

# ST. LUKE'S INN OF COURT INTERNATIONAL

presents

“AN AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY REUNION SPEECH”

To  
The Woods Family<sup>1</sup>

By

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The Black Family Reunion is the third-most important institution behind the Black Family and the Black Church to the African American community. This speech places the Black family at the heart of the American labor problem in the United States. It is the litmus test whereby all other endeavors—political, economic, social—must be measured. The speaker clearly believes that without the amelioration of Black family, there can be no progress in Black America. This is not a transcript of the actual speech itself. However, there are only minor variations between the actual speech that was presented and this essay. What follows below is a reprint of the original written design of the speech as it was subsequently delivered orally with only slight variations.

I am very happy to be here tonight. When cousin Stephanie (Hamilton) asked me to give a speech on African American history, I was at first honored by the invitation but then, suddenly, I was quite overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. As you are aware, African American history spans more than 500 years on the North American continent. And so I faced the challenge of trying to tailor a speech on African American history that would be appropriate for a family reunion setting.

First, let me give my disclaimer and say that I am not a doctor of philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> Ocala, Florida, June 14, 2009

in history. Much of what I know about African American history has come from books that I have read on my own time. Despite having attended a historically black university, I don't recall ever taking any classes that were titled "black history." On the other hand, I fell in love with black history "way in the midnight hour," as I was riding a Greyhound bus from Baltimore to Syracuse, New York. I was twenty years old then, and that was, in fact, twenty years ago. But I remember it like it was just yesterday; I must have felt like the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus, as I was reading a little book by W.E.B. Du Bois called *The Souls of Black Folk*, and to this day I cannot remember how that little book fell into my lap. But this book changed my life. Du Bois spoke some profound truths that moved my conscience; he said, for instance, that the Negro had a "two-ness"; that he had two thoughts and two un-reconciled strivings whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Any way, as I began to tackle the task of preparing a presentation for this family reunion setting, it dawned upon me that *African American history is all about the African American family.*

In fact, the Black Family is the Key to Black History.

The ultimate measure of the spiritual, social, economic and political condition of the African American community is the Black Family.

Aside from the Bible, I think that the best evidence of what I would like to convey to you tonight, on the centrality and importance of the Black Family in history, it is Alex Haley's masterpiece about his family heritage--- a book titled *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, which became an international best-seller, with a spin-off TV series that attracted over 80 million viewers.

"Roots" is Black History to the core.

What made it so powerful was that it was not the history of simply famous Black personalities and Black public officials. But rather it was the history of the rank-and-file African American. And its central focus was on the status of the Black family.

Dr. Benjamin Quarles, former distinguished professor of history, wrote in *The Negro in the Making of America* that,

Alex Haley's autobiographical novel focused on his ancestor, African-

born Kunta Kinte, and his descendants in the United States, describing the manner in which they proved themselves capable of coping with the harshest adversity, of making resourceful and self-respecting adjustments to racial discrimination. From one generation to another the family that emerges from Haley's pages was a stable, two-parent household, characterized by binding marriages, a respect for the elders, a tenacious family bond, and a sense of mission.

Tonight, I want the Woods Family to think about these six major elements of the strong African and African American family that Alex Haley discovered: (1) a sense of mission; (2) a tenacious family bond; (3) respect for elders; (4) binding marriages; and (5) stable, two-parent households-- being passed down from one generation to another despite tremendous odds.

I submit to you tonight that all of the other black accomplishments, including the life stories of Rosa Parks and Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Marcus Garvey and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Booker T. Washington and so on without number--- these historical accomplishments mean very little if, at the end of the day, they do not translate into that rich tradition which Alex Haley discovered, and that is the edification of the Black family.

Today, in the year 2009, as we complete the first decade of this twenty-first century-- in what will go down in history as the year when the first African American took the oath of office as President of the United States-- we who are the sons and daughters of those who were captured in Africa and brought to America's shores in chains, are now called upon to ask ourselves, both soberly and honestly this question: *"Has the long nightmare of racial subordination in America finally come to an end?"*

What is more, many white political pundits, in less than twenty-four hours after President Obama's historic election, started posing the following questions quite sharply:

1. *"Hasn't Dr. King's Dream finally become a reality, now that an African American has been elected the President of the United States?"*
2. *"Isn't it now high-time for Black people to stop clamoring for race-based initiatives such as affirmative action and civil rights?"*
3. *"Isn't it now high-time for black people to move with jet-like speed into the twenty-first century toward a race-neutral world-view-- and stop asking the nation for Civil Rights and reparations for slavery?"*

And adding to this unceasing questioning from many in the white community, many in the African American community are more and more beginning to ask themselves a more fundamental question, and that is: *“Should African Americans stop thinking in terms of race?”*

Moreover, President Obama’s mixed-race heritage seems to reveal a higher truth about who we really are as an American people. Whites and blacks and Native Americans have mixed their blood with one another for over 500 years on this great continent. Doesn’t this further reveal that from one blood God created all nations?

My first response to these questions is simply this: *“Know your history.”*

And my second response to these questions is: *“Know the times in which you now live.”*

In other words, know and understand the history of the African American family; and know and understand the current socioeconomic conditions in which the African American family today exists.

Renowned historian and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois reminds us that “The primary reason for the presence of the black man in America was, of course, his labor....” African labor was imported to America to clear the fields, to harvest crops, to perform domestic service, and to handle America’s heavy materials. Fear of slave insurrections led to harsh slave laws throughout the American colonies and, later, throughout the United States during the antebellum period. And as W.E.B. Du Bois observed: “The slave codes greatly weakened the family ties and largely destroyed the family as a center of government and economic organization.” Hence, from the very beginning of the African’s survival in America, his position in society was strictly controlled by laws and customs, and he was relegated to the very bottom of the social order as an unskilled laborer. He was a source of wealth; and yet he shared in none of the wealth which he produced. And that had a negative impact on the African American family.

In a nutshell, there were four broad categories or classes of African Americans during the slavery era:

First, there was the unskilled laborer. These were the field hands, the longshoremen, the mine workers, etc.-- or what some historians and sociologists

have referred to as “the field Negro.”

Second, there were the domestic and house servants. These were the aristocrats among the slaves. Some of them could read and write. Many of them were light-skinned mulattoes, quadroons, and the like-- or what some historians and sociologists have referred to as “the house Negro.”

Third, there was the skilled laborer. These were the black-smiths, carpenters, sailors, sail makers, bakers, taners, candle makers, caulkers, cabinet and furniture makers, shoemakers, masons, millers, millwrights, tailors, etc.-- in other words, these were the highly-skilled slaves. Historian Benjamin Quarles tells us that “[r]anking not much below the house slave in the plantation hierarchy was the skilled craftsman. . . . Chosen from among others because of their intelligence and manual dexterity, the slave artisans brought higher prices than their fellows. They received better treatment and were likely to be less subservient: ‘Whenever a slave is made a mechanic,’ said James H. Hammond, ‘he is more than half freed.’”

Fourth, there were the free African Americans. These were typically unskilled small farmers, ministers, or independent unskilled workers. They were most often located in cities such as Baltimore, New Orleans, and Charleston. Free African Americans were segregated and most were denied the right to vote, the right to serve on juries, the right to hold public office, to testify in court against a white person, and many other civil and political rights.

From 1619, the year when the first 20 African Americans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, up through 1865, the year when the American Civil War ended-- for nearly 240 years, this was the basic social structure that shaped and shackled the African American family. And in many respects this social structure sowed the seeds of class conflict between lighter-skinned blacks and darker-skinned blacks and between the educated and more affluent African Americans and the more economically disadvantaged African Americans, following the Civil War.

Of the four classes or categories of African Americans during slavery, the white North and the non-slave holding white South feared the most was the *skilled African American slave*, because the skilled African American slave posed an economic threat and potentially could drive white workers out of the labor market.

