

✠Wilton Cardinal Gregory

Discarding the Things of Little Worth!

In classic Greek mythology, Sisyphus was the King of Corinth who was delegated as his eternal punishment in hell the burden of rolling a huge stone up the side of a steep hill, then just as he was about to reach the top of the incline; the stone would slide down the hill again – ceaselessly. In some respects, race relations in the United States can be as frustrating for us as was the punishment that Sisyphus endured in his own mythological torment. We never seem to be able to make any lasting, demonstrable progress that provides satisfaction for everyone. There are regular moments of apparent hope when everyone can see the top of the hill and a horizon of genuine progress, only to find that the great stone with which we are grappling has begun to roll backwards.

Clarence Page, the syndicated columnist wrote a perspective several years ago in which he addressed the possibility that we African Americans may very well be the victims of a national paranoia.¹ There are more than a few African Americans who believe, to some degree or another, that there is a systemic and orchestrated conspiracy against peoples of Color in our country and in many places well beyond. They point to the long list of injustices and hostile activities and even to the endurance of social ills among people of Color as appropriate indications for their fears and anxieties. "Even a paranoid can have enemies." Page cited the late Henry Kissinger in his article. There are more than a few personalities within the African American community who seize each and every regrettable event to keep the paranoia level animated in the minds and hearts of our people.

The political environment, such as that in which we now find ourselves, also provide a fertile field for such reflections. In the subtle and oftentimes not so subtle suggestions that point to instances of reverse racism, there is increasing concern over "affirmative action," "set asides," "welfare fraud," "reverse discrimination." More than a few politicians find themselves seeking safety under a "conservative" political banner or attempting to distance themselves from the code language of certain conservative political issues. The recent spate of highly publicized criminal behavior on the national and local scene has raised both the level of African American paranoia as well as the strident voices and fears of certain proponents of political conservatism. The matter is made even more complex because there are legitimate conservative concerns which many African Americans do embrace. Moreover, even moderately sensitive outside observers of African American life can understand a prudent level of historical sensitivity and skepticism about the impartiality of our public systems and structures.

I have long given up the hope of convincing the extremists on either side in this matter. There are people who still maintain that the world is flat in spite of the most convincing data and there are people who deny that the Holocaust, which caused over 6 million Jewish people to die, ever really took place. There will always be a fringe element in every society and among all people who refuse to accept even the most widely held and well-founded facts. If our efforts to improve race relations target such extreme opinions, we will be doomed before we begin.

Nonetheless, there are many people, African Americans, and White Americans as well who want to advance the state of our communications, support interracial collaboration, and promote genuine mutual understanding and respect. In other words, there is a broad grouping of people from all racial communities who would like to see the state of America's multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-language society improve. It is to those people, of good will and of hopeful hearts, whom we need both to speak and to pray.

While the context for this homily focuses on the challenges that face White and Black Americans, none of us can be neither unconcerned nor unconcerned that many other peoples within our society face similar difficulties as do we. Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, newly arrived immigrant Americans, Americans with physical disabilities, women, and a host of other segments of our society might all legitimately demand a moment of our concern and attention. I am well aware of the more than justifiable struggles of these people with many of the same concerns that frustrate race relations between Black and White Americans. There is no shortage of social inequities about which we ought to pray this morning. But the human heart and mind can absorb only so many issues at once. As part of your observance of Dr. King's birthday anniversary, I assume that you and I need to focus upon the specific challenges that so dominated his life and mission.

The greatest challenge that we all face is discovering what we are to do with our history. It is no small coincidence that Alex Haley's literary and genealogical explorations held such fascination for American people. In many respects, he helped Americans, Black and White, face some of the issues of our joint history. *Roots*, whether exact according to all of the highest standards of scientific historical reporting, managed to bring a component of our common history to light. We are a people who are related to one another through conflict and oppression. That common history has established a number of dynamics that some of us, even today, find difficult to accept and to understand. We need to take a sober, but hopeful look at our history. I emphasize hopeful, because until we can admit that there are elements in our history that are painful and conflictual, we might be forever tempted to downplay their significance. There is another danger, which is equally destructive. If we cannot move *beyond* and learn from our history, we will have no tomorrow in which to hope. Of course, I have my own paranoia in this regard. There are those present in our society who do not want us to move beyond our history because they stand to benefit in a number of ways by keeping us hopelessly shackled to yesterday.

Like most of you, every once and a while, I get the urge to clean out my closet at home and to give away some of the many things that I don't regularly use anymore. Every now and then, I get the urge to dispose of books, clothes, and other personal effects that I haven't used in a long time. Then, like you, I go through the awful process of sorting out the past. Things that have not been very important for a long while suddenly become interesting once more. I remember the people who have given me things as gifts, even if I have not used the gifts for a very long time. I call to mind the special events and occasions when I wore a certain sweater or shirt, even though I may not have worn that shirt or sweater in ages.

Discarding the past is difficult for all of us. We all tend to hold onto things from the past, simply because they remind us of the past. We link things to memories even though the items themselves are unimportant. In the end, most of the things that I intended to throw away go back into the closet because it is too painful to let the past go! What is true of us as individuals is patently true of us as a people. This morning, let us agree to discard those old biases and propensities that close us off to tomorrow. If Dr. King's birthday anniversary means anything to those people like us who are believers, Christians, then it ought to provide an opportunity to discard those things that are worthless – like fear, hatred, and intolerance that neither serve us nor will make for a hopeful tomorrow.

¹ [[Emerge](#), March, 1992, Vol. 3, Issue 5, pp. 43-45]