HOPE and HISTORY
Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement
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To the Memory of My Father,
Graham Augustine Harding, 1903–1983
not to dominate, threaten, destructively compete with, or subvert, but to help each other on to higher human ground. Then a new conversation may need to begin—about international relations and geography, yes, but also about the purposes of human life, wherever it is found. They may initiate a deeper search concerning the possibilities of human community across all geographical lines, and inquire about the education that best prepares us for higher ground, for connections. Perhaps some students will even want to explore the difference between the international search for cheaper goods and wages and the quest for higher ground. (What a reward for teaching!)

Under those circumstances what they will likely hope for from us are not answers, but a recognition, a confirmation that these are right and necessary questions for this time. Indeed, our best response may be nothing more than to join them in watching the video and singing the sometimes sentimental (and very hopeful) song, “We Are the World.” But as we do it together it will be most helpful if we can remind ourselves again of the costs of such apparently romantic convictions, even discover that they are more than romantic. For this may be the point to bring geography, music, politics, and history together as we remember the South African children who were brutally whipped in the streets for daring to believe and to sing “We Are the World.” And still they sing, and still they act. And now Mandela’s voice can be heard with them. Let scrapbooks be kept of these children. Let maps be drawn toward them. Let all in the room memorize the words of the great Afro-Caribbean poet-politician Aimé Césaire: “The work of humankind has just begun. . . . There is room for all at the rendezvous of victory.”

Perhaps it is only fitting that a study of human geography that grows out of one people’s freedom movement should eventually return, via the mappings of our hearts, to the higher ground that bears our common struggle, our deepest human hope. Even the youngest of our students will likely understand that path.

10

Is America Possible?

The Land That Never Has Been Yet

Some years ago I came across one of the most intriguing book titles that I have ever seen. It was set forth in the form of a question: Is America Possible? Even without delving into the contents, I was struck by the playful seriousness of the inquiry, the invitation to imagine and explore the shape and meaning of a “possible” America, an America still coming into existence. The idea itself, of course, was not new, simply its formulation. But since then, everywhere that I have paused to reflect on the powerful, flooding movement of the Black struggle for freedom in America, I have been called back to that title, to its query and challenge. For it is a question that has always been at the heart of the Afro-American quest for democracy in this land. And wherever we have seen these freedom seekers, community organizers, artisans of democracy, standing their ground, calling others to the struggle, advancing into danger, creating new realities, it is clear that they are taking the question seriously, shaping their own answers, testing the possibilities of their dreams.

Is America possible? Yes, they say, sometimes testifying to their vision with great eloquence: “I have a dream that one day . . .” Sometimes joining their vision to the magnificent Biblical images, they proclaim, “I’ve been to the mountaintop. I’ve seen the Promised Land.” Or, in the marvelously mundane messages of their freedom songs, expressing great hope: “If you
don't see me at the back of the bus / And you can't find me nowhere / Just come on up to the front of the bus, / and I'll be riding up there." Envisioning very specific expressions of America's possibilities they sang, "I'm gonna eat at the Holiday Inn . . . one of these days." And the great hope and vision were ultimately caught up in the anthem of the movement, in the stanzas that came from the past, as well as in the ones forged in the heart of the post-World War II struggle. "We shall overcome. . . . We'll walk hand in hand. . . . The Lord will see us through. . . . The truth will make us free. . . . Black and white together. . . . Our children will be free. . . . The whole wide world around."

Somehow, in a time like our own, when the capacity for imagining appears to be endangered, both by the technology of television and by the poverty of public dreams, it seems especially crucial to introduce our students to the meaning of such a question as "Is America possible?" And it is absolutely necessary that they discover the significance of the Biblical text: "Where there is no vision the people perish."

Indeed, it is precisely in a period of great spiritual and societal hunger like our own that we most need to open minds, hearts, and memories to those times when women and men actually dreamed of new possibilities for our nation, for our world, for their own lives. It is now that we may be able to convey the stunning idea that dreams, imagination, vision, and hope are actually powerful mechanisms in the creation of new realities. Especially when the dreams go beyond speeches and songs to become embodied, to take on flesh, in real, hard places.

This is why we turn to the world of dreams and visions that became flesh and blood in the Afro-American freedom movement. This is why we return to Rosa Parks and wonder aloud what visions of Black and white together were in her mind and heart as the bus approached her stop on December 1, 1955. This is why we listen and laugh when her friend and mentor E. D. Nixon tells us that his dream of a new America for his grandchildren had eventually changed to a vision of a new nation that he could see and feel and experience in his own lifetime. It is in search of that power of imagination and action that we approach Malcolm X, realizing that the best heroes of democracy's shaping were constantly opening their dreams and visions to change, and were never satisfied to get high on dreams alone.

