

# *Culture, Soul, and the Joy of Struggle*

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Both artists and prophets are visionaries. Perhaps this is why Martin Luther King Jr. and Harry Belafonte found each other and were good friends. Harry Belafonte has a rich history as a human being, and he's still writing that history. I recently read an interview with him and Cornel West, dated in 1996.

Cornel West, an American scholar and public intellectual, is the interviewer in his book, *Restoring Hope, Conversations on the Future of Black America*.<sup>1</sup>

Harry Belafonte was a confidante of Dr. King, and was fully involved in the Civil Rights Movement. He helped support Dr. King and his family financially; he funded the Freedom Rides. Between his fame as a singer and an actor, and his amazing array of connections, he exemplifies what you would hope any superstar would do with all that money and influence – work to improve the world, through action and philanthropy and being outspoken.

For, the artists are some of the seers in a human society, they are some of the prophets. I think one of the reasons I like music so much is because it is soothing to my soul to listen to these seers; it is a link to hope and a popular voice that is sane, that speaks to the deeper realities of existence. When you hear a song that has the truth of the modern world expressed with such accuracy and melody, even if it's sad, it's a comfort to know that others in the world share the same blues and bemusement. I'm thinking of people like Ani DiFranco, Curtis Mayfield, Bob Dylan, Billie Holiday. I could go on, but the names of artists grow more obscure, since the mono-cultural music industry can't keep up with the multitude of artists that the people REALLY want to listen to. In other words, you won't hear such artists on commercial radio.

Comfort and sanity are certainly what the African American spirituals meant to the slaves whose inventive, codified expressions in the farm fields was some of the only free and creative expression left to them to preserve their dignity as human beings. Over the centuries, through cultural and social evolution, those spirituals evolved to gospel, to the blues, to ragtime, to jazz, to soul, to funk, to hip hop – and hundreds of other nuanced styles along the way that would depend if you're talking about Florida or Texas, Harlem or Chicago, rural, urban, or suburban.

It was the same concept in other categories of culture – language, dance, theater, philosophy, religion. Harry Belafonte, because he served in WW2, was exposed to black cultures (FROM) all across America. He said,

*When I entered into the Second World War, it was the first time I discovered diversity among black people. Because the only people that I really knew were members of the Harlem community, and they had a very special style, a very special way. There were the Harlem folk and the West Indian folk . . . and those were . . . the two cultures that I knew. When I went into the navy, however, I found black people from Mississippi; from Memphis, Tennessee; from Chicago. Everybody spoke different, everybody looked different. Everybody had different things to say, different tastes, different foods. I had never understood before that there was this enormous diversity among us as a people in this one country.*<sup>2</sup>

In the navy, Belafonte met artists, musicians, poets, and writers.<sup>3</sup> After the war, this exposure launched him into the intellectual and creative world, which in his day, was connected to the political action world. He linked the black artists of his time with the black activists. He brought music to the civil rights rallies: Charlie Parker would play before Robeson or DuBois would speak. Mahalia Jackson and Sammy Davis Jr. before Dr. King. Belafonte says, "I've always believed that the culture of a people is the

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<sup>1</sup> *Restoring Hope Conversations on the Future of Black America*, 1997, Cornell West, Beacon Press.

<sup>2</sup> P. 12.

<sup>3</sup> P. 14.

soul of a people. It expresses their highest hopes and aspirations. And in that hope, and in that aspiration, there is a political statement."<sup>4</sup>

The very last thing Dr. King said to Harry Belafonte was at a meeting in his home, just before Dr. King went down to Memphis. They had been strategizing, and most people had left the meeting. Dr. King was very agitated, his shoes were off, and he was pacing up and down and muttering to himself. Harry asked, "What's the matter, Martin?" He answered, "I don't know, I'm troubled." Harry said, "About what?" He said,

"You know, we fought long and hard for integration, as we should have, and I know we're going to get it. That's a fait accompli. But I tell you, Harry, I've come on a realization that really deeply troubles me." – "Well, what is it?" And he said, "I've come to the realization that I think we may be integrating into a burning house."<sup>5</sup>

I didn't know Dr. King said this soon before he died, and I think it may be one of the most prophetic things he ever said.

