

A Search For Identity

By John Henrik Clarke (May 1970)

My own search for an identity began—as I think it begins for all young people—a long time ago when I looked at the world around me and tried to understand what it was all about. My first teacher was my great grandmother whom we called "Mom Mary." She had been a slave first in Georgia and later in Alabama where I was born in Union Springs. It was her who told us the stories about our family and about how it had resisted slavery. More than anything else, she repeatedly told us the story of Buck, her first husband, and how he had been sold to a man who owned a stud farm in Virginia. Stud farms are an aspect of slavery that has been omitted from the record and about which we do not talk any more. We should remember, however, that there were times in this country when owners used slaves to breed stronger slaves in the same way that a special breed of horse is used to breed other horses.

My great grandmother had three children with Buck—my grandfather Jonah, my grandaunt Liza, who was a midwife, and another child. With Buck, Mom Mary had as close to a marriage as a slave can have—marriage with the permission of the respective masters. Mom Mary had a lifelong love affair with Buck, and years later after the emancipation she went to Virginia and searched for him for three years. She never found him, and she came back to Alabama where she spent the last years of her life.

My Family

Mom Mary was the historian of our family. Years later when I went to Africa and listened to oral historians, I knew that my great grandmother was not very different from the old men and women who sit around in front of their houses and tell the young children the stories of their people—how they came from one place to another, how they searched for safety, and how they tried to resist when the Europeans came to their lands.

This great grandmother was so dear to me that I have deified her in almost the same way that many Africans deify their old people. I think that my search for identity, my search for what the world was about, and my relationship to the world began when I listened to the stories of that old woman. I remember that she always ended the stories in the same way that she said "Good-bye" or "Good morning" to people. It was always with the reminder, "Run the race, and run it by faith." She was a deeply religious woman in a highly practical sense. She did not rule out resistance as a form of obedience to God. She thought that the human being should not permit himself to be dehumanized. And her concept of God was so pure and so practical that she could see that resistance to slavery was a form of obedience to God. She did not think that any of us children should be enslaved, and she thought that anyone who had enslaved any one of God's children had violated the very will of God.

I think Buck's pride in his manhood was the major force that always made her revere her relationship with him. He was a proud man and he resisted. One of the main reasons for selling him to a man to use on a stud farm was that he could breed strong slaves whose wills the master would then break. This dehumanizing process was a recurring aspect of slavery.

Growing up in Alabama, my father was a brooding, landless sharecropper, always wanting to own his own land; but on my father's side of the family there had been no ownership of land at all. One day after

a storm had damaged our farm and literally blown the roof off our house, he decided to take his family to a mill city—Columbus, Georgia. He had hoped that one day he would make enough money to return to Alabama as an independent farmer. He pursued this dream the rest of his life. Ultimately the pursuit of this dream killed him. Now he has a piece of land, six feet deep and the length of his body; that is as close as he ever came to being an independent owner of land.

In Columbus I went to county schools, and I was the first member of the family of nine children to learn to read. I did so by picking up signs, grocery handbills, and many other things that people threw away into the street, and by studying the signboards. I knew more about the different brands of cigarettes and what they contained than I knew about the history of the country. I would read the labels on tin cans to see where the products were made, and these scattered things were my first books. I remember one day picking up a leaflet advertising that the Ku Klux Klan was riding again.

Because I had learned to read early, great things were expected of me. I was a Sunday school teacher of the junior class before I was ten years old, and I was the one person who would stop at the different homes in the community to read the Bible to the old ladies. In spite of growing up in such abject poverty, I grew up in a very rich cultural environment that had its oral history and with people who not only cared for me but also pampered me in many ways. I know that this kind of upbringing negates all the modern sociological explanations of black people that assume that everybody who was poor was without love. I had love aplenty and appreciation aplenty, all of which gave me a sense of self-worth that many young black children never develop.

I began my search for my people first in the Bible. I wondered why all the characters—even those who, like Moses, were born in Africa—were white. Reading the description of Christ as swarthy and with hair like sheep's wool, I wondered why the church depicted him as blond and blue-eyed. Where was the hair like sheep's wool? Where was the swarthy complexion? I looked at the map of Africa and I knew Moses had been born in Africa. How did Moses become so white? If he went down to Ethiopia to marry Zeporah, why was Zeporah so white? Who painted the world white? Then I began to search for the definition of myself and my people in relationship to world history, and I began to wonder how we had become lost from the commentary of world history.

