

EDITORIAL

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P E R S P E C T I V E S

Showing My Race: Politically Incorrect Essays On Identity

By Prof. McKinley Burt

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Martin Luther King Jr. We quote a man from the ranks of those whose vision and impact were a vital force in the world, even, before they were born - if you can conceive that. Gifted with a formidable and vigorous capacity for pressing the cause of mankind, leaders like Dr. King have, more often than not, been labeled as prophets or charismatic precursors of change. But, also, they have been called "troublemakers," and have paid the ultimate price for having dared to address the collective conscience of mankind.

How often have I heard it asked, "Wouldn't it seem that there could be no less controversial message than a universal call (from the mountain top) for equal rights, justice,

and acceptance for 'all of God's children'?" right! And through the ages, nothing seems more certain than such a spiritual message will assure the prophet become a martyr.

Returning to the pages of "Showing My Color" by Clarence Page, the African American columnist whose 'up front' book on race was cited here last week, I consider several choice quotes to relate in particular to those whose stance is not supportive of "challenge and controversy." (Harper Collins, 1996)

We have it from Deborah Tannen, a specialist in gender communications gaps. "The biggest Tragedy that has happened between the races since the 1960's is our loss of honest conversation across racial lines. In contrast to the 1990's, when every crackpot you hear on a call-in

radio show talks as if he or she has a lock on the answers, we seemed in the 1960's to be much more concerned with the questions," (P.17)

Is that ever true as we seem to have more folks than ever tripping a light over the eloquent but naive rhetoric of, "our color-blind democracy" and "we must do more to appreciate our diversity- we're like the rainbow." That'll get you through the personnel agency, or past the registrar or pay a justice system- induced hospital bill the size of Rodney King's. Try it.

All of those who would pursue that pitiful little query of Rodney King- "Why can't we all just get along?" - could very well avoid the celebration of Dr. King's birthday or honors bestowed upon Rosa Parks. Much too controversial.

But we need not go so far afield to look for men (or women) to whom we may apply that "ultimate measure... not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." We can assess our condition, actions, and rhetoric right here in Northeast and North, can't we?

Certainly, there are a multitude of controversial subjects that are not being explored by leaders or eager throngs. We speak of areas of education, real estate ownership and development patterns. I, of all people, can attest to a pervasive dichotomy in our readership as I field calls across generations and from a spectrum of backgrounds; parents, students, professionals, housepersons, employers, craftsmen, officials, racists and liberals.

If some thought I have been very controversial at times, it is because the truth has always been of that nature. Sit back and relax for the 1999 trip - if you can!



BY PROFESSOR MCKINLEY BURT

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Sincerely
Ms. Tracie Sharp
Executive Director

CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL REMEMBERING HEROES

By Bernice Powell Jackson

A few weeks ago I was listening to Talk of the Nation on National Public Radio and they were talking about heroes. Many of the people who called in were lamenting that there are so few heroes today or that our heroes are often found to be flawed. Well, all human beings are less than perfect but at this time of celebrating one American hero, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I am reminded that I have been privileged to know and work with some real heroes in my lifetime. One of them we lost in the past few days. Like Dr. King he was an important part of the struggle of African Americans to be free. But, alas, his name is not as well known. But he was a hero just the same. His name was Charles Earl Cobb, Sr.

Dr. Cobb was the first Executive Director of the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ, the position which I now hold. But that title only begins to tell the story of Charles Cobb. Born in Durham, North Carolina, he saw his parents, particularly his mother, fight for justice as a small child. Indeed, he often told how she fought Duke University as it bought up the land of the black folks nearby when it was expanding. He attended North Carolina College for Negroes (now North Carolina Central I believe) and then Howard University Divinity School and Boston University School of Theology.

He pastored small churches in Kentucky and Massachusetts and then went to St. John's Congregational in Springfield, MA in the 1950's. There he took on the police department because of its treatment of black citizens and the education department because of its treatment of black children and finally challenged the power structure by running for mayor himself. He lost that race but the black community won by virtue of its new-found political clout and its newly-organized people.

Indeed, strategic political skills and organizational capabilities were two of the gifts that Charles Cobb used on behalf of his people throughout his life. Not long after he ran for mayor, he was called to the position which he held for 20 years at the Commission for Racial Justice. There he confronted the churches, particularly the United Church of Christ, with their participation in racism and challenged them to work to end all forms of injustice. He challenged the criminal justice system's inequities and promoted programs for the African American family. He started a scholarship fund which resulted in thousands of young black people receiving a college education. The Commission for Racial Justice hired community organizers who worked in communities across the country, helping people to challenge all kinds of racism.

One of these organizers was a young man in North Carolina, Benjamin Chavis, who along with nine others was falsely accused of setting fire to a store in Wilmington. They became the Wilmington Ten, recognized by Amnesty International as political prisoners.

Charles Cobb stood by these young people, urging the church to provide bail for them and then pressing for their appeals, which finally won them an acquittal.

Indeed, Charles Cobb's lifetime was spent leading the fight for racial justice himself and then supporting others as they challenged the systems of inequity. Whether it was supporting young people in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) or supporting communities of color in the earliest days of discovery that toxic wastes were being dumped in our communities across the nation, Dr. Cobb was a fearless advocate and supporter of justice. When Springfield police challenged the right of Black Muslims to sell their newspapers on the streets of that city, he challenged the city and when William F. Buckley criticized Vernon Jordan's leadership at the National Urban League, Dr. Cobb took him on as well.

At his funeral Rev. Douglas Moore, the well-known D.C. activist, called Dr. Cobb "Our Great Ancestor," an appropriate title of respect. Charles Cobb studied at Boston University, as did Dr. King. And while Dr. King's name was well-known around the world for his leadership in the civil rights struggle, Dr. Cobb's name was not as well known, but his contributions were many. His legacy is in the hundreds of young people who were infused with his spirit of fearlessness and his commitment to justice. A freedom fighter, a challenger of structures of injustice, a man of God, Charles Earl Cobb, Sr. was one of my heroes. He is already missed

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