

The Gift of W.E.B. Du Bois and Dr. Du Bois

By Alex Mikulich, Ph.D.

Heralded as the first African-American graduate of Harvard University, the first social scientist to publish a study of African Americans (*The Philadelphia Negro* in 1899), a co-founder of the NAACP in 1909, and the first editor of the NAACP's journal *The Crisis*, Du Bois was a historian, social scientist, pioneering civil rights activist, and Pan-Africanist.



Racism is a spiritual wound that afflicts all Americans. No one escapes it. For white Americans to attend to this wound, we will need to pray incessantly for God's grace and to "see ourselves as others see us."¹

Among countless ways that whites might begin to see ourselves as people of color see us, I suggest W.E.B. Du Bois's critical way of autobiography, including his articulation of "double-consciousness." While many have examined this wound, few have probed the depth of this wound more insightfully, compassionately, and fully as Du Bois.

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historian, social scientist, pioneering civil rights activist, and Pan-Africanist who died at the age of 95 in Ghana on August 27, 1963—one day before the March on Washington.

The most celebrated sentence in Du Bois's nonfiction (he also wrote novels), "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line," which begins chapter two of *Souls of Black Folk*, must be read within the context of chapter one. While many people of color have critically engaged double-consciousness in many and diverse fields of study, I believe it offers a way of spiritual transformation that has largely been missed by white America.

Every chapter of *Souls* begins with at least one stanza of poetry above one bar of a spiritual hymn, that Du Bois calls the "sorrow songs." Chapter I, titled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," begins with "The

Double-Consciousness

Crying of Water” by the poet Arthur Symons. “The Crying of Water” expresses Du Bois’s incessant suffering, mourning, and insatiable thirst for freedom within the experience of the oppression of the slave trade.

Like the poet’s “voice of my heart” that merges ambiguously with the “voice of the sea,” Du Bois’ mourning will not rest until “the last moon droop and the last tide fail.”² And not unlike the great slave spiritual “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” Du Bois expresses through the poet the unyielding terror and sorrow of the troubled waters of the Middle Passage.

Opening one’s heart to Du Bois’ sorrow is critical for entering his exploration of his experience of double-consciousness, for without it, the reader might get easily caught in a grim philosophical dualism with no outlet. One must also enter the physical, emotional, and intellectual experience and embrace the biblical imagery, symbolism, and message.

As James Baldwin expresses, an honest cry for help and healing “is the true basis of all dialogues.”³ To the extent that white people refuse to hear this cry and refuse to mourn with African-Americans, we not only cut ourselves off from connection and dialogue with our African American brothers and sisters but also from our own humanity and God.

Put in terms of the beatitude, “blessed are they who mourn” (Matt 5:4), the refusal to mourn with another is a refusal to join another in shared vulnerability and need for God’s love.

While we may hear the prophet Job’s pleading when Du Bois cries, “why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in my own house,” he knows that the Negro is neither condemned to be a stranger nor soulless. In fact, the “Negro is a sort of seventh son born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the other world.”⁴

As the historian Edward J. Blum explains in his biography of Du Bois, the use of the biblical seven—God rested on the seventh day of creation and Jews honored the seventh child born into a family—marked Negroes as a chosen people with the gift of second sight.⁵ This second sight enabled African Americans to see the myth of American white supremacy.

Or, as Du Bois would later describe “The Souls of White Folk”—“of them I am singularly clairvoyant.” Even when whites “clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness,” he still sees “them ever stripped—ugly, human.”⁶ Until whites look at ourselves in the mirror of double-consciousness, in what Blacks see in us, we will not know the role we play in perpetuating the wound of American racism.

Du Bois describes double-consciousness as “always feeling his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”⁷ Having been ripped of his ancestral home and forced across the ocean into a white world that only looks on in “amused contempt and pity,” white supremacy puts his Americanness and Africanness at war against each other and his very humanity.

In the midst of this war, writes Du Bois, Black folk would neither “Africanize America” nor “bleach his soul in a flood of white Americanism,” for America has too much to teach the world and Blacks have “a message for the world.” Even through his harshest criticism, Du Bois celebrates the goodness of white people and the possibility of American democracy.

While Du Bois echoes the prophet’s cry for justice, his cry is not about resentment. The purpose of “our spiritual strivings,” he explains, is “to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use the best of his powers and his latent genius.”

W.E.B. Du Bois offers a spiritual way for white Americans to enter a journey of transformation into the solidarity of our shared humanity before God. Following that path, I believe, is a way that we can become co-workers in the kingdom of culture, and a way where we all may find God healing the wound of racism. *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater* offer rich spiritual reading for JSQ readers, and a way to more deeply become “coworkers in the kingdom of culture.”

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alex Mikulich, “(Un) Learning White Male Ignorance,” in Laurie Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, ed., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007), p. 170, emphasis in original.
- 2 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003 [1903]), p. 7.
- 3 Margaret Pfeil draws upon Baldwin’s words in chapter 6, “Contemplative Action: Toward White Nonviolent Resistance to Hyper-incarceration,” in *The Scandal of White Complicity in US Hyper-incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2013, p. 167.
- 4 *Ibid.*, Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 9. The following quotes are from p.9 unless otherwise stated.
- 5 Edward J. Blum, *W.E.B. Du Bois: American Prophet*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. 79.
- 6 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater*. (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004, with an introduction by David Levering Lewis [1919]), p. 21.
- 7 *Ibid.*, Du Bois, *Souls*.