What did he mean?

Dr. King came from the earlier generation, when "American" could and did have high moral content. This was the time of FDR's new rules, and the sizable middle-class society that emerged after WWII, when hard work and dedication really DID let people earn pride and dignity. But Dr. King also lived during a time when those with money and power were just beginning to dismantle this class structure. I suspect King felt this in his bones, like artists and prophets do. So maybe what King meant by the burning house was the loss of a middle class culture that was viable, that was a culture worthy of integrating into.

What has replaced that simpler time is a mainstream culture, that's mainly about personal gratification as prescribed by consumption and entertainment; it's about what sells. It's about advertising. You can sell services and material items, but you can also sell a certain set of values; you can sell national imperialism, complacency, fear; you can sell a sense of personal entitlement. You can sell all these things to anyone, regardless of ethnicity. Media-culture has taken the place of civic-culture, and so it is media that now influences the content of our character.

Harry Belafonte explains how integrating into the burning house turned out to mean the loss of a healthy black cultural identity, and led to the troubling trends for everybody at the turn of the millenium. He says,

*What makes the crisis for me so great is that I see a whole people being wasted and being denied and being suffocated. I think black culture as it sits in America, and as it sits in other places in the diaspora, is under the greatest onslaught of negativity that has ever existed because of what monopoly capital is doing to control all the forces that buy and sell art, and determine the tastes of the public, and instruct and condition people in a way even Orwell didn't quite imagine. I think it is far more drastic than anything Orwell thought of in his book. And it is this that troubles me. Because technology in the hands of the oppressor is the new legacy to domination in the future. And that . . . has done much to neuter blacks as a people, and in fact it affects everybody – black, white . . . It's a nation that is being destroyed because we are becoming uniculture.*<sup>6</sup>

I love his word, uniculture. I heard on public radio yesterday morning that Britney Spears is a multi-billion dollar business, based on her tabloid value alone. She is an economic engine. So from the view of hoping to prevail over a faltering economy, she should be our hero!

The reason Britney is possible is because mainstream media diversity no longer exists – 2007 saw a rash of media mergers that put the power of disseminating information into even fewer hands. No single

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<sup>4</sup> P. 16.

<sup>5</sup> P. 24.

<sup>6</sup> Pp. 18-19.

acquisition signified the dangers of this trend more than Rupert Murdoch's \$5 billion coup of *The Wall Street Journal*. Despite howls of protests from journalists across the globe, Murdoch's cash proved too powerful and one of the last bastions of independent journalism fell. Then the FCC announced in October that it planned to loosen media regulations that would allow the six major media corporations to gobble up even more of the media pie.

Eric Klinenberg, author of *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media*, said "If the FCC passes these rules, media monopolies will have the kind of reach they've never had before. In addition to owning the major or only newspaper in town, they'll control the largest television station. Then they'll downsize their journalistic staff and use their reporters to echo their views in every medium."<sup>7</sup>

It's not hard to see that uniculture is bad, that it frustrates democracy, and that we'd be better off in a society where tastes can still largely be dictated by local cultural traditions rather than the pervasive, nationally broadcast culture.

It's an insidiously unexpected result of integration, and it can't possibly be what Dr. King had in mind: that the free and unfettered pursuit of the American dream would so easily become the mindless pursuit of the American nightmare – the obsession of personal gain and wealth, the "me and mine". It seems like a more advanced version of 'divide and conquer' – for community and cultural values to lose their power by the sabotage of their transmission. Or as Harry Belafonte puts it, "we have so distanced ourselves from our communities in the pursuit of our living, and our livelihood, and the other trophies they offer, that we have, in a way, alienated ourselves from ourselves."<sup>8</sup>

But let's complexify this for a moment. The discussions of our times that address multi-culturalism are very difficult. I'm throwing these questions out to you today, as much as I'm grappling to offer some perspective.

This can't just be about the pendulum needing to swing from uniculture to multi-culture. It's also about replacing the uniculture with a positive pan-culture that we all share - a common set of values that unifies us as one people of a nation.