W.E.B. Du Bois, in his 1924 classic, *The Gift of Black Folk*, stated: “[T]here had grown up a huge class of Negro servants and laborers who were distributed both north and south. These laborers in particular came into competition with the

white laborer and especially the new immigrants. This and other economic causes led to riots in Philadelphia, New York, and Cincinnati, and a growing conviction on the part of [the] newly enfranchised white workingmen that one great obstacle in America was slave labor, together with the necessarily low status of the Freedmen. These economic reasons overthrew slavery.”

And so, the Civil War was fought from 1861 to 1865 not to free the African American slaves but, rather, the Civil War was fought to free white American small farmers, artisans and workers from the competition from both skilled and unskilled African American slave labor.

The type of life where a poor white man could teach himself to read and to rise to the level of a prominent lawyer and politician-- as was exemplified by the life of Abraham Lincoln-- could not have been possible in a slave state. There were two economic systems in competition with each other. Abraham Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech in 1858, in which he said that this nation could not remain half slave and half free, was due to the fact that the institution of slavery, and the spread of slavery, was bound to drive the non-slave holding white workers into destitution and poverty. And for that reason, the white North hated slavery. But this does not mean that white northerners loved freedom or respected the humanity of African Americans. Rather, the white North hated slavery because of the competition from African American labor, which lowered their living standards. For this reason, when the Civil War ended, African American freedman, both the skilled and unskilled, encountered all types of racist resistance in labor markets in the North as well as in the South.

From 1865 to about 1970-- for more than 100 years after slavery, the African American family was crippled by the fact that African American men-- even those with college degrees-- could only find menial, low-paying work. Most black women worked as domestic helpers and as nursing aids. Just to give you an idea of how difficult things were during the 105-year period between 1865 and 1970:

\* In 1940, about 80 percent of the black male work force had only elementary schooling; only 1 in 14 black men had graduated from high school; and only 1 in 100 black men had received a college degree.

\* In 1960, fully 80 percent of the black male workforce had not completed high school and less than 3 percent of all black male workers had a college degree.

James Weldon Johnson, who wrote the Negro National Anthem in 1899, and



who was also a writer, composer, lawyer, and a former executive director of the NAACP, quite vividly described the attitude of white employers and white workers in his autobiography, *Along This Way*. Mr. Johnson recalled a very interesting conversation taking place among a group of white working-class passengers aboard a ship during his return home from Cuba:

One expression which I heard at least a hundred times was, 'Never let a nigger pick up a tool.' 'Never let a nigger pick up a tool.' 'Never let a nigger pick up a tool.'

This expression echoed in my mind for a long time, and the answer to it was, I knew, that in the practical processes of dealing with the race question there is nothing more fundamental and vital than the lowering and sweeping away of economic and industrial barriers against the Negro. For no condition under which he struggles oppresses the Negro more than the refusal of a fair and equal chance to earn a living-- to say nothing of earning it in ways in which he is able to prove himself well fitted. It is at once unfair, unreasonable, and cruel to declare to the Negro that, when he has grown to the stature of a full American citizen, he will be acknowledged as such, and at the same time to deny the basic means of accomplishing the very thing demanded. And of this unfairness, this unreasonableness, this cruelty, the American people as a whole are guilty. **When economic and industrial avenues are open to the Negro, many of the most perplexing phases of the race question will automatically disappear.**

The expression which James Weldon Johnson heard over and over again was:

*"Never Let a Nigger Pick Up a Tool!,*"  
*"Never Let a Nigger Pick Up a Tool!"*  
*"Never Let a Nigger Pick Up a Tool!"*  
*"Never Let a Nigger Pick Up a Tool!"*

This slogan was sadly at the heart of African American history fully from 1865 to about 1970.

But what was the proverbial or symbolic meaning of "*Never Let a Nigger Pick Up a Tool?*" It meant simply this: never let an African American get a quality education or a

descent or high-paying job.

