

W.E.B. DuBois: The zest for life

by Herbert Aptheker

One could discuss DuBois' careers: as a teacher and editor, organizer, poet, novelist, essayist, historian, sociologist and anthropologist. One could discuss DuBois' monumental confrontations: with Booker T. Washington, with Marcus Garvey, with Walter White twice, with the board of trustees of Atlanta University, with the so-called Department of Justice of the U.S. Government. One could discuss DuBois and his decisive influence on momentous developments: the Pan-African Movement and the movement for the liberation of Africa, of which he is the father; the Niagara Movement, the NAACP and the development of the modern Afro-American liberation movement, of which he is the father; the World Peace Council and the Peace Information Center, which he headed; and the movement to prevent a third world war, in which he played a central role; the development of a scientific study of the history of Africa and African-derived peoples, in which he was the pioneer; the awakening of the world to the importance and beauty of the art and music, the poetry and drama that welled up from the souls of Black Folk. But I will do none of these. . . . rather, I want to talk of DuBois' idea of life, of how he was able to make of his life an epic poem, of what he himself once called in a commencement speech for black children in jim-crow Washington in 1904, "The Zest for Life."

That he retained this zest, this eagerness, through 95 years of turmoil, would be remarkable in itself. But that this black man, this poetic black man, retained this balanced joyfulness while living and battling in the United States from the 1880s until the 1960s is perhaps the single most incredible reality in the accomplishments of this almost incredible person. Some wit, I think it was Oscar Wilde, once remarked that in life one faced two perils: failure and success. One would think this offered a rather hopeless alternative. DuBois' portion of cruelty was not less than Wilde's or anyone else's but he chose a third path. He so conducted his life that failure or success was not possible for each connotes completion which means satiation. But suppose one so lived that the point is the struggle? Suppose one so lived that he seeks to push back the past, to urge forward the present, to help shape an ever moving future? Suppose one so lived as to be part of the process, looking toward enhancement of the human condition?

Then, any possibility of final achievement is part of the joy of living. . . of one's zest. Then one sees himself, or herself, as one of a continuum and consciously draws on those who preceded him and consciously plans to bequeath not only some accomplishment to those who follow but also some work for them to do in the endless flow of human endeavor.

DuBois believed in work. DuBois lived as though he had made his credo Jefferson's advice to his daughter: "Be doing. You will be surprised at how much can be done if you're always doing." DuBois believed in work, but not work for its own sake, for mere business and certainly not work merely for sustenance. No, work that one loved, that one could not resist doing. The difference between hell and heaven, he once said, was the difference between doing what one disliked and what one loved. But again, not work for self-gratification but work for service. This was the point of his 1890 commencement address at Harvard and it was the point of his life until death came in 1963. Service to what? Service to the enhancement of human well-being was beginning where you were and among the people who bore you, sustained you, whom you loved.

Back in 1898, speaking on Careers Open to College Bred Negroes, DuBois said, "We serve first for the sake of serving, to develop our own powers, gain the mastery of this human machine, and come to the broadest, deepest self-realization. And then we serve for the real end of service, life, no narrow selfish thing, but to let it sweep the morning broad and full and free for all men and women and all time, that you and I may earn a living and earn too much more than that, a life worth living." He urged here in 1898 divine discontent with the imperfect and told his young audience, at the age of about thirty, . . . to do your duty because the world thirsts for your service; to perform clean, honest, thorough work not for cheap applause but because the work needs to be done."

Of course it was one thing to make speeches to college audiences, or any other audience, and it is another thing to live by the suggestions made in such speeches. DuBois did both.

The first thing in terms of making a life was work—work that one cherished. And second was service, which meant a cause. And what cause was that? He explained to the children of Washington back in 1904 and only the numbers he then used need changing. "Look! Yonder lie 10 million human beings writhing in sorrow and disappointment, bending beneath insult and

hatred, choked with the blood and the dust of battle. . . . For them must you work, in their service must your work be put, and such work and such service will be the ultimate secret of a worthwhile life and that is sacrifice. Be prepared for personal sacrifice, the sacrifice of position, of income, of social prestige, even of life itself for the sake of a mighty people." Even then he made clear that he meant far more than the 10 millions of his own folk for he added, "The majority of mankind are colored. The farthest portions of the earth are under their feet, and the marvelous spectacle before the world today is the fear of the darker races. Not fear of their retrogression, but fear of their advance."

It is in conjunction with this sense of service and of sacrifice that one is to understand DuBois' famous essay on the talented tenth, first published in 1903. There still adheres to that something of the attitude of a settlement worker. It was under the auspices of a settlement house as well as the University of Pennsylvania that DuBois had produced in 1899 his great book, *The Philadelphia Negro*. That is, there adheres to this great 1903 essay, *The Talented Tenth*, the idea of lifting up the mass. But whatever the limitations of this essay, which may be discerned now with the hind-sight of three-quarters of a century, it was not elitist in the sense of remoteness from the masses, the withdrawing from them. On the contrary, his whole purpose was that of service to them, albeit still from outside.

By 1907 DuBois encompassed in his view of work, service and sacrifice not only his own people, and not only the colored people, but also all working people. For he then writes, "The cause of labor is the cause of the colored masses, and the cause of those masses is the cause of labor." By 1911 he joined the Socialist Party. True, he remained a member only one year, but this was at least as much the doing of the party as of DuBois. In any case, Dr. DuBois considered himself a socialist from about 1907 until his death. His definition of socialism changed through the years but his basic commitment to the emancipation of working people and his sense of the irrationality of capitalism and the bestiality of imperialism not only never left him but grew as the decades passed and as both the irrationality and the bestiality intensified. The culmination came with his joining the Communist Party of the United States in 1961.

In his essay written in Rayford Logan's splendid book, *What the Negro Wants*, 1944, DuBois concluded this way: "The hope of civilization lies not in exclusion, but of inclusion of all human elements. We find the richness of humanity not in the social register but in the city directory, not in great aristocracy's chosen people in superior races but in throngs of disinherited and underfed people; not the lifting of the lowly but the unchaining of the unawakened mighty will reveal the possibilities of genius. gift and miracle in mountainous treasure trove which hitherto civilization has scarcely touched and yet boasted blantly and even glorified in its poverty. . . . In worldwide equality of human development is the answer to every meticulous taste and each rare personality."

DuBois' work and service and sacrifice was moved by a love for his people and a passionate hatred of their oppressors. This passion in DuBois is the secret of his vast accomplishments and of his life. Many missed this passion, but missing this means misunderstanding. One might well miss it. DuBois' manner was more courtly than warm; DuBois was not the kind of person who slapped others on the back and certainly not the kind of person one slapped on the back himself. So far as I know, in his adult years only his wife of 50 years and Mary Church Teller, who was his senior, ever called him Will.

The exterior of formality was part of DuBois' armor, just as his sartorial care, his precise grooming, his promptness, and the manifest dislike he had for wasting time. He lived under fire for decades. This did not destroy him but tempered him. And part of this tempering was a very conscious and necessary kind of restraint. He relaxed of course; there was no more delightful companion than DuBois if the company were small and congenial. He carefully watched his own health. He never failed to take at least a two-week vacation he spent walking, fishing and hoping not to catch any fish, and reading detective stories. He ate quite slowly and wisely, slept eight hours a day, smoked (Benson and Hedges Gold-Tipped) only three cigarettes a day, one after each meal and then quite deliberately as part of the enjoyment of the meal. Ever since his mother had warned him to stay out of saloons DuBois avoided hard liquor, but he dearly loved good wine and his student days in Germany gave him a taste for fine beer. Certain things he relished. Among them were music, poetry, the circus. At a seventi-



eth birthday celebration DuBois said of himself, "I am especially glad of the divine gift of laughter. It has made the world human and loving despite all its pain and wrong. I am glad that the partial Puritanism of my upbringing [he means New England] has never made me afraid of life. Now I have lived completely, testing every normal appetite. Feasting on sunset, sea, and hill, I have seen the face of beauty, from the Grand Canyon to Capri to Lake Baikal, from the African Bush to Venus de Milo. I am proud of a straightforward clearness of reason, I suppose a gift of the gods but also to no little degree due to scientific training and discipline. By means of this I have met life face to face. I have loved a good fight and above all I have done the work which I wanted to do and not merely that which somebody paid me to do."

As to DuBois' passion, witness the tenderness of his love for Josie in his immortal *Souls of Black Folk*; the depths of his anguish at the passing of their firstborn, of their son; the intensity of his hatred for those who attempted what he called "the damnation of women." No one has ever expressed with greater force hatred of the oppressor, not even Mr. Eldridge Cleaver before he became a born-again Christian.

Shall we sample a little of this part of DuBois? "Does not this justice of hell stink in your nostrils, oh God? How long shall the mounting flood of innocent blood roar in Thine ears and pound in our hearts for vengeance? Pile the pale frenzy of blood-crazed brutes who do such deeds high on Thine Altar and burn it in Hell forever and forever."

As for his great essay, *The Burden of Black Women*, DuBois writes of, "The white world's vermin and filth, all the dirt of London, all the scum of New York, valiant spoilers of women, conquerors of unarmed men, shameless breeders of bastards drunk with the greed of gold. . . ." Can't you

PACIFIC NORTHWEST BELL SALUTES TWO BLACK

INVENTORS



GRANVILLE T. WOODS
1856-1910
INVENTOR



LEWIS HOWARD LATIMER
1848-1928
DRAFTSMAN, ENGINEER

Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison dominated the age of electricity in the late 1800's, but others played important roles.

Lewis Howard Latimer and Granville T. Woods, who produced key inventions, had two things in common. They both contributed to telephone and electricity and they were Black.

LATIMER was born in 1848. He left home at sixteen to join the Navy and after serving in the Civil War, returned to Boston to become a draftsman.

Alexander Graham Bell hired Latimer in 1876 to make the patent drawings for the first telephone.

After joining the United States Electric Lighting Company in 1880, Latimer invented a carbon filament for an incandescent lamp. As a member of Edison's engineering staff he supervised the installation of the electric light in New York, Philadelphia, Montreal and London.

Later in life Latimer produced one of his first books, explaining the principle of the electric light and published a volume of his poetry when he retired. He died at the age of eighty.

WOODS who was born in Columbus, Ohio in 1856, was a prolific inventor. He learned through practical experience rather than from books. He quit

school at ten and improved his mechanical skills by working in a machine shop and on a railroad.

He was 28 when he patented his first invention: a furnace and a boiler to produce steam heat. In the same year he invented a telephone transmitter which he sold to Bell.

Woods' 150 patented inventions included an incubator, an electrical relay switch, a regulator for electric motors, and a safety cut-out switch to avoid overloading electrical circuits.

One of his last inventions was a telegraph system for use between moving trains.



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