

We do not merely protest: we make renewed demands for freedom

hear the immortal words of Claude McKay's lines from these lines written by DuBois eight years before McKay's *If We Must Die*. This is DuBois, 1911: "Let every black American gird up his loins, a great day is coming. We have crawled and pleaded for justice and we have cheerfully spat upon and murdered and burned. We will not endure it forever. If we are to die, in God's name let us perish like men and not like bales of hay."

You will understand then that when one speaks of DuBois and of his approach to life and his zest for life, one is speaking of a fighter, of an agitator. Indeed, here is DuBois writing on agitation, again in 1911: "Some good friends of our cause we represent fear agitation. Such honest critics mistake the function of agitation. A toothache is agitation; is a toothache a good thing? No. But is it therefore useless? No. It is useful because it tells the body of decay. Without it the body would suffer unknowingly. It would think all is well when lo, danger lurks." Three years later he wrote that basic to human progress is the radical, the disturber, the agitator, the organizer. These are the ones he then wrote of and always believed. These are the ones who, "seeing the disinherited and the damned can never sit still and silent; on the contrary, these are the men and women who go down in the blood and dust of battle. They say ugly things to an ugly world. They spew the lukewarm fence straddlers out of their mouth like God of old. They cry aloud and spare not. They shout from the housetops and they make this world so damned uncomfortable with its nasty burden of evil that it tries to get good and does sometimes get a little bit better."

To make a life, one must face it. One needs courage no matter who one may be. But if the person is black and lives in the United States and is to retain sanity and effectiveness, courage is vital. This is true now, and God knows it was true fifty and thirty years ago. It's true now here in the North and it certainly was true then in the North and in the South. And if one is a black man and a poet, and a black militant poet and lives and writes and agitates and organizes while in the South, one surely needs courage. In addition, a pistol on one's person and a shotgun in one's home will not do any harm either and DuBois had both. As for courage, let one example suffice.

It is 1951 and Washington is in the lowest depths of McCarthyism. As part of the vicious insanity, Dr. DuBois has been indicted as, quoting the indictment, "an unregistered foreign agent" because he headed the Peace Information Center through which over 2 million signatures to the Stockholm Peace Pledge against the A-bomb were obtained in this country despite terror and Hitler-like propaganda. Of course if Thomas Jefferson and Frederick Douglass could be called "foreign agents" in their day as they were, why not DuBois? In 1951, unlike Jefferson and Douglas, there was an actual indictment and DuBois was mugged, fingerprinted and even handcuffed, and put on trial. In the course of that trial, when world public opinion let the chauvinist government of the United States have some inkling of who it was they were trying and when the Prime Minister of India, Nehru, DuBois' friend, sent a cable to the United States, to Mr. Eisenhower, asking if everybody in Washington had gone quite berserk and crazy; when the damned chauvinist government had some idea of who they had arrested, other than an old black man, they came to the conclusion that they had better offer a deal. So the government indicated to DuBois' attorneys that if he, at 83 years old, would plead what the lawyers call "no defense," he would be given a suspended sentence and not go to prison.

On this matter Dr. DuBois wrote to one of his attorneys, a black attorney, James A. Cobb, April 10, 1951, "I want to make clear to you my own attitude after careful thought and deliberation. I regard this case as a

great opportunity to communicate the right of free speech and advocacy of peace. On this line I want the case fought and under no circumstances will I curry favor or ask leniency of this government. If that involves declaring that I ever acted as an agent for any foreign person, organization or state I will prefer to rot in jail than utter that lie and I have refused too many offers to sell out to be bribed now in my old age." And he closed with this characteristic paragraph which will give a hint of his humor and his sweetness: "I know you will respect my decision and I put it down in plain words to be sure it is understood. I was always cranky, as you know, and this grows with the years. At the same time, I am not really hankering for jail and want your best efforts to keep me out."

I bespeak to you his legacy. Speaking for the Niagra movement, which he founded, speaking for it in 1906 he warned, "No promise of money or notoriety, no promise of wealth or fame is worth the surrender of a people's manhood or the loss of a person's self-respect. . . . On this rock we have planted our banners, we will never give up though the trump of doom finds us still fighting. . . . We appeal to the young men and women of this nation, to those whose nostrils are yet befouled by greed, snobbery and racial narrowness. . . . Courage, brothers and sisters, the battle for humanity is not lost or losing. The morning breaks over bloodstained hills. We must not falter and we may not shrink." That was 1906.

Here is 1938. "Life has its pain and evil, the disappointments, but in healthful length of days there is triumphal fullness of experience, joy, and the most interesting of continued stories unfold. Not eternity but time is for the living."

He had his moments of despair. Even he had such moments; he was human. With this in his *Litany at Atlanta*, written on a train in 1906 when he got news of the terrible pogrom of that year, when a crazed mob, assisted by the police, was rampaging through the ghetto where his wife and little girl, Yolanda, lived. And he did not know what had become of them and so he wrote *Litany at Atlanta*, one of the great poems in the English language. There is in this poem a note of despair. "North is greed and South is blood. Within the coward and without the liar. Whither? To death."

But they were very fleeting moments. To the end he held fast to his rock. In his last message which characteristically he drafted years before his death and sealed it in an envelope and told his wife, his second wife—Shirley Graham DuBois—"My dear, when I am being buried I ask you to read this message at the grave," which she did: "One thing alone I charge you. As you live, believe in life. Always human beings will live and progress to greater, broader and fuller life. The only possible death is to lose belief in that truth simply because the great end comes slowly, because time is long."

"All of us need," he said in 1904, "the uplifting presence of morning on the hills, the whistle of birds in the treetops of the dawn, the flair of the flaming sword in the hands of that dread angel who keeps the way of life."

DuBois was as learned as one could become in a formal sense, with years of concentrated study at Fisk, at Harvard and Berlin. He taught German, Greek and Latin, and sociology, history and economics. He had studied with Albert Bushnell Hart, with William James, George Santayana, Max Faber, Josiah Royce, and George Chaney. He had dined with counts and dukes, wined with heads of state and even been appointed a Minister Prime Potentiary by the President of the United States, Mr. Coolidge, in 1924. Still he was not corrupted and still he persevered. Harvard published his dissertation in 1896 but never thought of adding him to its faculty; the University of Pennsylvania published his massive pioneering effort in urban sociology, what we now call urban sociology, in 1899 but never thought of adding him to its faculty. In Atlanta he was forbidden use of its main library, filled with his own books. Working on his magnum opus, *Black Reconstruction*, first published in 1935 and revolutionizing the understanding of United



States history, he apologized in his book, in its introduction, for possible research failures since the archive depositories of half a dozen states prohibited his entry. In Nashville a white woman slapped him full in the face and hurled obscenities at him. A kind of pogrom entered his home and terrorized his wife and daughter and his wife was never the same thereafter. When he was 83 years old the United States government arrested him as a foreign agent and mugged him and fingerprinted him and put manacles upon his wrists.

A youngster of 22, at the Harvard commencement of 1890, a black student, delivering the speech for the student body of Harvard in 1890, facing an audience including the wife of a former president of the United States, the governor of Massachusetts, the Episcopal Bishop of New York, let alone the assembled dignitaries of his university, facing an audience of white faced in 1890—twenty-two years of age, he had ten minutes to speak. He chose as his topic "Jefferson Davis as a Representative of Civilization." And Jefferson Davis was then dead only eleven years. "He and his civilization represented," said the black young man, "the cool logic of the

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