The 1970s is a benchmark decade in African American history. This was the decade following the Civil Rights movement and the radical 1960s. This was the first decade that saw racial integration and affirmative action fully implemented. And this was the decade in which the U.S. Supreme Court really started to enforce the Civil Rights Acts on a massive scale.

But by the 1970s, globalization really started to emerge, and the shift from the manufacturing-oriented economy to the service-oriented economy-- with the American manufacturing base being shipped overseas to Asia, Latin America and the Islands of the Seas-- had created the social pathologies in the black community that consisted of dwindling opportunities for low-skilled and semi-skilled African American workers. The 1970s witnessed the growing preference for whites, immigrants, and females among the service sector industries, and the growing rejection of African American workers (particularly black male workers) in these service industries. The 1970s also witnessed the growing trend of absentee fatherhood in the black community, and of single-parent homes largely headed by African American women. The 1970s witnessed more and more African American children being raised in poverty, and the rise of street gangs, the drug and sex trade, and inner-city pathologies.

What is most telling about the decade of the 1970s is that starting in that decade, we began to witness the slow deterioration of the two-parent African American family, as well as the steady rise in the percentages of incarcerated African American males.

The great African American writer James Baldwin once wrote: "In our image of the Negro breathes the past we deny, not dead but living yet and powerful-- the beast in our jungle of statistics." For instance, in 1970, black two-parent families comprised 68% of all black households. By 2000, the number decreased to 48%. The number of black children being raised in a two-parent household was 59 percent in 1970, falling to 42 percent in 1980, 38 percent in 1990 and 35 percent in 2004. By 1970, less than 3 out of 10 African American babies who were born into the world were born outside of the union of marriage. By 2005, that number had increased to 7 out of 10. Today, black children are about 9 times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison. Almost half of the one million men in federal and state prison in 2000 were black. By 2000, black women comprised about half of the women in federal and state prison. Three-fourths of female prisoners are mothers; and two-thirds of these female prisoners



have children under the age of 18. By 2000, African Americans comprised about half (45 percent) of the 204,730 persons with AIDS and one-third of the deaths from AIDS. African Americans between the ages of 25-44 were four times more likely to contract AIDS than comparable-aged whites. Black females were 14 times more likely than white females to contract AIDS. And, black children, who make up about 60 percent of all children with AIDS, were 15 times more likely than white children to contract AIDS.

Now the impact of these trends on the African American family is an economic impact. According to the 2006 edition of *The Covenant With Black America*, African Americans have a median net worth of about \$6,000, compared to about \$88,000 for whites. And, although African Americans are more than 13 percent of the nation's population, their total net worth is only 1.2 percent of the total net worth of the nation. This number has not changed since the end of the Civil War in 1865.

Now, you might be wondering, "What's going on beneath all of these statistics?"

Renowned Harvard Professor and Sociologists William Julius Wilson also asked this same question. He has recently published in his 2009 book *More Than Just Race*, that: "[t]he commitment to traditional husband-wife families and the stigma associated with out-of-wedlock births, separation, and divorce have waned significantly in the United States." [This is true for whites, as well as for the Africans, Hispanics and other groups]. "As employment prospects recede, the foundation for stable relationships [among black men and black women] become weaker over time. More permanent relationships such as marriage give way to temporary liaisons that result in broken relationships, out-of-wedlock pregnancies and births, and... separation and divorce."

Further, Professor Wilson writes, "[i]nner-city black women routinely said they distrusted men and felt strongly that black men lacked dedication to their partners and children. They argued that black males are hopeless as either husbands or fathers and that more of their time is spent on the streets than at home...."

Professor Wilson wrote that "[t]he men complained that it was not easy to deal with the women's suspicions about their behavior and intentions. They also felt that material resources especially attracted women and that it was therefore difficult to find women who were supportive of partners with a low living standard."

Finally, Professor Wilson notes that “[t]hese antagonistic relationships influenced the views of both men and women about marriage.... Joblessness among black men is a significant factor in their delayed entry into marriage and in the decreasing rates of marriage after a child has been born, and this relationship has been exacerbated by sharp increases in incarceration that in turn lead to continued joblessness.”

