

Looking Back Looking Around Looking Ahead!

Looking Back

The month of May each year is the month that I look back to the Brown versus Board of Education decision that was passed in May of 1954. I was twelve years old and anxiously looking forward to turning thirteen that September. The decision meant nothing to me at first because I lived in Philadelphia. Living in Philadelphia meant that I had attended an integrated elementary school, was attending an integrated junior high school and would be attending an integrated high school.

Because my grandparents lived in Virginia, however, I understood clearly the segregation problem in the South. The Supreme Court decision about the desegregation of public schools, however, made no day-to-day difference in my twelve-year-old world in Philadelphia. I did not understand, therefore, what was really at stake, what was being won and what was being lost in that momentous decision made by the Supreme Court in May of 1954.

Looking back, however, I have come to learn some very painful lessons about that momentous decision. The first lesson I learned was that desegregation is not the same as integration.

Desegregation meant that African American children could no longer be denied the right to go to schools that were “For Whites Only.” Desegregation did not mean that white children would now come to Black schools and learn our story, our history, our heritage, our legacy, our beauty and our strength!



By Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.

As a matter of fact, across the years that I have been teaching graduate school (since 1975), I have tried to get my students to understand that one of the tragedies about the whole “integration era” was that African Americans did not understand

what integration meant. Integration means the coming together of equals to the table.

Whites, in a culture of white supremacy, however, did not view us as equals and still do not view us as equals; so nothing from our Black or African experience was ever allowed at the table of “integration,” much less invited or asked to be brought to the table.

Looking back, I saw very early on that many African Americans meant assimilation and acculturation when they used the word “integration.” To integrate, however, does not mean to assimilate or to acculturate!

Looking back, moreover, I learned the difference between desegregation which was a legal issue (a political issue) and equality which is a spiritual and moral issue. Desegregation had to do with legal access. Giving African American citizens access to quality education, to healthcare, to public facilities, to equal protection under the law was one thing.

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That access, incidentally, is still being blocked. It is being blocked very sophisticatedly, both in the South and in the North (up South!), with attacks upon affirmative action, with the “conservative” agenda and with policies put in

place by the Republican Party, which is the Party for the “have mores.”

Having legal access to schools and public accommodations, however, does not touch the deeper moral “American” problem, which is white supremacy! I owe much of my insights on this issue to Lewis Baldwin.

Dr. Lewis Baldwin, a professor of African American studies at Vanderbilt University, points out a very important truth in his analysis of George Fredrickson’s monumental work in comparative history. Fredrickson compares the Apartheid in South Africa with the segregation here in the United States of America. Fredrickson’s years of teaching at Northwestern produced two very important works that deal with the comparisons between the Apartheid of South Africa and the “Jim Crow” in America.

What Dr. Baldwin (a student of Fredrickson’s) does is point out the importance of Fredrickson’s insights. Dr. Fredrickson helps us to see that the real nature of the beast has to do with white supremacy. Baldwin prefers the term white supremacy over “racism” because it is far more accurate in describing what took place in South Africa and what still takes place in South Africa. It is also a term which puts its finger on the pulse of the reality of American thought and American practice!

“Racism,” in Baldwin’s opinion, is too nebulous a term. It is slippery and has many different meanings for many different people. I have even heard misguided (and ignorant) pundits like Rush Limbaugh and Tom DeLay calling Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney and other Black people racists. I have heard the term “Black racism” and I have also heard the term “reverse racism.”

The misuse of that term ignores the fact that Africans do not control the military, the police, the legal structure or any of the means to enforce their race prejudice. To try to get misinformed whites and blacks to understand that fact is a waste of time.

You end up trying to make a blind man see something that he is physically and biologically unable to do. The use of the term “racism,” therefore, makes one enter into an exercise in futility and causes you to come away from that discussion frustrated, angry and wanting to do like Langston Hughes’ Jess B. Semple and smash something!

The term “white supremacy,” however, is much more accurate. White supremacy undergirds the thought, the

ideology, the theology, the sociology, the legal structure, the educational system, the healthcare system, and the entire **reality** of the United States of America and South Africa!

