

By Dr. Horace Mann Bond
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My subject is, "A Cigarette for Johnnie Birchfield." I announce that subject, and assure you that, sooner or later, I intend to talk to the point of it. But first I must tell you why I am here; and this, in itself, is a long tale.

I was overjoyed to get your kind invitation to come to Montgomery, but uncertain as to whether I could do so. This uncertainty, I assure you, was altogether because of reasons of health. My health has not been so good in recent months, and it seemed extremely doubtful, if a trip to Montgomery, just at this season of the year, would be likely – (in spite of the ancient and well deserved reputation of these parts for salubrity of climate) – to contribute, restore, or improve my chances for living out the Biblical three-score-and-ten span promised by the Psalmist.

But then I reflected how much Montgomery had endeared itself to me in my youth, as a kind, urbane, and forgiving city. When I lived here, in the year 1927-1928, and during successive assignments as a researcher and summer school teacher, I had frequent occasion to reflect on the broad, liberal policies of the City Government—from the policeman on his beat, to His Honor in City Hall; all displayed commendable tolerance toward the frailties of human nature, and the misdeeds of evil-doers. In those days, the Tract was "wide open"; I do not know how it is now, but I shall never forget what an education it then was to me – a poor, ignorant, somewhat innocent boy reared in a narrow Christian home – to see (always from a distance, I assure you!) those bright lights burning on Holt and its back streets and alleys, knowing that, fortunately, this was not for me; both because of my upbringing, and because those lights illumined a world dedicated to "joy" that was segregated, that it might also be "inter-racial."

When I did decide to come, it was for several reasons. Firstly, I was young, in Montgomery, 29 years ago; and one can never quite forget the pleasant memories of a stretch of one's youth spent amidst a veritable plethora of pretty girls; and I see there are still a lot of pretty girls in Montgomery!

Secondly, I wanted to come, to see this strange thing that was happening in this town, according to the newspapers. By trade, I have been a historian, and my specialty has been the history of Alabama. I have written, literally, hundreds of thousands of words, trying to tell the story of the history of this State; its mid-position in the Lower South gives that history an uncommon significance both for the entire Southern section, and for the Nation, and so for the world.

Now history is being made; and I saw it as my privilege, to visit one spot on earth while History, in the grand manner, was in process of being made. While thanking your Committee for inviting me, I reflected that I had, really, little to bring to this Association, or to this city, beyond a deep and lively curiosity, to view History in the making.

We hear a great deal, these days, about “outside agitators”; and about “gradualism.” I can scarcely qualify as an “outside agitator,” even if I wished to be one; but I must confess to being, if not the original gradualist, at least one of more than twenty years of standing. I am scarcely from the “outside,” since I was born in Tennessee, lived in Kentucky, Alabama, and Georgia, as a youth; and, for years, worked and researched all over the very Deep South.

I say, again, that I am an old time “gradualist.” On my arrival here this morning, I got from this Library a copy of a book on education I published in 1934 – twenty-two years ago. I wanted to check up on some proposals for education that I then made. I turned to the pages where I discussed the future, and read with interest the confident proposal I then made. I had it all neatly figured out, whereby the South could achieve an equality of educational expenditures for whites and Negroes – and, of course, in a segregated system – between 1933 and 1953. My scheme was very simple, and would have been painless; I proposed that there be added, to the expenditure for each Negro child, per capita, just 50 cents more, each year, than was added to the expenditures for each white child; and estimated that in cities like Birmingham, Nashville, even Montgomery, this would have done the trick, neatly and effectively, in the twenty year period that began in 1933, and ended in 1953.

But no one paid any attention to my little book – in fact, few ever read it – and now, looking back, I think it is just as well; indeed, it is better, so.

The only moral is, that I now see myself a failure as a prophet, or, rather, as a prophet whose predictions have been outridden by History. As an "educational expert," I now see my work deserving a flunking mark; and the shape of things in 1956 out of all recognition as compared to my confident plans made in 1933.