My Teachers

In my first years in city schools in Columbus, Georgia, my favorite teacher and the one I best remember was Evelena Taylor, who first taught me to believe in myself. She took my face between her two hands and looking at me straight in the eyes, said, "I believe in you." It meant something for her to tell me that she believed in me, that the color of my skin was not supposed to be a barrier to my aspirations, what education is, and what it is supposed to do for me.

These were lonely years for me. These were the years after the death of my mother—a beautiful woman, a washerwoman—who had been saving fifty cents a week for my education, hoping that eventually she would be able to send her oldest son to college. Her hopes did not materialize; she died long before I was ten. I did, however, go to school earlier than some of the other children. We lived just outside of the city limits. Children living beyond the city limits were supposed to go to county schools because the city schools charged county residents \$3.75 each semester for the use of books. This was a monumental sum of money for us because my father made from \$10.00 to \$14.00 a week as a combination farmer and fire

tender at brickyards.

In order to get the \$3.75 required each semester, my father made a contribution and my various uncles made contributions. It was a collective thing to raise what was for us a large sum of money not only to send a child to a city school instead of to a county school but also to make certain that the one child in the family attending the city school had slightly better clothing than the other children. So I had a coat that was fairly warm and a pair of shoes that was supposed to be warm but really was not. As I think about the shoes, my feet sometimes get cold even now, but I did not tell my benefactors that the shoes were not keeping me warm.

I grew up in a religious environment after we came to Columbus, Georgia, and after the passing of my mother. The local church became my community center and the place where most of the community activities occurred. It was here that I wondered about my place in history and why I could not find any of my people in any of the books that I read, and my concern began to change to irritation. Where were we in history? Did we just spring as a people from nothing? What were our old roots?

As I approached the end of my last year in grammar school, Evelena Taylor told me that she would not let me use the color of my skin as an excuse for not preparing lessons or an excuse for not aspiring to be true to myself and my greatest potential. She taught me that I must always prepare.

I think my value to the whole field of teaching history is that I have prepared during my lifetime, and I have prepared in the years when no one was thinking anything about black studies, but I kept on preparing until ultimately the door opened. I had to search, however, for some definitions of myself, and during that last year in grammar school, I began to receive some of the privileges in the school that generally went to the light-complected youngsters whom we called "The Light Brigade." They were sons and daughters of the professional blacks—the doctors and the teachers who were usually of light complexion. I was the leader of the group called "The Dark Brigade," the poorest of the children who came from the other side of the railroad tracks. I received that privilege in the school, not just as the leader of the contingent of young people who came from my neighborhood, but because for once the teachers could nominate the best student to ring the bell. Mrs. Taylor, who played no favorites, nominated me.

This privilege gave me my first sense of power—the feeling that I could stand in a window and ring a bell and five hundred children would march out, or I could ring it earlier or later, but they were simply immobile until I rang that bell. After handling my responsibility a little recklessly for a few days by ringing the bell a little early or a little late just to prove my prerogative to do it, I realized that I was not living up to my best potential as Mrs. Taylor meant it. Then I began to exercise this responsibility in the exact manner in which it was supposed to be exercised: to ring the bell for the first recess at exactly 10:15 A.M., to ring the bell for the second recess at noon, to ring for the return of the children into the school at exactly 12:45 P.M., and to ring for dismissal at exactly 3:00 P.M. Thereby, I learned something about the proper use of authority and responsibility.

I wanted to advance the status of my particular little group, the poorest students in the school. They were not the poorest in the way they learned their lessons because they could readily compete with students who came from homes where they had books and some degree of comfort and who wore shoes even in the summertime (which was unthinkable to us because generally we had one pair of shoes and that pair had to last the entire year). I wanted, however, to do something to make my group look exceptionally good. I had been the leader of the current events forum in my school, and because I worked before and

after school mostly for white people who had good libraries and children who never read the books, I began to borrow books from their libraries and bring them home. In Columbus, Georgia, where they had Jim Crow libraries and black people could not use the public library, I began to forge the names of well-known white people on notes that instructed the librarian to give me a certain book. I accumulated a great many books that way. This illegitimate book borrowing went on for quite some time until one day the white person whose name I had forged appeared in the library at the same time I did. That put an end to my illegitimate use of the public library of Columbus.

