

BLACK POWER: KEY TO NATIONAL FULFILLMENT

by Nathan Wright, Jr., Ed. D.

The mounting dislocations in our American cities stem from an unwholesome imbalance in power relations between black and white Americans.

"We do not want better housing. We do not want better schools. We do not want any more of anything. We simply want to be treated like people." This is the message being made increasingly clear, as the smoke is dissipated above the smoldering rubble of our riot-and-revolt-torn cities.

The desire to be persons is the will to control one's own destiny. It speaks to the issue of the equitable extension of power which is the means of national fulfillment.

A divorce court judge tells of a woman who came before his court seeking a divorce. Had her husband not provided for her? No. He had given her every material thing which she had wanted, and often in double measure. She had two cars and two fur coats. Whenever she expressed a need, she was treated like a Christmas tree. Another ornament was added. She was decorated with abundance. But she had never been treated like a person.

"Persons" have a sense of being. They experience a creative give-and-take with others. They recognize a sense of power over their own destiny. They know that they are more than "things".

Black people in America have been treated as though they were things. Some young black people who are yearning for identity and are seeking an explanation for their past sense of negative identity see in the failure of black people to be "black" as the root of our racial difficulties. Hence, for them there must be a glorification of blackness. "Black is beautiful." "Black is glorious." "Black is best." These expressions become pathways toward being. They are seen as the vehicles which make for fulfillment. Fulfillment must come for black Americans, for only as fulfillment come to the nation as a whole. *(is defined by black Americans)*

Indeed, the term Black Power speaks not only to two of the basic problems in the life of Black Americans but also to the two problems which are most pervasive in our national life. They are the twin concerns of identity and fulfillment.

Becoming Whom We Are

Black people have a negative conception of whom or what they are. Black people, in our census, are "non-white".

Look up "black" and "white" in the dictionary. Webster's New World Dictionary: College Edition, 1964, speaks of black thus: "1 opposite to white...2. dark-complexioned. 3. Negro...4. totally without light; in complete darkness, dark. 5. soiled, dirty. 6. wearing black clothing. 7. evil, wicked, harmful. 8. disgraceful. 9. sad; dismal; gloomy...10. sullen; angered. 11. without hope; as, a black future..."

The same dictionary defines "white" in far different terms. White means; 1. having the color of pure snow or milk; of the color of radiated, transmitted, or reflects light containing all the visible rays of the spectrum; opposite to black. 2. of a light or pale color; specifically, a) gray; silvery; hoary. b) very blond. c) pale; wan; pallid; ashen; as a face white with terror. d) light-yellow or amber; as, white wines. e) blank; said of a space unmarked by printing, writing, etc. f) of a light-gray color and lustrous appearance; unburnished: said of silver and other metal. g) made of silver. h) snowy; as, the White Friars. 4. morally or spiritually pure; spotless; innocent. 5. free from evil intent; harmless; as, white magic, a white lie. 6. (rare) happy; fortunate; auspicious; said of times and seasons. 7. a) having a light-colored skin; Caucasian. b) of or controlled by the white race; as, white supremacy. c) (nations of racial superiority). (slang), honest, fair, dependable. 8. being at white heat...9. reactionary, counter-revolutionary, or royalist, as opposed to red (radical or revolutionary..."

Black people start off with two strikes of cultural bias against them. A non-being, a negative identity is a nobody.

Small wonder, then, the poor learning habits of so many of our black urban youth! Small wonder also the crimes of self-destruction and the social and civic expressions of self-hate!

Small wonder also that black people are, by many signs, this nation's basic hope for sanity, decency and fulfillment!

By addressing ourselves to specific problems which appear as urgent in the life of black Americans we develop saving answers which redound to the benefit of all. Is not the problem of identity, after all, the most pervasive problem in our personal, family, community and total corporate and national life?