This was no reason, to burden your association with my presence at this meeting.

But I had still a third reason, and that is the real reason why I came; and with gratitude. It was, to bring, "A Cigarette for Johnny Birchfield."

You've never heard of Johnnie Birchfield. Let me tell you how I knew him; and why I bring, tonight, a cigarette for him, and his memory.

I met Johnnie Birchfield for the first and last time, just twenty-eight years ago. I met him in the death cell at Kilby Prison, where I had gone, with the Reverend Williams, prison chaplain, to comfort two condemned prisoners in their last moments here on earth. One of the men was Charlie Washington, a Negro, from Birmingham; he had been convicted of killing a motor policeman, and the entire squad had come down from Birmingham to seem him die.

The other prisoner was Johnnie Birchfield. He was a young white man from the hills of Eastern Alabama. Neither Charlie Washington, nor Johnnie Birchfield, had ever had much of an education; the first, because he was a Negro; the second, because he was a white boy from an Alabama white county. Both men had committed heinous crimes, and the Law, in all its majesty, was taking its just, but terrible, course.

Regardless of Justice, and Law; regardless, even, of Murder; it is not an easy thing to see human beings die, especially when they are young; and never had their full and complete chance; and when they die at the hands of a State that, somewhere, never quite did for such people what its Constitution and laws have pledged themselves to do for them. As I sang and prayed with Charlie Washington, and Johnnie Birchfield, that night twenty-eight years ago, there came to me an overwhelming realization of the responsibility each individual citizen owes to every other human being; and to his God.

Just before the last moment, they let the men out of their cells, to sing together in the corridor. Charlie Williams was on my left, and Johnnie Birchfield was on my right; and, between us, we held one hymn-book.

I can remember, as though it were tonight, Charlie William's black thumb on that hymn-book page; and Johnnie Birchfield's pink-white thumb, holding the other page. And I can remember the song we sang, together.

"I've wondered far away from home
The paths of Sin too long I've roamed;
Lord, I'm coming home.

Coming home, coming home,
Never more to roam;
Open wide the gates of love;
Lord, I'm coming home.

I've wasted many precious years;
Lord, I'm coming home;

And now repent in bitter tears.
Lord, I'm coming home.

Coming home, coming home,
Never more to roam,
Open wide the gates of love,
Lord, I'm coming home."

It struck me, that after we passed the first, and familiar verse, neither Charlie Washington, nor Johnnie Birchfield, could very well read the other verses; they had to follow me and the other chaplains.

This I could never forget. It may not have made any difference, if the State had given each of the men an education up to the Ph.D. level; they might yet have fallen into the toils of the law. But somehow, the society in which both had lived, was so contrived, that neither ever got much of any kind of education at all; the black man, because he was black; and the white boy, because he was a white boy from an Alabama hill county.

Somehow it seemed then, as it still seems, a monstrous injustice, that it should be so; and that the monstrosity belongs to each and every human being who, living in such a society, knows the truth, but does not voice it.

And there was something else I can never forget.

In one of the interludes between song, and prayer; and prayer, and song; Johnnie Birchfield asked me for a cigarette.

Now, I had cigarettes in my pocket. I could have given Johnnie Birchfield a cigarette. But for some strange reason, that I yet cannot explain, I told Johnnie Birchfield that I didn't have a cigarette. It may have been mental shock; it may have been a sub-conscious shame at having so wicked a thing as a cigarette on my person, in this dread place of death that was also something like a Holy of Holies, for Men were here being consecrated to their Maker – or maybe it was just because Johnnie Birchfield was white – and I was Negro.

For whatever reason, I did the ultimate unkindness; I didn't give Johnnie Birchfield, who was scheduled to die in thirty minute, a cigarette.

Now that is why I am really here tonight.

Out of the remorse of twenty-eight years of regret; and into a world and state and city inhabited by the ghosts of Charlie Washingtons, and Johnnie Birchfields past, living, and yet to die; I bring a cigarette of love, to the memory of Johnnie Birchfield.