One Friday evening when the teachers let us do whatever we wanted to do, I planned to do something extraordinary in the leadership of the current events forum. My group had always done a few exceptional things because I would take the magazines and newspapers from the homes of the whites, and, rather than throw them into the garbage can, I would distribute them among our group. I also brought copies of the World Almanac once a year. My group, therefore, always had news from Atlanta, news about the Japanese navy, and news about many different things. When they spoke in school about current events, they were able to speak with authority about international news because they had authoritative sources.

I have always had a phenomenal memory. When I was a youngster, I could quote verbatim much of what I had read in almanacs and in small encyclopedias. In trying literally to outdo "The Light Brigade," I decided to prepare something on the role of the black man in ancient history. I went to a lawyer for whom I worked. He was a kind man whose library I had used quite extensively. I asked him for a book on the role that black people had played in ancient history. In a kindly way he told me that I came from a people who had no history but, that if I persevered and obeyed the laws, my people might one day make history. Then he paid me the highest complement that a white man could pay a black man in the period when I was growing up. He told me that one day I might grow up to be a great Negro like Booker T. Washington.

At that time white people considered that the greatest achievement to which a black man could aspire was to reach the status of the great educator, Booker T. Washington. He *had been* a great educator and he *did* build up Tuskegee Institute, but he consistently cautioned his people to be patient with the Jim Crow system and to learn to be good servants and artisans. He said it was more important to earn a dollar a day (at the turn of the century that was considered good pay for a black man) than to hope or work to sit next to white people in the opera. He was actually telling his people never to seek social equality, and later on he was challenged by W.E.B. DuBois, who created a whole new school of thought based on the belief that blacks should aspire to anything they wanted, be it streetcleaner or president

At the time of my conversation with the lawyer I had nothing for or against Booker T. Washington. I really didn't know much about the lawyer, and his philosophy of racial equality didn't mean a great deal to me. What insulted every part of me to the very depth of my being was his assumption that I came from a people without any history. At that point of my life I began a systematic search for my people's role in history.

Other Influences

During my first year in high school I was doing chores and, because the new high school did not even have a cloakroom, I had to hold the books and papers of a guest lecturer. The speaker had a copy of a book called *The New Negro*. Fortunately I turned to an essay written by a Puerto Rican of African

descent with a German-sounding name. It was called "The Negro Digs Up His Past," by Arthur A. Schomburg (edited by Alan Locke. New York: Albert and Charles Bone, 1925, pp. 231–37). I knew then that I came from a people with a history older even than that of Europe. It was a most profound and overwhelming feeling—this great discovery that my people did have a place in history and that, indeed, their history is older than that of their oppressors.

The essay, "The Negro Digs Up His Past," was my introduction to the ancient history of the black people. Years later when I came to New York, I started to search for Arthur A. Schomburg. Finally, one day I went to the 135th Street library and asked a short-tempered clerk to give me a letter to Arthur A. Schomburg. In an abrupt manner she said, "You will have to walk up three flights." I did so, and there I saw Arthur Schomburg taking charge of the office containing the Schomburg collection of books relating to African people the world over, while the other staff members were out to lunch. I told him impatiently that I wanted to know the history of my people, and I wanted to know it right now and in the quickest possible way. His patience more than matched my impatience. He said, "Sit down, son. What you are calling African history and Negro history is nothing but the missing pages of world history. You will have to know general history to understand these specific aspects of history." He continued patiently, "You have to study your oppressor. That's where your history got lost." Then I began to think that at last I will find out how an entire people—my people—disappeared from the respected commentary of human history.

It took time for me to learn that there is no easy way to study history. (There is in fact, no easy way to study anything.) It is necessary to understand all the components of history in order to recognize its totality. It is similar to knowing where the tributaries of a river are in order to understand the nature of what made the river so big. Mr. Schomburg, therefore, told me to study general history. He said repeatedly, "Study the history of your oppressor."

I began to study the general history of Europe, and I discovered that the first rise of Europe—the Greco-Roman period—was a period when Europe "borrowed" very heavily from Africa. This early civilization depended for its very existence on what was taken from African civilization. At that time I studied Europe more than I studied Africa because I was following Mr. Schomburg's advice, and I found out how and why the slave trade started.

When I returned to Mr. Schomburg, I was ready to start a systematic study of the history of Africa. It was he who is really responsible for what I am and what value I have for the field of African history and the history of black people the world over.