Our jails, and mental and general hospitals and our automobile accident and divorce and delinquency lists - are filled with people who have difficulties with the matter of identity. People who know who and what they are and who have a clear vision of what they are destined to be are daily more rare in a world where people are gripped by a sense of being "lost", "alone", "afraid."

By raising the issue of the need for a positive identify for black people through the current focus on Black Power, a direct and immediate service has been performed by black people for the nation as a whole.

Whenever we look at the problems of our black communities we may see the problems of America as a whole as though written or sketched with a large hand, in dimensions closer and bold enough for all to see and understand. The problems of black America are those of white America in extremis. They are there to come to terms with for the benefit of one and all.

Thus, in our urban schools the widespread problem of identity might be faced squarely for the greatest good for all.

Pupils learn largely by a role identification. A student pictures himself, for example, as a doctor or a scientist. Each day then he learns in relation to that which he senses that he shall be.

In a negative way it is evident that teachers who are aggressively upward mobile, away from the blue collar background of their youth, tend to be threatened by the presence of those who remind them of the social or economic identification from which they would seek to escape. Thus the lower class white children in our urban schools - along with the black children who corporately symbolize a low socioeconomic status - for some teachers become the invisible students who cannot be taught. To the teacher, caught in the threat-to-identify bind, those whose presence would threaten are simply wished away. This is not basically racial prejudice, such as we have often thought in the past. It may include prejudice but is largely a common place mechanism with which we must come to grips in teaching and learning and in every area of our common life.

Two basic attributes are needed for teaching. They are self-understanding and a knowledge and love of one's subject. The failure to understand and accept oneself is the basic barrier to all communication. A person who does not know or accept himself cannot know and become accepting of others.

On the other hand, one who knows and accepts himself may relate freely to others.

Self-hate among black Americans is a logical consequence of the desire by black people to be American. Being unaccepted in large measure by America, black Americans try harder than all others to be American. Thus in the traditional American disdain for blackness (as the Century Dictionary reveals) black people often out do their fellow Americans.

So-called riots are expressive of self-hate. They are black

suicide before white men's bullets. They represent the crazed consequence of being a nobody boxed in on a dead-end street.

### The Power To Become

Both a scientist named Aristotle and a prophet named Paul said that life is what it is destined to become.

What all life needs is the power to find its due fulfillment.

Thus Black Power speaks both to identity (or the recognition of ourselves as the persons we should be) and to the empowerment necessary to enter fully into the life which should be our own.

People who are power less find frustration as their daily lot.

Such is the lot of the black masses in a place which might be called Everywhere, U.S.A.

Frustration is the condition of seeing a goal and of never seeming to have the power or the capacity to achieve it. Black people want daily for a fair return for energies fully spent. But there are certain rewards for white men and other rewards for "others".

Sometimes the reward is more, not less. Sometimes the black men get the breaks. They are accorded a kind of preferential treatment. Whether too much or too little, the general rule is still the same: there are other rewards for "others".

The anti-poverty programs often favor the black poor over the poor who happen to be white. The unusual black man may often get a more than even break. Yet characteristically, a crucial ingredient is missing. He has not the reins of power. Others do for him. Others decide. He is, after all, a part of a white man's controlled and effectively white purposed world.

Black men, women and children in America have found frustration to be their daily lot. Theirs has not been the power to control, to shape or to decree even in those areas which pertain to their own immediate welfare.

Those with power decide. Those without power become what others than themselves decide what they shall or shall not be.

Those whose lives are marked by frustration may either turn to escapism or they may become bitter, resentful and resigned. These are the two paths of accomodation to frustration most often followed by black Americans.

Black Americans have found means of escape in many ways.

### The Misuse of Religion

They have, perhaps most often, turned to religion for escape. Religion has through the ages been the bulwark for those in need. It has opened men's sights upon a hidden world where pain, want, degradation and defeat are turned to victory. The fact that these ingredients, to be turned to victory, must be used for a redemptive purpose, is all-too-easily and all-too-often lost.

