself among our people, and will end by preventing the atrocities.

I used to bewail the present legacy of the Slave-trade as much as the original iniquity of it. The fact that the negroes are here at all seemed almost to over-punish America for the crime of their importation. I used to think that the consequences which that crime entailed in the perpetuation among us of passions fierce and base, and in the mingling of races that are better apart, were pure evils, – ghastly never-ending punishments. But now I believe that it is foolish to argue in such a manner as this about historic things. The subject is beyond our comprehension. What we think the greatest evils in our minute lives often bring to us the greatest blessings. It may be so with nations.

The race question certainly puts each of us to the alternative of becoming a great deal holier, a great deal kinder, a great deal deeper in character, or else of being brutalized to some extent. We have not yet got free from some of the intellectual consequences of slavery. The old cruelty of the plantation is gone, and yet I sometimes hear rich people in club-rooms arguing about the negro question in a spirit, and from a point of view, that indicates an intellectual injury. My own friends sometimes show scars of the mind in dealing with the negro question. They become for a moment like sixteenth-century pirates, their eyes glitter, and they talk tyranny. Yet these men are now mere relics. The newer age shows ever fewer of the type. Such meetings as this show that the American people are choosing the upward path. Hardly a day passes but we see new proofs that America will solve her race question in the only way it can be solved, through herself becoming more gentle and more intelligent.

Our progress in this direction is slow; the path leads upward at a very small angle. But let us remember that slowness of growth is what America most needs in all directions. In everything we have grown up too quickly. To-day all things among us go crashing forward too quickly. We should not desire sudden changes, even for the better. Sudden changes signify short-lived events. Therefore, if we see steady improvement going forward anywhere, let us rejoice that it goes forward slowly, so that its roots may sink deep, and all nature may accommodate herself to the change. Thus will the good things become permanent.

Isaiah says in a text that is too seldom quoted: "He that believeth shall not make haste." Those words seem to suggest the very patience which is the national endowment of the negro race. We see the virtue to-day in the meek and sturdy spirit with which the leaders of that race are building up schools and sending out missionaries. They are men of long wind and great faith. They refuse to be drawn into controversy or to take part in occasional excitement. They realize the nature of their work. They have studied their problem with the passion of their souls, and they understand it. And we, who belong to the white race, may herein find our best lesson. We also must have long wind and perfect faith. We must be as patient, and school ourselves as thoroughly as they.