I grew up in Harlem during the depression, having come to New York at the age of seventeen. I was a young depression radical—always studying, always reading, taking advantage of the fact that in New York City I could go into a public library and take out books, read them, bring them back, get some more, and even renew them after six weeks if I hadn't finished them. It was a joyous experience to be exposed to books. Actually, I went through a period of adjustment because my illegitimate borrowing of books from the Jim Crow library of Columbus, Georgia, had not prepared me to walk freely out of a library with a book without feeling like a thief. It took several years before I really felt that I had every right to go there.

During my period of growing up in Harlem, many black teachers were begging for black students, but they did not have to beg me. Men like Willis N. Huggins, Charles C. Serfait, and Mr. Schomburg literally trained me not only to study African history and black people the world over but to teach this history.

My Teaching

All the training I received from my teachers was really set in motion by my great grandmother telling me the stories of my family and my early attempts to search first for my identity as a person, then for the definition of my family, and finally for the role of my people in the in the whole flow of human history.

One thing that I learned very early was that knowing history and teaching it are two different things, and the first does not necessarily prepare one for the second. At first I was an exceptionally poor teacher because I crowded too many of my facts together and they were poorly organized. I was nervous, overanxious, and impatient with my students. I began my teaching career in community centers in Harlem. However, I learned that before I could become an effective teacher, I had to gain better control of myself as a human being. I had to acquire patience with young people who giggled when they were told about African kings. I had to understand that these young people had been so brainwashed by our society that they could see themselves only as depressed beings. I had to realized that they had in many ways adjusted to their oppression and that I needed considerable patience, many teaching skills, and great love for them in order to change their attitudes. I had to learn to be a more patient and understand human being. I had to take command of myself and understand why I was blaming people for not being so well versed in history. In effect, I was saying to them, "How dare you not know this?"

After learning what I would have to do with myself and my subject matter in order to make it more understandable to people with no prior knowledge, I began to become an effective teacher. I learned that teaching history requires not only patience and love but also the ability to make history interesting to the students. I learned that the good teacher is partly an entertainer, and if he lost the attention of his class, he has lost his lesson. A good teacher, like a good entertainer, first must hold his audience's attention. Then he can teach his lesson.

I taught African history in community centers in the Harlem neighborhood for over twenty years before I had any regular school assignment. My first regular assignment was as director of the Heritage Teaching Program at Haryou-Act, an antipoverty agency in Harlem. Here I had the opportunity after school to train young black persons in how to approach history and how to use history as an instrument of personal liberation. I taught them that taking away a people's history is a way to enslave them. I taught them that history is a two-edged sword to be used for oppression or liberation. The major point that I tried, sometimes successfully, to get across to them is that history is supposed to make one self-assured but not arrogant. It is not supposed to give one any privileges over other people, but it should make one see oneself in a new way in relation to other people.

After five years in the Haryou-Act project, I accepted my first regular assignment at the college at which I still teach. I serve also as visiting professor at another university and as an instructor in black heritage during the summer program conducted for teachers by the history department of a third major university. I also travel to the extent that my classes will permit, training teachers how to teach about black heritage. The black power explosion and the black studies explosion have pushed men like me to the forefront in developing approaches to creative and well-documented black curricula. Forced to be in the center of this arena, I have had to take another inventory of myself and my responsibilities. I have found young black students eager for this history and have found many of them having doubts about whether they really had a history in spite of the fact that they had demanded it. I have had to learn patience all over again with

young people on another lever.

On the college level I have encountered another kind of young black student—much older than those who giggle—the kind who does not believe in himself, does not believe in history, and who consequently is in revolt. This student says in effect, "Man, you're turning me on. You know that we didn't rule ancient Egypt." I have had to learn patience all over again as I learned to teach on a level where students come from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

In all my teaching, I have used as my guide the following definition of heritage, and I would like to conclude with it.

Heritage, in essence, is the means by which people have used their talents to create a history that gives them memories they can respect and that they can use to command the respect of other people. The ultimate purpose of heritage and heritage teaching is to use people's talents to develop awareness and pride in themselves so that they themselves can achieve good relationships with other people.

[John Henrik Clarke Virtual Museum](#) | [FRONTal View](#)
[NBUF Homepage](#) | [DuBois Learning Center Homepage](#)