

## Postlude: Familiar Waters

**T**hroughout literature water is used as a metaphor for life. And it is referenced in songs throughout our culture. In the spiritual realm we have “Take me to the water”, and “Wade in the water.” And then there are the legendary renderings of Paul Robeson and William Warfield singing “Ole Man River.” In the blues we have “The River’s Invitation,” “Muddy Water,” and even Otis Redding “ ‘Sitting on the Dock of the Bay’ ... watching the tide roll away ... wasting time.” In R&B there’s the Four Tops “Still Water (Runs Deep).” In Jazz there’s Cecil McBee’s “Undercurrent.” We should note that it is often the undercurrent in a stream or river that is the most dangerous, that which is more likely to be the cause of drowning than the over-current. And in hip-hop we have TLC in “Waterfalls” admonishing us “Don’t go chasing waterfalls. Please stick to the rivers and the waters you’re used to.”

And lest we forget, there is the folktale of “Shine” about the mythical Black survivor of the Titanic that took to the waters of the ocean rather than go down with the ship. And his survival travails in the ocean mirrors the survival challenges that Blacks have faced in these United States.

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*However, I was inspired to feature the song by The Sounds of Blackness, “Familiar Waters” written by Mindy Johnson to highlight in the wrap up this memoir. Among its lines are the following:*

*Too long away from who I am  
Too far removed from all I can  
Be not afraid what lies ahead  
It holds your heart too long dead*

*Your soul awakes to a brighter day  
Sings new your voice to light the way  
Step simply on to a higher ground  
Where truer peace is richly found*

*(refrain)*

*Getting back to familiar waters  
A truer place found deep inside  
Something known but long forgotten  
Once removed and now redefined*

*That initial line in the refrain, “Getting back to familiar waters,” expresses my views as to what I think we need to do, now more than ever, to address our current situation. For it is metaphorical of the approach that the Learning Center and its Telehub Network chose to carry out its mission to address some of our communities’ most pressing needs.*

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What our ancestors went through during the “Middle Passage” foreshadowed what we were to go through near the rivers of America. We had to re-acculturate ourselves, learn a new language, learn new survival strategies; in fact we had to “redefine” ourselves, as stated in the song. Any unsupervised gathering of us, during our enslaved period, was considered threatening by our oppressors. So we slipped off “Down by the Riverside” to collect our thoughts, strategize and socialize.

In places where we could quietly gather, we would do our best to educate ourselves, even though it was outlawed. Our oppressors would train us to be able to acquire the skills necessary for us to work for them. But, more often than not, we had to turn inward to acquire the education necessary for our benefit.

When our enslavement ended, it was replaced by “grace period” albeit of segregation. Here too, the training we were offered was primarily to benefit our neo-oppressors. However, when we acquired the franchise in the South, we hurriedly moved to establish “public schools” there so that our youth could receive a more fitting education that could redound to our benefit. For ten short years we seemed to be making steady progress. Then Reconstruction ended and the abyss of “Jim Crow” segregation set in. We went through an ocean of despair. However, as DuBois wrote in “Black Reconstruction,” in those ten short years we had acquired enough leadership, as a result of the establishment of the Black Church and the Black College, to navigate us through those rough waters. In fact when our enslaved period ended, we were over ninety percent illiterate. And by the turn of the century, 1900, we were over fifty percent literate. That is an achievement that is unprecedented in human history!

Now let me hasten to add, that we did not do this entirely alone. We had some help by enlightened souls. But the initiative and drive came from within. And this pattern has continued up to this day. We had our “village” concept then and we have our “village” concept now. These are our “familiar waters.” Always we have to play to our strengths and with the hand we’ve been dealt. We should not be mere swine that have neither the insight nor wisdom to take advantage of the pearls cast in our midst.

I argue that the pearls in our midst are the many skilled professionals, people in the trades, and arts, etc., in a variety of areas and fields that have sprung forth from our communities, many as a result of the Civil Rights movement. And among them are “master souls” who will give of themselves for the uplift our communities. These are those who use their education to build our communities, rather than simply being satisfied with receiving a good enough training to earn enough money to live a good life. All of us are products of our environment. Haki Madhubuti has pointed out in his book “Black Men: Single, Obsolete and Dangerous?” that people grow up and do what they have been taught to do. Recall the type of things we say, mentioned in Chapter Six, that we typically use to encourage our youth to get a good education: You need a good education so that you can get a good job; so that you can make some good money; so that you will be able to live a good life. And that is what most of our youth who receive a good training and acquire good skills grow up and do. It is our “master souls” who step out of this acculturated path and use their talents to uplift our communities.

Moreover, ever since the end of our enslaved period onward, we have established institutions, such as churches and community centers, which are facilities that are owned or controlled by members of our community that we have used for the betterment of our communities. These are examples of “familiar waters” that we have traditionally used to

collect our thoughts, to organize ourselves, to get ourselves together, and to pool our resources for our collective uplift.

**Kansas City is fortunate to have in its midst** a grand old man that many of us regard as the sage of our community, Dr. Jeremiah Cameron. He is a retired educator of over forty years. Among the positions he has held was the head of the English department at Penn Valley Community College. He has written a series of articles on the “Brain and Learning” and some reading lesson plans for elementary school children that are posted on our website. See:

- <http://www.duboisl.org/EducationWatch/JCameron/JCameronArticles.html>, and
- <http://www.duboisl.net/read/YouCanRead/YouCanReadIntro.html>.