The religion of the oppressed becomes most easily the religion of accomodation. The "balm of Gilead" is not used for healing and restoration. It becomes the salve for relieving pain.

In this light, the religion of the oppressed may be seen as a mirror image of the religion of those who, however well-intentioned individually they may be, are cast by historical and cultural circumstance in the role of the oppressor. Those who have or weild power, always, in relation to the power less, fulfill the oppressor role.

The powerless, the oppressed, need power to move out of their power-lessness, which is the root of their oppression. Power is never freely shared. Those who have power will seek to ease the pain of the powerless. They will work to create a condition of relaxed frustration or of bearable pain or poverty. The keys to the seats of power, however, are never freely given ever.

Hence, the religion of those who have power tends to sanctify and uphold the public good "as is". This is true of institutions generally. This is almost inevitable, in that no movement is allowed by those who control society, to continue long enough to become an institution unless it is committed to the upholding of the existing public order.

Those who have power see good in those relationships which give to society stability. This means that basic relationships are to remain as they are. The technical name for "relationships as they are" is "mores" (more-aze.) Our churches - along with other business, civic, social and educational institutions are upholders of the public mores, meaning the public morality.

Morals, in this root sense, reflect the present interests of those presently in power. Morals or standards of morality change only when there is a change in power relationships.

The religion of those in power is never basically re-creative and hence redemptive. It is, on the other hand repressive, even though in a kindly, caring and loving way. Like the pathological religion of those who are hopelessly oppressed, the religion of those who find themselves caught in the oppressor role is escapist.

It is other-worldly or "spiritual". It lifts men's sense beyond present reality as it focuses men's sights upon heavenly realms of glory, that which is becomes "the given." It is the assumed starting point beyond which religion moves.

Yet the "glory" upon which true religion would have us focus is only the fulfillment of that which is immediate. Heaven is the present circumstance redeemed. "Speak comfortably to Jerusalem", said the prophet. "Cry aloud and let her know that her iniquity is pardoned, that her warfare is accomplished." Eternal things are ever-present. They are not realities which wait for the future, and so which are yet to be.

The escapist religion of the hopelessly oppressed is but a mirror image of the "beyond reality" religion of those who oppress. It is blinding to the present circumstances which are always the raw material of redemption.

Our current urban unrest is a judgement upon American religion, black and white. "Just a little talk with Jesus" can make things right only when all of our present circumstance is offered in such a way that it actually can be "made right." If His "is the power", then any unilateral hold on the reins of power relationships must be at least relaxed in favor of Him with whom "all things are possible."

Our present urban distress is, in some of our cities, being exploited by religion to encourage people to move closer to God by "worshipping in church each Sunday". Our typical church efforts, in post-riot situations, are to ask forgiveness for those whom we perceive as the rioters, to offer them relief and to restore the former order of things "with improved means of communication between the races". Is this redemption? Is this life-giving or growth-producing?

Our churches can at this present hour serve a truly redemptive purpose as they use our urban distress as the occasion for re-creation. There must be on the part of church people a re-ordering of relationships in such a way that every new circumstance in our common life reveals what life is meant to be.

Churches or church people can never be change agents unless they are willing to be changed themselves. For the powerless oppressed our churches should work to do one basic thing. They must work to facilitate authentic change in basic relationships of power. Static relationships of power corrupt. Equitable relationships of power alone are growth-producing.

"I am come," said Jesus, "that you might have life, and have it more abundantly." Life, in greater abundance, in our homes, our

communities, our business and everywhere in our world comes only where the equitable give-and-take of power makes for continual growth and interchange. In a classical sense, life and power are one, as indeed their Greek forms bios and bia suggest.

Religion should invest life's every present circumstance with the fulfillment of its innate, or, divine purpose. The fulfillment of each immediate circumstance must be immediate. Once the fleeting moment has past, its circumstance no longer is. Hence it cannot be fulfilled.

Escapist religion, however kindly or sweet it may appear to be, glosses over the hard present realities of life in such a way as to be an effective barrier to their redemption.