So, too, because we need new dreams in each generation, new visions for each time, we ask ourselves and our students about the dreams that moved fourth-grade-trained Mrs. Hamer to challenge an entire political party and its presidential leader. We seek to know more about the visions that kept her working for the poor and the left out until she died. Because we believe in the power of imagination, especially when linked to committed lives—even when the lives and dreams go astray—we look deeply into the eyes of Huey Newton and understand why a long-time resident of his community, shocked by his murder in 1989, could nevertheless say, "To us, Huey Newton was a hero. The Black Panthers were a thing to identify with, along with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King." What a gathering of dreamers!

If we dare, it may still be possible to encourage such audacious—and necessary—dreaming on behalf of a more just and humane America today. With some encouragement, our teaching may yet find the way to engage the centers of imagination and open visions of a possible America in places where no one ever expected to find them. (Can any good thing come out of Dorchester?) As we have seen, we could do this through entering the dreams of those visionary workers who have gone before us, hearing and speaking their words, singing their songs, exploring the hope that moved their lives, finding the mysterious connections that exist between them and our own centers of creativity.

Or, at times we might try another path. Exploring the world of the Afro-American freedom struggle, we might grasp firmly one seminal statement of vision, one powerful answer to the key question, "Is America possible?" and walk with our students into the depths of that experience. Considering Octavio Paz's description of poetry as "the bridge between history and truth," it would be exciting to explore a classic poetic statement of the archetypal African-American dream of democracy and see if it can help to bring some fundamental truth and hope to the life and times of our students, especially in this decade of awesome transitions. If I were to choose such a vehicle it would be Lang-
ston Hughes's magnificent poetic summons, "Let America Be America Again." Such a work could easily occupy us for days or weeks, as we touch all the levels, enter all the hope, receive with gratitude all the visions shared by Hughes more than a half century ago.

To provide a setting, to mix poetry with biography and history, someone (not necessarily the teacher) might explore what America was like in 1935 when the poem was written. What was it like to be Black in New York, or on lecture tours through the South, or on troubled waters somewhere, far from tours and cities and help? In the midst of a national Depression how could a Black man dream? Indeed, we are pressed by this initial investigation to raise the larger question: What is it that makes for dreams, for visions, for some audacious movement beyond the "is" to the "ought" even in the midst of the most desperate and dangerous situations? But returning to the specific object of our attention, to the keeper and singer of some of the nation's most important—and most ignored—dreams, we can best respond to the search for sources by looking more closely at Hughes himself. We see his Harlem-based, world-traveling life; we grasp the remarkable span and fidelity of his work. And everywhere we recognize his firm belief in the life-giving purpose of dreams, as well as his sense of responsibility for sharing that belief with those who were younger than he. In a thousand ways throughout his work we hear him say, as he did in "Dreams":

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.³

Against that background, we approach the larger poem, "Let America Be America Again," again allowing our pedagogy to free us from older academic categories, to strengthen our own wings, to speak to our students in songs. And as we use the half-century-old poem to encourage an experience of flight in us all, it may be good to go right to the heart of the work, to experience its last stanzas together. Invariably I have found students of all ages responding fully to this poem, opening themselves both to its larger vision and to its implications for their own apparently dreamless lives. Sooner or later it becomes clear that they have not been encouraged in the nurturing of dreams and visions. Or they have closed themselves against the exposing of such personal levels of their being. Even more frequently, they have been taught by words and examples that they have no role in the dreaming of America, in the storming of the impossible. Once they feel permission, once the life-giving power of their own imagination is touched at some vital point, it is amazing how quickly and how well they find their voices and their visions.

Of course, my own experience is not a substitute for each teacher's own path of discovery; rather, it is simply offered as a word of encouragement. So, too, the brief reflections on the poem outlined here provide only an idea of what has often proved helpful in the settings where I have shared Hughes's call—from maximum security prisons to Sunday school classes. In many ways, the poem is its own commentary and encouragement, its own faithful reflection of the central dreams of so much democratic struggle in this land:

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—
The land where every man is free.⁴

So we begin with a marvelous and stimulating set of ideas and images for our students to explore (rather than focusing on literary criticism). What does he mean by these two lines?

The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—

Already we are offered the sense of vision, of hope, of dream, of a land that does not yet exist. It is on one level a familiar approach to the entire American hemisphere, as dream, as that which is conjured up within the minds and hearts of those who have come here, voluntarily or enslaved. But Hughes takes it further than the usual semi-passiveness of inner dreams. For he encourages us to recognize that this nation is still in process,
still coming into being, still on its way to the fulfillment of its best self. And—once that image is suggested, then the natural questions flow: What would America’s “best self” be like? Earlier in the poem Hughes referred to the essential dream of founders, immigrants, and slaves, of building a “homeland of the free” on these shores. In this latter segment of the poem he opens up the vision, looks for a land “where every man is free.” Of course, we stop to ask if Hughes would use the word “man” today. And it is more than academic for us to press on to the question: What does it mean to be free, in America, in the 1990s? Constantly tantalizing, nudging, calling forth, we might inquire: What would this country be like today if we were all “free,” free to become our best selves (and who might that be), free to create a more perfect union for us all?

Such questions only begin the conversation, suggest directions for the imagination, invite a variety of sometimes conflicting dreams. Hughes goes on to contribute more concrete images when he writes of

The land that’s mine—
The poor man’s, Indian’s, Negro’s, ME—
Who made America

His owners of America are a fascinating group, similar to many that we have seen in places like the Poor People’s Campaign and the Rainbow Coalition. Indeed, there is almost an echo here of the classic, prophetic, justice-obsessed strands of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Hughes envisions the land, God’s land, as belonging to the outcasts, the workers, the unexpected. Are these really the ones who made America? And if that is so, what are the implications of such truth for the future of the nation? How should it be shaped and directed and governed and cared for if our country really belongs to poor people, Native Americans, African-Americans, and all the laborers “who made America”? What would a country be like that gave its greatest attention, care, and concern to such people? What would a country be like that took its major leadership from such owners?

Even as we attempt to play with such ideas and visions, it becomes clear that they may not present the greatest challenge to our capacity for seeing the unseen. For it is possible that the most arresting aspect of Hughes’s dream is not a matter of who owns America, but his assumption that the primary owners also have primary responsibility for fulfilling the original dream of a “homeland of the free.” Isn’t this the essential message in the words

Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

At the center of the vision is a dream of a land that does not yet exist, and a vision of its creation placed in the hands of very ordinary, non-elite men and women. What do our students—and their teachers—think of such a vision? In other words, who do we think America belongs to, and who has the essential responsibility for its future? Are we prepared to abandon the cynically safe responses to those questions, responses like, “It belongs to the people with the most money, the best lawyers, and the greatest access to the levers of political power”? Do we know that such supposedly realistic responses eventually stunt and finally destroy all the dream ports of our spirit, break all the wings of our hearts—and that they warn our students against ever dreaming, ever believing that they can fly?

Eventually Hughes also insists that we confront one of the most daunting realities of all dreams concerning the creation of a more just society, of an America more faithful to the truth of our joint ownership. As we have seen throughout the Afro-American freedom struggle, and in other movements for the expansion of democracy, all visionaries must count the costs. And Hughes’s next stanza reminds us of the ever-present opposition which sets itself against dreams of hope and flights of freedom.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people’s lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!
commitment, must follow: “America will be!” And this is precisely the point at which our students and all of us who sense the inadequacies and injustices of the present and past must be encouraged to cultivate not only indignation and anger, but vision and hope. There is no humane future without them. So Hughes is able to predict the coming of a more just and democratic America partly because,

An ever-living seed,
Its dream
Lies deep in the heart of me.

The dream, the seed, the inner vision of a new nation are crucial. And all of us who are willing to hear the call are challenged to be the bearers, the nurturers, the waterers of the seed, the tree of democracy that grows deep within our hearts.

So the question becomes more urgent: What is the America that we dream, that we hope for, that we vow to help bring into being? If Langston (and there are many Langstons) is right, then ordinary people, whose lives still carry the life of all the early workers and makers of America, bear the central responsibility for the re-creation of the nation. And in the 1950s and 1960s, while Langston was still alive, a generation of African-Americans and their white allies took up the challenge, crafted their own versions of the dream, and committed their lives to its fulfillment. Indeed, the work was carried out with such fervor and fullness that one of Langston’s Harlem-based contemporaries, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., could stand in the midst of that movement and declare, “We are the last revolutionaries in America—the last transfusion of Freedom into the blood stream of democracy.” What do our students know of all this, think of all this? (What does the name of Powell or the Abyssinian Baptist Church mean to them?) What shall they do with the idea of an America in process, an America that is not a finished block of white granite, but is instead a malleable, multicolored gift of clay, still seeking, taking, giving shape, purpose and direction? Even more important, how shall our students respond to the challenge of Langston’s dream, Langston’s hope, Powell’s audacious declaration? Is it too old and out of style,
this call for dream keepers, reality shapers, life-giving revolutionaries? Is this a time of permanently broken wings? Are we in a place without healers?

Clearly neither Langston—sainted poet of democracy—nor any of those who made the movement that helped to transform the last years of his life, would settle for broken wings, aborted transfusions. Rather it is fascinating that Hughes, ending his poem in the 1930s, and the SCLC founders, opening their campaign in the 1950s, used the same religiously charged imperative—to redeem. In this supposedly more secular age, when we tend to be uncomfortable with the age-old memories of a religious spirit that “can make a way out of no way,” we are still faced with Hughes’s last words, his repeated challenge, his call for something resembling a religious fervor to rise up in our ordinary lives:

We, the people, must redeem
Our land, the mines, the plants, the rivers,
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again.

Now, in the last decade of this amazing century, when the “impossible” has sprung up live among us again and again, it may be possible to rescue such words from mere sentimentality, to let them call us and our students from temptations toward nihilism and indifference.

How? Perhaps we begin simply by listening together to the incantatory “We, the people,” allowing its vibrations to inhabit us, asking each other about its original source and its meaning in this setting. Gathering to struggle against our hesitation to dream “a more perfect union,” we may begin to play, to imagine, to dare envision some of what Hughes was (is) calling for. Gathered together, protected in the common circle of our common work from our own fears of exposure, we might ask each other what it would mean to redeem or rescue our land, mother earth—from its erosion, from our chemical pollutants, our nuclear waste, our garbage and our greed. How might the land be rescued from its concentration into fewer and fewer hands, further and further away from the ordinary owners that Hughes identified?

The challenge is powerful, especially when we absorb into our beings the ecological, economic, and political developments that have taken place in America since Langston wrote, since he died in the mid-1960s. For now we must place new meaning on saving our mines, recovering and remaking our disappeared and dilapidated industrial plants, rescuing our dying rivers and our denuded mountains. Indeed, one of the most important responses to the call of the poem would be the expansion of our imaginations into the twenty-first century, bringing together the older, valiant dreams with all that we have seen and heard and felt since World War II regarding the struggle for democracy in America and across the globe.

Because we have been given years that were not his, it may be that one of the greatest challenges of the poem is to dream beyond Langston, to recapture the best dreams of Ella Baker, Huey Newton, and Harold Washington, to join forces with the dreams of Angela Davis, Jim Lawson, and Myrlie Evers. We need these dreams badly. These are marvelous sources of “advanced ideas” about democracy. So it is likely they would ask us to nurture the living seed within us and imagine how our cities might become safe, rewarding, and nourishing places, especially for our children. They would ask us to look somewhere between the isolation of the suburbs and the desolation of so many inner cities to dream a way of housing our people in places worthy of human dignity. They would encourage visions of a health system that would care for the needs of all our citizens. They would invite us to dream of schools (and neighborhoods) where children of all races, cultures, and economic groups are taught together to become responsible, compassionate citizens in an ever-expanding democratic society.

Taking up Hughes’s unmentioned concerns, those who lived beyond him in a struggle for a new America would ask us to envision a nation free from the scourge of drugs, in both our personal and our collective lives. They would nurture dreams of a society in which training for nonviolent peacemaking took priority over military preparedness. They would call us to see a
time when our relationships with other nations became more neighborly, more mutually supportive in the great multinational tasks we have to accomplish, ecologically, economically, and educationally. Remembering King, we know these rainbow warriors would urge us to dream a world in which our country works with others to seek economic justice for all the basic-goods producer nations who are now broken and exploited, a world where the United States takes the path of peace with all who are now threatened by our immature and unwise search for military-based “security.”

Of course, continuously, persistently, all the heroic voices of struggle join Hughes in the common message to us: The work of discovering, exploring, developing this true America is our work—we, the people. Is it too much to ask our students to consider their role in this life-seeking action, both as dreamers and as workers? Are there noncoercive ways in which we may invite them to live beyond their presently defined self-limits, to participate in the re-creating tasks, beginning with themselves and stretching out to all “the endless plains,” and to the wounded cities of our land? To dream such dreams, to grasp such visions, to live lives anchored in great hope is certainly to develop ourselves and our students in the best traditions of the freedom movement, of all movements for justice, compassion, and democracy. Eventually we discover that it is also the path to our best personal humanity.

Once, in the midst of the African independence struggles of the early 1960s, I remember hearing a poet of that continent say, “I am a citizen of a country that does not yet exist.” Perhaps this is the paradox into which we must allow Hughes to move us. Together with those we teach, we are citizens of the America we now know, but we are needed to give our greatest energies to the creation of the country that does not yet exist. Hughes calls us to envision it, to encourage our students to use all the magnificent but underdeveloped faculties of their imagination to begin to bring it into being, to share that work with those who have gone before us. Ultimately Langston spoke both for our personal lives and for our nation when he wrote

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

The message is for all of us who teach. We are the nurturers, the encouragers of all the dreams, all the seeds deep in all the hearts where the future of a redeemed and rescued land now dwells. So we hold fast and see beneath the snow, always calling others to recognize their own magnificent possibilities, to see and plant and join our hope with theirs. Singing, saying in our dreams and our actions, America (Langston’s and Malcolm’s and Ella’s and all the marchers’ and mourners’ and organizers’) is possible, is necessary, is coming.