I was personally blessed to have him as my high school English teacher. (And given the fact that he had gone to school with my parents, aunt and uncles, I knew that I had better shape up while I was under his watchful eye.) Dr. Cameron has often expressed to me that the most important thing that the Learning Center is providing our children is not the tutoring. It is providing our youth with the realization of caring adults giving of themselves and their time to work with them. (Although it is clear to all concerned that the tutoring benefits them as well.) One of our slogans states: Children learn more from what you are than what you teach.

Others have often commented on the quality of our staff, and the mere fact that so many of them volunteer their services is what many find remarkable. Professor James Smalls of New York said to us, “You would have to go to the community college level to find a comparable staff.” Many people who have witnessed the Learning Center have made similar comments. In addition to that, from what they’ve observed, they tell us, in effect, that what the Learning Center has done is provide a model of an organization or institution that is set up in such a way as to make it possible for the “master souls” that are the “pearls,” referred to above, to give of themselves to the benefit of our community in an environment wherein they can try out their visions and are free to do things in their own way. (Or to paraphrase Elton: It makes it easier for them to get off the mountain and come back to the valley.) And again as we like to say, they are limited by their collective imagination. I like to think that this is another way of “getting back to familiar waters ... something known but long forgotten, once removed and now redefined.” Professor Smalls has charged us with the responsibility of spreading this concept.

**In this Information Age** that we have entered into, there are opportunities opening up to be taken advantage of. If only we have the wisdom and insight to see the pearls in our midst. The establishment of our Telehub Network, I submit, is an example of taking advantage of such an opportunity. And as a result, many more opportunities will open up for us to take advantage of.

Hopefully we can use the Telehub Network to help fashion a more enlightened culture in our communities. Culture is key. It affects all things, especially the education of our youth. The acculturation they receive determines what they consider important, what they want out of life, and how hard they will be willing to work to accomplish it. Amilcar Calbral, an African sage and visionary, stated it well when he said that “culture is an act of liberation.”

**Lloyd Daniel is a member of our community** that many of us refer to as our poet laureate. In his poem “The Mind and the Body” he states “the mind and the body, you know that since the start, the mind and the body, ain’t never been apart.” This stresses the need for an emphasis on holism—both mental and physical, and in these times I would add, emotional and spiritual. Kwame Nkrumah, the late prime minister of Ghana, used to speak about “thinkers and doers.” We especially see this kind of coming together within the Learning Center’s Telehub Network. What I often refer to as a dance between the “hard techs” and the “soft techs,” those who build and undergird the infrastructure, and those who use it to develop, maintain and employ applications that run on it.

Later in the poem he tells us “we stand on the brink of another man, all around the word the land is changing hands.” But what of this “another man” is he speaking? I would argue that he is a man who will “be not afraid of what lies ahead”; a seer who prophesizes to fellow travelers—know “your soul awakes to a brighter day”; a visionary with the foresight to “step simply onto higher ground”; a sage who counsels that we can attain the world of our dreams by “getting back to familiar waters, a truer place found deep inside.”

And what of this “brink” we’re standing on? I submit its foundation, its cornerstone, is “a truer place found deep inside.” It’s likened unto the aforementioned cultural and historical helix (see Chapter Five) in the sense that it comes back around but on another level. It’s the metaphysical verge of a higher level of vision, insight and indeed an action to be taken, based on the best of the tradition and cultural traits that’s served us well up to this point, but upgraded for these historical times. It’s “something known but long forgotten, once removed and now redefined.”

Indeed, “all around the world the land *is* changing hands.” But not necessarily in the sense usually meant. In this era, the Information Age, it’s more of a virtual change, or change in infrastructure and “undercurrent,” if you will. But this dance within “familiar waters” must continue for success in this era.

And this again brings us back to the observations of the Learning Center’s Telehub Network. Already we have witnessed a cooperative spirit emerge among the participants of the Telehub, a pulling together, a dance if you will, to help make it successful. “Blessed be the tie that binds” the classic gospel tune reminds us. And the Telehub Network is certainly binding us together. We have coined an expression that seems to capture the essence of all this: “competitive cooperation.”

As the youth and others engage the technology, they invariably come up with creative new things, or ways of doing things. When it is observed, others want to bring their operations up to speed. And we have seen processes shared by those who create them. So you have competition, but at the same time you have cooperation. That creates a win-win environment.

**Aretha Franklin established a new phase of her career** when she left Columbia Records and joined Atlantic Records. For her very first album there, “I Ain’t Never Loved a Man the Way that I Loved You,” she recorded a song entitled “Don’t Let Me Lose This Dream.” And in it she pleads “baby, baby hold on.” Then she repeats the words in the title followed by “baby, baby be strong.” As we seek to fashion “The World

of Our Dreams,” we should be mindful of Aretha’s plea. After all, we’ve “come this far by faith,” and we still have a ways to go. But we can make it if we try.

So let me conclude this memoir with the words of W.E.B. DuBois that opened the prelude. And with a gentle reminder that although they are from his speech given during the era of segregation, entitled “The Field and function of the Negro College,” that their essence still rings true today.

*We live our lives in years, swift, flying, transient years. We hold the possible future in our hands but not by wish and will, only by thought, plan, knowledge, and organization. If the college can pour into the coming age an American Negro who knows himself and his plight and how to protect himself and fight race prejudice, then the world of our dreams will come true and not otherwise.*

He goes on to say: *If we use our brains and strength there is no way to stop our ultimate triumph as creators of modern culture—if we use our strength and brains. And what, pray, stops us but our dumb caution—our fears—our very sanity. Let us then be insane with courage.*