Your theme is, "Meeting our Crisis through Education: State, Nation, World." It may be well for us to realize that the Past is always Prologue; and that each new crisis may be understood, and its solution intelligently planned, only when we understand the history of the social Crises that perennially afflict all mankind; and the history, likewise, of the solutions men have advanced to meet each new crisis.

There are three great sources of American educational traditions.

One, of course, is that ancient ethic and religion, Judaism, that first gave to human beings the notion that there was one God, and, therefore, the idea that all of the children of the One God must be brothers, since God was the Father of all mankind. Noble as it was, Judaism suffered limitations because its followers developed the theory that theirs was a singular God to a singularly chosen people. But the great, basic idea, flowered as

Christianity, and the expansion of the idea that all men, of whatever race or condition, are truly children of one God, and, therefore, are brothers.

As the root of Judaism branched into Christianity, the third great tap source of our American educational heritage was the Enlightenment, that 18th Century philosophical movement, created by men like Locke and Rousseau, who developed a system of rationalism that deeply affected the history of this Nation. You know that this year we are celebrating the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Benjamin Franklin's birth; it is less well known that this universal sage and philosopher derived his conception of the natural rights of man from the Philosophers of the Enlightenment in France, and England, with whom he held commerce, as did Thomas Jefferson, the author of our Declaration of Independence. The very cornerstone of our American faith is, that "all men are created equal; and are endowed by their Creator, with certain unalienable rights." This was Judaism; this was the genius of Christianity; this was the genius of the 18th Century and of our American Revolution, each root leading upward to create a new nation and start its growth toward eventual realization of its ideals.

Both Thomas Jefferson and Franklin had to accept compromises, in the making of our American Constitution, and on the slave question. Thomas Jefferson faced difficulties, not from his Virginia constituents; for Virginia was on the brink of emancipating its slaves, as New York and Pennsylvania were then just doing. Jefferson, and Franklin, had to accept compromise because of the lower Southern colonies; South Carolina, and Georgia, in particular. But they did what they could to make a Federal Nation; they left intact in the basic constitutional documents, their sublime convictions, in good hope that some day, these principles might be realized; and each died in the great Faith they had made perpetual part of this Nation's great, founding documents; Franklin, in 1790; ten days after publishing his last letter, one to the newspapers, ridiculing a South Carolina Congressman who had defended human slavery; Jefferson, in 1826, emancipating his slaves, and leaving behind the tragic prophecy that he foresaw calamity for his country, should slavery be retained.

The American Faith is a noble one; one of its difficulties is that it encourages the belief in perpetual progress, rising ever upward. We have a noble creed; but we are also

human; and human beings can never go steadily onward, and upward, without occasional relapses.

So was it with the American creed of human equality. As promulgated in 1776, with our Declaration of Independence; and made into a Constitution in 1789; the fervor of first things then seemed to promise immediate realization. This was the period when the New England and the Middle States did abolish slavery; and when the mid-South States moved strongly in that direction. Few recall that Virginia, repeatedly, failed only by a vote or two of abolishing slavery, the latest date being 1818, when a bill to abolish slavery in Virginia failed of passage only by a vote of 21-20. Sentiment in North Carolina, likewise, was strong.

Perhaps because of the economic changes that made slavery profitable; perhaps because of the almost inevitable tendency of human beings, to find it difficult to sustain permanently the high note and plane and of initial conviction; there was a reaction in the 1830s. Virginia, that only a few years before had nearly abolished slavery, now passed the harshest legislation to enforce the institution; and Virginia was followed by severe "Black Codes" adopted in the other Slave States.

The reaction, in terms of the bright, high hopes of the Revolutionary period, was almost complete; but there were still small voices stirring in the land. These were the voices of men, principally in New England, but also including many in the South; for one of the first published voices of the abolitionist movement was that of Elihu Embree, printed at Greenville, Tennessee. A great portion of the migration from North and South Carolina, across the mountains and up to the Middle West, was of men who could not bring themselves to continue to live in a slave state.