### The Peril of Accepting Things As They Are

If we are to take a religious or a scientific view of life, we must assume that life has as its purpose fulfillment. This simply means that life is to become what it is designed to be.

In such a way of seeing things, to thwart or to alter function is to pervert nature or to channel powers, in unnatural directions. Pathology or illness or malfunction of any kind is a sign and direct result of a perversion of purpose.

Racial discrimination hence is not a privilege to be exercised by those possessing power since such activity desecrates life and subverts the processes of life's fulfillment. Equally perverse is the popular practice among those of good will as in our churches, of "working toward" the elimination of any such activity as hampers life's becoming what it should be.

Progressive improvement is but sophisticated perversion. It is like asking a thief to gradually stop stealing or like imploring a wayward husband to be gradually weaned from his lover.

The inherent thrust of the efforts of those in power in any situation is toward continuing things as they are, towards the maintenance of power. Privilege does not seek to be abandoned. Its stock in trade is the development of the stalling device. It seeks always to create means to prevent or to postpone change.

In the period of black slavery in America, power was undergirded by the building in of benevolence along with despotism in such a way that one element could not be clearly separated from the other. Given the inherent degradation and debauchery of slavery -- with no civil or human rights --, security unknown to many northern sweat-shop hands. Slaves were always fed, and old age had for the slave what might be seen as its relative rewards in contrast to the threat of destitution or abandonment which hung like a perpetual

pall over the advancing years of northern white factory hands.

Old slaves were especially useful to those in power. They were the preachers or became the home grown philosophers of "things as they are." They had won the endearment and solicitation of their children and grandchildren. Where no marriage could take place, who knew, after all, whose grandchild one might be?

The elders-in-general of the brothers-in-"soul" had long practiced the art of survival in a world where the odds were stacked against them. Out of the never-ending school of life-and-death they had learned ways of survival as real to them as the stories of the Biblical Apocalypse. The escape from the firey furnace and Daniels' rescue from the lion's den were to them not fantasies out of the past but a part of the daily stuff of life.

The experienced elders among the slaves thus recited for their younger brothers-in-bondage not only "saving" truths from the Holy Book but also a homespun philosophy for escape from the seemingly inescapable circumstances of their common lot which were written indelibly in their Book of Common Life. This worked for the benefit of the slave-owners. It was they whose basic interests were served by the preservation of "order", by the maintenance of things as they are.

Escapism is always the handmaid of order. Diversionary devices - whether bearing the labels or imprint of sin or of salvation - serve the purposes of those in power.

The diversionary tactics employed or fostered by slave-masters during the period of black American slavery came to be a cultural characteristic among America's black people. Escape from reality; the confusion of the heavy hand of the oppressor with a kindly, helping hand; the slave mentality of dependence upon others - all have been built into the fabric of the American Negro's way of life. This pathological way of life has continued to serve at least the saving purpose of black survival.

In the period following legal emancipation and the brief abortive period of reconstruction, black people were set free to the caprice of the wind, the rain, the bitter cold and the changing whims of each and every white man who could decide each day for black men the issue of food or famine.

The command for Hebrew slaves to make bricks without straw could scarcely have had the demoralizing effect of giving men the badge of freedom with only flesh exposed to the elements to pin it on.

Yet while it is natural for an oppressor to oppress, in however kindly or stern way, it is an unnatural act for the oppressed to accept oppression.

From the heyday of the slave preachers and elders to the present day black men have tended to be unduly grateful for the friendly hand of their oppressor. Lack of passivity before oppression brought every non-black group of immigrants to our shores. The long-standing tradition of the acceptance of oppression is peculiar in our nation's life to the experience of black Americans.

Whether by violence, by subversion or by flight to our country's shores, practically every major ethnic group in America—save for black men—has resisted and rejected oppression. This is not to say that there have not been gallant black men, at every stage of our nation's life, who have placed their lives before the onslaught of oppression.