I bet there are some people here who can remember that time period after WW2 with some nostalgia, and can remember what the American dream meant back then – not this consumerist/entertainment one, but the one that ensured education, and rightful benefits for anyone who works hard. There were good values in that version of the American dream - hard work, integrity, civic-mindedness, volunteering in the community, *having* a community.

It's the version of the American dream that is noble, that everyone should be included in, regardless of race, class, ethnicity, etc. – it's also the same set of values that can hold this country together, that actually MAKE us American. A mosaic is nothing but a collection of stones without the guiding image in the artist's mind.

While it seems obvious that we should emphasize and celebrate diversity, that we should strive toward a multi-cultural attitude, I also think we're at a point when we need to focus on what brings us together, beyond our cultural particularity. This is a both/and proposition – that the incredible diversity in the American tapestry be preserved and passed down as traditions to our children, AND that we start thinking about an all-inclusive pan-culture we can flourish in, that has the same simple set of values this country was founded on.

Because, the latter, I would venture to say, is what Martin Luther King was after – that is, the mutual sharing of good and honest values, as Americans, period. The values that makes a country great, and in which all are members of society are free to participate.

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<sup>7</sup> The previous two paragraphs' content is from *Adbuster* magazine, January/February 2008.

<sup>8</sup> P. 27.

What we've lost to the uniculture *as a whole country*, transcends racial particularity – because of a market media society, *we've ALL lost the traditions of local community*.

Part of what disempowers us so greatly in this uniculture is passivity; being passive imbues so much of our daily lives, but in particular, our leisure time, our recreation time. If you look at the word recreation, at its base it means to 're-create.' In other words, to be creative, whether that's individually, as family, or as a community. It is the *making* of art and culture *ourselves* that assures that nothing of real value is ever mass-produced. This is why artists and musicians and other visionaries are so important in a society, because they affirm this truth in the most distilled of manners. Recreation is the perpetual creation of community, or of the arts, or both. As it stands now, the entertainment model of recreation has us significantly isolated from each other.

It's actually an old method of oppression, to take away a people's beloved traditions, all in the span of a few generations.

Language is one of the ways that the spirit of a culture stays intact. The slaves weren't allowed to sing the songs of their native language. They weren't allowed to play their African instruments. But they found a way to keep singing until the songs of the Freedom Marches for Civil Rights. These are holy songs because as Harry Belafonte said, they express the highest hopes and aspirations of a people, the soul of a people. They had the power to unite a people who were struggling to get somewhere better.

Senator Obama recently connected hope and struggle in his victory speech for the Iowa Caucus. He talked about how America is remembering again what it means to hope:

*He said, We've been teased and derided for talking about hope – but we always knew that hope is not blind optimism. It's not ignoring the enormity of the task ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. It's not sitting on the sidelines or shirking from a fight. Hope is that thing inside us that insists that despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it and to work for it and to fight for it.*

Obama's success may be that he's selling hope and struggle as something positive – and we've needed that for so long, because it's been missing from our culture. We've lost the sense that to struggle is a good thing. Human beings were built to struggle – that is the foundry where hope is cast – in our ability to struggle, we can hope.

We struggle as individuals to survive in a faltering economy, we struggle as families, who can't always afford healthcare. We struggle as a nation, to be the authors of our own identity.

We struggle to set good examples for our youth, no matter what their ethnicity is. People learn about the joy of struggle through cultural examples and right now, young people have very little to look to – they don't readily connect struggle with culture, with music or art. We need to follow the lead of Harry Belafonte, who wants to say to young people,

*Do not look on struggle as some harmful, negative thing. Struggle has great glory and great dignity and great power and great beauty. As a matter of fact, the more you discover through struggle, the purer you become.*<sup>9</sup>

Struggle is, by and large, a local phenomenon – just as the best art is produced in the context of a local culture, in a specific time and place. These places are our places, these times are our times. As Sonia Sanchez says, *We need to catch the fire, we need to find it and pass it on, we need to find it and pass it on.* We need to re-create, to re-recreate, to re-create.

Let us heed the direction of one of our beloved prophets of America; let us heed the direction of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and his artist disciple Mr. Harry Belafonte.

Let us struggle in the direction of their vision until finally, a new vision that surpasses even that of the prophets' is in view.