These "abolitionists" have now, in many quarters, a bad name; they are called "fanatics," "wild-eyed radicals," "troublemakers." But they never said anything more radical than what Thomas Jefferson wrote into our Declaration of Independence; their "radicalism," their "trouble making," consisted in voicing, in a different intellectual climate, the words Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson had enunciated fifty years before.

They were, then, peculiarly American, drawing their inspiration from sources that, likewise, were peculiarly American. We remember that the year 1848, in Europe was a

time of great, but unsuccessful, revolutionary movements; the period of the Birth of Karl Marx's and Engel's, "Communist Manifesto." Communism had its birth in a social and political system where Revolution was defeated by bloody force of arms; and where the people had no tradition of individual freedom through law.

We have another tradition in America. It is, indeed, the great American tradition; the hope, and, indeed, certain faith, that social and political change can be effected through democratic procedures and policies. The "abolitionists" founded their Faith on the processes and theory of Christian Democracy.

And yet, they fought what in their times seemed to be, indeed, a "Lost Cause." The height of the work of the abolitionists was carried on from 1838 to 1854; and included in their ranks were Lurcretia Mott, who worked, also, for the emancipation of women; the good poet, Whittier; Theodore Weld, the eloquent evangel who married Angelina Grimke, the South Carolina aristocrat who turned her back on slavery; Henry Barnard, who founded the National Education Association, and the first American Normal School; and Horace Mann himself, who left his secure job, as superintendent of Education in Massachusetts, to enter Congress on an anti-slavery platform.

The cause seemed lost; but it was planted by Horace Mann at Antioch college – now nobly represented in Montgomery by Mrs. Martin King; and at Oberlin College, where, in 1834, was formed the first higher institution in America that opened its doors to two despised classes; women, and Negroes. The men who founded Oberlin founded also, the American Missionary Association; and even before the Civil War had begun, tried to establish an inter-racial college at Berea, in Kentucky, a slave state.

It should be remembered, that Berea was reconstituted after the Civil War; and continued to flourish as an institution, in the South, interracial in trustee board, faculty, and student body, until the Kentucky Day Law was passed in 1904, and upheld by the Supreme Court in 1907. It was in this decision that the great Kentucky jurist, Justice Harlan, repeated his famous dissent from Plessy vs. Ferguson of 1896; "The Constitution of the United States is Color Blind."

The theory of absolute human equality seemed briefly assured, after the Civil War; but by 1876, had again become a lost cause. Here in Alabama, it had its advocates.

One was Peyton Finley, Negro, a member of the State Board of Education during Reconstruction.

It should be interesting to recall Peyton Finley's efforts. He pointed out to his contemporaries, in 1871, on the Board, that Negroes had been refused admission to the University of Alabama; why, then, not establish a University for the Negroes? Due to his insistency, this was finally done; and the "Alabama Colored People's University" was established at Marion; the parent of this Alabama State College of the present time.

And, in 1875, a great Alabama Superintendent of Education, a Democrat, and a Conservative, said of this school, "The normal school at Marion is designed to become a University for the colored race in the State; and it is not doubted that its facilities for furnishing the higher education to this race will be amplified as the demand therefore becomes apparent."

John K. McKleroy was, of course, perfectly sincere, and honest, but it did not turn out that way. There arose, in this State, and elsewhere in the South, a generation that knew not Joseph; nor remembered any of the promises made to Negroes when Reconstruction was ended. It is a striking commentary on "Gradualism"; but also, on how causes are lost over many generations, as well as years.

From 1890, to 1920, the cause seemed really lost. This was the period in which William Burns Paterson, and J.W. Beverly and George W. Trenholm struggled manfully to keep this institution alive, as its name was degraded through the years, and the yearly appropriation reduced from \$25,000 to \$15,000 to \$10,000 and then to \$4,000 a year.