"We have come over a path which with tears has been watered;  
We have come treading our feet in the blood of the slaughtered.."

So wrote the poet-statesman, James Weldon Johnson, several generations ago.

James Weldon Johnson, however, was a statesman. He was not chiefly an agent of necessarily radical change. This has been the prevailing stance of black men who have sought ceaselessly and forever abortively for the substance and not just the airs of freedom.

Men who have bought into America in the past have been those who had willed and worked that life might be made different. Black people have sought uniquely to move out of oppression by moving in-to and accepting things as they are.

The oppressed have always had but three choices. They may change society. They may leave it. Or, they may remain oppressed. The "Uncle Toms" and the black nationalists are, thus, reasonable men. It is psychotic to work for freedom and not be committed to basic and pervasive change. Further, to fail to be something of a revolutionary in these perilous times for our nation would make one undeserving of sharing in the fullest fruits of this nation's life.

America as a whole needs precisely the social, political, economic, civic and moral change which only a worthy and determined black America may catalyze or spawn.

Indeed, the failure of black America to share equitably in the growth - producing power dynamics in American life has been the root cause of widespread pathology throughout our nation's life.

The path which black Americans have followed in the past is as deeply understandable as it is clearly unfortunate for their own and the nation's good. The failure of black people in America to exercise what we speak of today as Black Power has been the missing key

in our efforts to attain national fulfillment.

The Redemptive Exercise of Power

The recent so-called riots in our cities are illustrative in this regard. White oppression must be seen as the immediate cause of our urban distress. But the basic blame must be placed at the feet of black Americans in their failure to exercise the dynamics of power without which black men cannot hope to be free nor can this nation ever become what it is destined to be.

Creative power may be of the hand, the heart or of the mind. It is most effective when the three agree.

By creative power of the hand we mean a type of physical power. Corporately, it involves the implied power of one's ethnic group numbers, the basic and residual form of power available to all minorities. It may be used with telling effect at the ballot box and at the cash boxes of every enterprise with which the black community deals. We say "may be used" with telling effect for several reasons. There must be a semblance of group purpose, so largely missing in the black communities of the land. Then there must be a sense of hope or of faith in the established economic or political system. That this faith is being eroded is evident in every distraught city in America.

The power of the hand in former years meant economic power. But in an automated, technological society, such as we have experienced notably since the early 1950's, this type of economic power has less meaning.

Physical power may mean the power of mass or personal disruption. It can -- as with boycotts of schools, businesses and other civic institutions -- reject the agenda of those who effectively oppress. It can force the re-statement of problems in such a way that more saving answers may be devised for urban peace and for the fulfillment of the common life of those who reside in our distressed cities.

The power of the heart suggests a sensitivity to common need. On the part of black people it may mean the willingness to suffer greater inconvenience in order that others may taste in some degree the bitter pill which is the daily diet of black urban masses.

When Jesus said, "that they may have life, and have it more abundantly", he willed that they might have power in greater abundance. The power which forces creative change and pulls others into a sharing of the common lot of sufferers may be the most redemptive suffering of all. It wills for the neighbor what it accepts for itself. It works for mutuality, for understanding, and for life's fulfillment.

The creative power of the mind speaks to the role of marginal insight. Marginal insights stem from the reflective experience of those who are not fully accepted by those presently in the seats of power. Unblinded by the pretentiousness of unchecked power, the marginal man sees the weaknesses as well as the assets of a system. He know, from the acute demands of his own survival and integrity, where the prevailing order of things is most urgently in need of change, adaptation or catharsis.

Black people in America, with the combined creative potential of the hand, the heart and the mind may help America more than any other agency from its charted self-destruction.

Black people know more deeply than any others in America that cities are people. Our cities -- as our government and other urban programs all-too-often seem to assume -- are not physical fabric. If our cities are to be re-created, a sense of re-creation must come to our distraught black urban masses.