To sum things up, what Professor Wilson concludes is that there are structural global economic changes going on in the world economy that are directly impacting the cultural values and norms in the African American community.

My beloved friends and family members, this is Black History in 2009. This is the history of our day and of our time.

I admit that we find ourselves in trying and difficult times. But there is hope. The fundamental question that we must ask ourselves is, “*What on earth are we to do?*” We can resolve to make black history right here tonight by resolving to do something. And if we take action; if we keep the faith; and if we are willing to die trying, then we will make black history in our own time.

But we will also make black history by resolving to do nothing. And 100 years from now, historians will look back upon our decision to do nothing and upon our times and they will say, “What happened to the Black Family Reunion?” They will ask, “What happened to the Extended Black Family-- that supportive network of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins?” And they will say, “Black folks used to get together for 2, 3 or 4 day week-end celebrations of the family; and they used to commemorate their rich history and their traditions; and they used to have cook-outs, dinners, and banquets; and they used to go to church together, to sing hymns and praises to God together.”

And the reply to this will be: “African Americans forgot their history, and because they forgot their history, they forgot how central God was in their lives. And because they forgot what God had done for them throughout their history, they eventually discarded God from their thoughts. And because they forgot God, they fell out of love with their own humanity; and they slowly began to lose respect for themselves, for their own genius, ability and intelligence, for their own women, men and the institution of marriage and family.”

Unfortunately, my beloved friends and family members, we can also make Black history in our time *by doing nothing!*

For I agree with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who believed that we should do something about this situation-- even if we fail trying. Dr. King said, "right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant."

For God is not dead!

On night, during an Anti-slavery meeting, Frederick Douglass had given up hope in white people, and he commented that the only hope that black people had was in their own right arms! In response, Sojourner Truth said, "Frederick, Is God dead?"

For God is not dead!

For as James Weldon Johnson so eloquently put it:  
"Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died  
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?"

"We have come, over a way that which tears has been watered  
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered  
Out of the gloomy past, till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast

"GOD of our weary years, GOD of our silent tears  
Thou Who has brought us thus far on the way  
Thou Who hast by Thy might, led us into the light  
Keep us forever in the path we pray."

No, God is not dead!

Why don't African Americans sing the Sorrow Songs with the passionate eloquence sung in the olden days? Why don't African Americans write poetry like they used to write in the olden days-- like James Weldon Johnson, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Langston Hughes?

Our traditional African American values used to solemnly embrace Biblical

teachings and precepts. Our traditional African American values used to compare the African American experience with that of the Children of Israel who had come out of the House of Bondage in Egypt. And we used to believe that we too were God's chosen people and we solemnly trusted in the word of the Lord.

"I am the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. Thou shalt have none other gods before me...."

"Honor thy father and thy mother, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee; that thy days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with thee, in the land which they LORD thy God giveth thee."

"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.... [L]et every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband."

But today, more and more, it seems that we African Americans have removed such Biblical-based values from our day-to-day ethical conduct. And so, tonight, I wonder if we have become too cool for God? Have we become too educated for God? Have we become so self-righteous that we no longer fear God's righteousness? I leave these questions with you tonight for you to ponder.

But I also leave you with a wise saying:

The cornerstone of African American history is the African American family. At the core of the African American family is the institution of marriage--the union between man and woman. This institution was established by the word of God at the beginning of human history. And the word of God may be summed up in one simple phrase: *Love Ye One Another*.

And upon that foundation, with God's help, my dear family members and friends, and loved ones, we will strengthen our mothers and fathers, our grandparents, our sisters and brothers, our aunts and uncles, our cousins and nieces, nephews and friends of all nationalities, races, and creeds. And with that faith, we will transform the jangling discords of African American history into a beautiful symphony of family, faith and hope.

Thank you and may God bless you.

**THE END**