But the cause was not really lost. The seed had been planted; the same seed of the faith in equal creation of mankind, that Thomas Jefferson had implanted in our Declaration of Independence; that Henry Barnard and Horace Mann had planted in American education; that had been nursed in the tiny colleges, that almost seemed to lie dormant; but where men like DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, Thurgood Marshall, Charles Houston, James Nabrit, and the rest had been cradled, and given the great vision of human equality.

I think, some day, our histories will show that these men saved America; and so, saved the world. Their's was the old – the oldest – American tradition, of human freedom.

The world has always learned the hard way, the inexorable lesson of the corruptions wrought by power, and wealth. Human beings are so constituted, that the quickest poison is that of exercising unchecked power over one's fellow men. The little band of men, and women, who in the 1830s, kept alive the apparently "lost cause" of absolute human equality, were the anti-body that preserved the health of this Nation, and armed it for its "time of troubles" when the 20th Century brought conflict with powerful and fanatic Fascist and Communist totalitarian States.

So have served the men, and women, in our generation, who have lived, and placed their lives in jeopardy, to keep this Nation true to its original aims. It is a thrilling fact, that the stone the builder rejected, now providentially turns itself into the chief cornerstone upon which this Nation's pretensions rest in its struggle for survival in a world yet dangerously constituted.

But here, in this city, we are seeing a high human drama, when the talent we have received from the 19th Century, and from the 18th Century, undergoes even a further refinement. A great many of the radical abolitionist of the 19th century were pacifists; such a one was Garrison. But a substantial number did believe in force, and the recapturing of human rights and equality through the application of force, to meet force.

It is a majestic thing, that here, before our eyes, is being added a fourth dimension to a noble heritage. For here we see the ancient heritage of the ancient Judaistic notion, that all men are the children of one God; consummated courageously and lovingly with the even greater heritage, of the Son of God who was also the Prince of Peace.

It is a historic time, and a historic place, for here, for the very first time in the history of these United States of America, have we witnessed thousands of American citizens exemplifying the principle of peaceful resistance to what their religious conviction and their basic American civil documents tell them is an outrage to human dignity.

This is love among the ashes of many lost human causes. This is the majesty of the common man, who thereby makes himself, and his fellows, an uncommon man. In this wicked, worried world, no application of force and violence has ever permanently won a cause. Here in Montgomery, we see being written hourly, daily, a new chapter in the history of the human race.

That is why I call this talk to you, "A Cigarette for Johnnie Birchfield." Not all of the electric chairs in the world reach to the roots of a soil wherein are grown Charlie Washingtons, and Johnnie Birchfields.

Having long felt that teachers like yourself are carriers of a great tradition, I now feel that great tradition has now been immeasurably enriched, by history being made here in Montgomery, Alabama. The lesson taught reaches to the heart, and, I hope, to your heart, and through your heart, to the heart of the hundreds of thousands of children you teach. It is an opportunity that never until this day has come, in the history of the entire teaching profession since time began.

None of us is perfect, nor ever will be. Still, man stumbles along the road to perfection. One man, or a dozen, or twenty, hit upon a great idea in a German, an Italian, an American laboratory; and, presto! by their genius the whole world is imperiled.

Here in Montgomery, one man; and a dozen; and a hundred; and a thousand; and fifty thousand; stumble upon another, but even more powerful, idea. And, Presto! by their simple genius and faith, the whole world is, prospectively, saved from immolation.

It is in the faith that this is so, that I bring here, tonight, a Cigarette for Johnnie Birchfield; and sing with him, whether in the corridors of Kilby Penitentiary, or in this Hall, and anywhere in the world where human beings are distressed of heart, imperiled of life, uneasy of their destiny:

"I've wondered far away from Home;
The paths of Sin too long I've roamed;
Lord, I'm coming home.

Coming home, coming home;
Never to roam;
Open wide the gates of love;
Lord, I'm coming home."

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