Twelve years after Nelson Mandela is out of prison and Black South Africans control the legal structure in that country; yet, white supremacy is still in charge. It is “living large and in charge!”

Black Africans do not control the economic systems, the military or have control over the resources (the diamonds, the oil and the natural resources that were stolen by the whites who took over South Africa), and until that changes, white supremacy will still be in charge!

White supremacy is not a legal problem. It is a spiritual problem, a psychological problem and a moral problem.

White supremacy controls the economic system in America, the healthcare system in America and the educational system in America. Hurricane Katrina has pulled the blinders off of all Americans and shown us what white supremacy means at its ugly core and what it has done to the fabric of these “still-yet-to-be-United States” (to use Maya Angelou’s term). That is what I see when looking back during the month of May.

Looking Around

Educating our children to the reality of white supremacy becomes crucial for African Americans and for all Americans. Educating our children is a term that I use pointedly. I do not mean “training” our children. That is a part of our problem now.

We have trained our children and not educated them! I think we need to train our children in every discipline in

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order that they might become more rounded and fully productive citizens in this culture and in this country. What we need to do, however, is go beyond training and educate our children!

We need to educate our children to the reality of white supremacy. We need to educate our children as to the difference between desegregation and equality, the difference between the legal issues and the spiritual issues; and the difference between access in this country as opposed to acceptance in this country!

We need to educate our children about the white supremacist's foundations of the educational system, the educational philosophy and the very curricula that immerses them in a culture of white supremacy from kindergarten through graduate school! We need to educate our children how to navigate the dangerous waters that lie ahead of them in this 21st century.

In navigating the waters, our children need to be aware of the shark-infested waters and the other predators that live in those waters.

Hurricane Katrina gave us some important images that are analogous to the future that our children have to learn how to navigate. When the levees in Louisiana broke alligators, crocodiles and piranha swam freely through what used to be the streets of New Orleans. That is an analogy that we need to drum into the heads of our African American children (and indeed, all children!).

In the flood waters of white supremacy that our children have to negotiate economically, educationally, culturally, socially and spiritually, there are not only sharks in those waters, there are also crocodiles, alligators and piranha!

The policies, with which we live now and against which our children will have to struggle in order to bring about "the beloved community," are policies shaped by predators. Jesus taught us that white supremacy – or the thinking that any one race is superior to any other race – is against the Will of God, who only created one race, the human race!

Looking Ahead

I look back during the month of May to assess the powerful ramifications of the Brown versus Board of Education decision and our misunderstanding of what the full import of that decision meant. I look around to assess where it is we are now in terms of the work that is cut out ahead of us as we educate our children; and I look forward with hope.

We are on the verge of launching our African-centered Christian school. The dream of that school, which we articulated in 1979, was built on hope. That hope still lives. That school has to have at its core an understanding and assessment of white supremacy as we deconstruct that reality to help our children become all that God created them to be when God made them in God's own image.

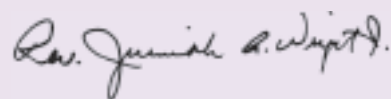
We teach with hope. It is the same hope which would not let Adam Clayton Powell, Denmark Vesey, Alexander Crummel, Harriet Tubman or Septima Clark give up. It is the same hope which motivated Martin King, Rosa Parks, Samuel DeWitt Proctor, Coretta Scott King, Harry Belafonte and Mary Henderson Wright. I look forward with hope.

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Our hope is not built on faith-based dollars, empty liberal promises or veiled hate-filled preachments of the so-called conservatives. Our hope is built on Him who came in the flesh to set us free.

We lay a foundation, deconstructing the household of white supremacy with tools that are not the master's tools. We lay that foundation with hope. We deconstruct the vicious and demonic ideology of white supremacy with hope. Our hope is not built on faith-based dollars, empty liberal promises or veiled hate-filled preachments of the so-called conservatives. Our hope is built on Him who came in the flesh to set us free.

I look forward with hope, and I invite you to look forward with me as we build a future where white supremacy is a "thing of the past."



Pastor Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr