

Lift Every Voice...Why I Stand

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Transfiguration... a word that signifies a change in form or appearance. In today's Gospel, we heard about the Transfiguration of Jesus. It was a special event in which God allowed certain apostles to have a privileged spiritual experience. It was meant to strengthen their faith for the challenges they would later endure. It was only a temporary event, not meant to be permanent. Jesus was glorified and his garments became dazzling white, he stood in the presence of Moses and Elijah, and finally the voice of God commanded the disciples to "listen to Him". The transfiguration was a transforming event in the life of the disciples

In our own lives, we may have experienced a transfiguration, not in the same way that the disciples did but in way that allows God to transform our lives to strengthen us for the challenges ahead. For me being an African American male has been a challenge. My history has been a fortunate one, but not without the stings of racial strife as so many of my brothers and sisters who have had to face he slings and arrows of racism. For many of us music has been a trans figurative experience, which strengthens our faith as we go forward.

At least twice a year, in the United States, people stand and sing *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. The first time is usually for a Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr Celebration and the second time is during the month of February for Black History Month. After that it disappears from our collective vision but for African Americans it is part of our DNA since its first performance on February 12th of 1900, 120 years ago.

I have often been asked why African Americans stand when we sing this piece. For years, I had no answer...it was something we did. The words and the tune make you want to rise. However recently I started looking at why we stand and what does the song represent. As I thought more about it, it became even clearer that this is a song of transfiguration, a song of transformation, a song of faith.

James Weldon Johnson and his brother John Rosamond Johnson were born in Jacksonville, TN. Their father worked as the Head Waiter at the St James Hotel, a prominent job for the Black man in 1871 in the midst of the Jim Crow south. Their mother taught music at the Stanton School for Colored Children, a racially segregated school. The family lived during the times of Reconstruction and saw the rise of the Klu Klux Klan, segregation, and lynching. American entertainment of that time were minstrel shows that portrayed white men in Black face as African American having exaggerated red or white lips and large white eyes and with exaggerated speech. The music of these shows talked about jamborees of various sorts and the play of razors, with gastronomical delights of chicken, pork chops and watermelon, and the experiences of red-hot mammas and their never too faithless papas. The covers of the music, many that I saw as a child, were exaggerations of African American as buffoons or depicting scanty clad Black children in torn clothes being eaten by alligators. White Americans only saw African Americans as second-class citizens who had no culture and were destined to be servants forever.

Against this background, the Johnson brothers were born and nurtured with music, art, and culture by their parents, both whom were educated. James Weldon Johnson went to Atlanta University in 1887 as a preparatory student and graduated with his bachelors in 1894 with a full scholarship to attend Harvard Medical School. His trans figurative moment occurred his freshman year in 1890.

That summer he found himself teaching in the rural town of Hampton, Georgia about a half hour from Atlanta. Here he encountered Blacks that suffered the true slings and arrows of a racially prejudiced society. Children could only attend school after they had chopped the cotton and laid it up. His compensation was 5 cents per child when they attended school. Here he discovered a different side of Black life that he was unaccustomed. He saw how Black people had to deal with White people that still robbed them of their dignity in spite of emancipation. He saw the injustices of sharecropping, minimal educational opportunities, and of prejudice. What he discovered was the resilient spirit of Black people that manage to outwit and out-smart their oppressor and yet laugh in the face of danger. This temporary assignment, this trans figurative experience made him forego his plans to attend Harvard, and become the principal of the Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida where he had attended. As he put it, teaching and education were “a means of living, not of making a living.” Two years later in 1896, he had the distinction of being the first African American to pass the Florida bar exam.

In 1899, another trans figurative experience occurred when a group of African Americans decided to put together a program to celebrate the birthday of Abraham Lincoln on February 12, 1900 with Booker T. Washington as the featured speaker. As principal, he was selected asked to bring words. Being frustrated with his speech, he decided on a poem he determine to become a song that would be sung by the 500 Black school children at Stanton school. He got his first line...Lift every voice and sing. As he said not a startling line but he kept working wrote the next five. As he writes in his book *Along This Way*, “When near the end of the first stanza, there came to me the lines:

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us

Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us

The spirit of the poem had taken a hold of me.

It is in his words that the trans figurative happened. “I could not keep back the tears and made no effort to do so. I was experiencing the transports of the poet’s ecstasy. Feverish ecstasy was followed by that contentment-that sense of serene joy-which makes artistic creation the most complete of all human experiences. “. He and his brother John Rosamond Johnson, a musician who had studied in Europe and was music teacher at the school worked on this historic work. History has recorded the dissemination of the song by word of mouth by those children and soon Black people all over the South embraced it. 19 years later on the same date, the NAACP adopted it as their anthem as James Weldon Johnson became the National Secretary of that organization. His role was to help Black people become better educated, get the right to vote, and most importantly bring attention to the unlawful and cruel lynchings of African Americans that were taking place in America.

The song has evolved over time and its history has been a trans figurative in the fight for racial equality. It was at one time considered as a potential national anthem, however White America was

never going to allow that but instead chose a poem written by Francis Scott Key, a man born and raised on a plantation, a slave owner, a lawyer that defended slavery, and a person that persecuted abolitionists. His poem was set to an unsingable English beer drinking melody and it became the National Anthem in 1931.

No one knew in 1900 that this song was going to be transformative as it became a battle cry for Black America giving hope, and instilling pride. Just suppose James Weldon Johnson had decided to go into medicine and not become a teacher at the Stanton school...would this piece had been written? However, the song has had transformative power as it has galvanized Black people for the last 120 years to strengthen their faith for the challenges they would later endure. Those years include:

1. The ugly hand of Jim Crow laws
2. The murder of Emmett Till,
3. The cross burnings of the KKK
4. The bombings that killed four little girls in the Birmingham church
5. The murder of Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others,
6. The bombing of buses in the south

Moreover, today:

1. The marching in Charlotte, NC
2. Voter suppression laws
3. The use of racial slurs against people of color
4. The murder of Black people in a church in Charleston
5. The calling of police on Black people by white citizens, who feel they have the right to question a person of color,

and so many more. These moment and so many others are part of my DNA and yet when I sing this song, I feel the presence of something that strengthens my faith for the challenges I have to endure as a Black man in America.

Therefore, I stand when I sing Lift Every Voice and Sing

1. To honor those 20 million Africans, captured, transported in the holds of ships, placed in servitude, degraded and sold like animals to satisfy America's desire for cheap labor.
2. I stand to honor those Black families torn apart and sold away from each other for a profit.
3. I stand in honor of those who were threatened or murdered when attempting to vote.
4. I stand to honor those 4,300 people that hung from trees, as sung by Billie Holiday in the song, Strange Fruit and in some cases burned alive for no reason except to drive fear into Black people in the South and in the North.

5. I stand to honor those who struggle against unfair housing, inferior schools, and unkept promises by our government.

Jesus stood on the mountaintop and the transfiguration occurred for the apostles to have a privileged spiritual experience designed to strengthen their faith for the challenges they would later endure. Lift Every Voice and Sing is my trans figurative experience that allows me to strengthen my faith to face the challenges I see today in this America.

It looks easy to be Black at St. Michaels and All Angels, but the world is not quite like this church. I face it every day when I drive at night or stopped by police officers and have to remember what my dad taught me 50 years ago about making sure my hands are visible and to be overfly polite, no matter the situation. Alternatively, being called the “n” word on and off the campus by people that do not know me but see me only by the color of my skin.

I recall an incidence in Sacramento, California while standing in the lobby of the Holiday Inn dressed in a suit and tie with a brief case in my hand on the way to a meeting of the California Arts Council. A white woman approached me and asked me to call her a cab. My response, after my shock, was that I do not work here. She walked away and did not apologize for her mistake.

I remember a faculty member at IU South Bend, after I dismissed them for insubordination remarking that the only reason they took the job was because “I was Black and gay and need their help”.

I know how it feels to walk into a room and be the only Black person present and know that that people a questioning my credentials before I even open my name.

Lift Every Voice and Sing gives me strength, it gives me encouragement and the brothers James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson give us that hope in their final line

Lest our feet stray from our God, where we met thee

Lest our hearts drunk with the wine of the world we forget thee.

Facing the rising sun of that new day begun

Let us march on 'till victory is won.