After the so-called riots people must be given hope. Others outside the black community must not set an agenda for black redemption. The black community as a whole -- which shares a common oppression -- must set its own agenda as a whole.

The development of the potential of people is an economic good, basic to the extension of business. It is a political, social and moral good as well.

Change in all of our cities is an urgent necessity. The black people in our cities know more acutely than do any other Americans that "order" at the expense of justice is nothing more than brutal repression. Such so-called order is clearly the enemy of the public good.

In a society where continuous change is the world's most predictable constant we must develop new definitions of order to accomodate necessary growth and orderly change.

As the result of our so-called riots, the glaring deficiencies of the moral value system of white America have been most embarrassingly exposed. Human life - black human life, that is - has been devalued or, perhaps more realistically, been seen for its true valuation all along.

To a civilized mind, how much is one human life worth in terms of property values. Is it worth two stolen bottles of whiskey? A color television set? Or is it to be equated to 500 million dollars worth of property destroyed? To civilized minds a life is of infinite worth, and no amount of destroyed physical property can justify the heinous act of taking one human life.

The fact that the religious and civic leaders of the nation have not been outraged at the public massacres such as have taken place against black people in Newark, New Jersey, and elsewhere reveals the perverted morality of America for what it truly is. The worst crime in the nation this past hot summer was the acquiescence by the nation as a whole in the resort to the destruction of human life for the preservation of physical property.

So-called riots are a form of social psychosis. They are the crazed behaviour of a people driven by our society to utter distraction. In our system of law those engaged in psychotic behaviour are held incapable of judgement. So-called riots represent psychotic behavior outside of the realm of morality. Yet there is an area related to the riots in which moral judgements may be made.

For fourteen years I served as a parish parson. At times I was called upon to come quickly to a home where a wife was breaking dishes, destroying or damaging her own clothing or putting the house in general disorder. On entering such a home I would go quickly to the distractor rather than to the distracted housewife. I would indicate to the husband that I did not know specifically what he had done to drive his wife to distraction, but whatever it was, he should indicate to his wife that he would stop it and would work out with her and a counselor a new and more thoughtful relationship. When the husband apologized to his wife and indicated that he would do all within his power to set things right, the wife would relax and begin working with her husband to put the house in some form of order again.

The moral here should be clear. What kind of justice is it which renders guilty the victim rather than the victimizer, the distracted rather than the distractor?

Yet the justice here may be far more sound in its direction than its seeming inversion suggests. If a man is beaten once by another out of a sense of caprice, the assailant is clearly wrong. But if this happens over and over again and the one beaten confronts each and every assault with anything less than the assertion of the totality of his being, a new and different problem has been created.

Black men are the only group in this nation which as a whole does not believe in violence. We have, as a group, been non-violent to a fault. Black men are the only Americans who, as a whole, do not believe even in self-defense. And black people are the only men in America who are not free.

Sometimes when a man fails to engage in defense it may stem, at least in part, from a feeling that what cries out for protection is not worth protecting. By many signs, self-hate does play some substantial role in the life of black Americans. But for the good of this nation, as well as for the attainment of their due dignity on the part of black men, this state of affairs must not remain.

Black men - by some means acceptable to God and good for the nation - must assert their creative and effective power of the hand, the heart and the mind.

All of us who are true conservatives and believe sincerely in the American system, can, I believe, serve the needs of all mankind much better by making aggressive peace with the future to conserve the best of the past. Every objective analyst knows that marked changes for equity for all must come. This will come either when those of us who stand for the best in American traditions aggressively facilitate the legitimate agenda of the oppressed. Or it may be that "the baby will be thrown out with the bath".

Out of the clear and immediate self-interest of each and every American, the facilitation of truly effective power by black men must be the work of one and all. Men of good will especially must work aggressively toward this end.

Only in this way may peace be brought to our distraught cities. So also may be brought to this nation at this urgent hour, as to our world, some substantial measure of the vital gifts of our needed cleansing, regeneration and fulfillment.