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James Baldwin

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Today, David Leeming is an English professor at the University of Connecticut, but back in the 1960s, when he was in graduate school, he was James Baldwin's personal assistant—and later he continued to be close friends with Baldwin for more than two decades until Baldwin's death. His acclaimed biography of Baldwin, published in 2015, opens with a quote from Hebrew prophet Ezekiel Chapter 2, verse 5: **“And they, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear...yet shall they know that there hath been a prophet among them.”**

That epigraph is appropriate for a number of reasons. For one, it is from the King James Version of the Bible. And as the African-American writer Darryl Pinckney (1953 -) said of Baldwin, “No other black writer I'd read was as literary as Baldwin in his early essays, not even Ralph Ellison. **There is something wild in the beauty of Baldwin's sentences and the cool of his tone, something improbable, too, this meeting of Henry James, the Bible, and Harlem.**”

A second reason that an epigram from Ezekiel is appropriate is that James Baldwin was also a prophet in the terms of our UU Second Source: “Words and deeds of prophetic people who challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” Baldwin was a powerful prophetic voice, but that also meant that he—like many prophets before him—wasn't always easy to live with.

In Leeming's words:

Almost from the moment I met Baldwin, I recognized that I was in the presence of a highly complex, troubled, and driven individual who was more intensely serious than anyone I had ever met. This is not to say he did not enjoy life.... He was a man who laughed a lot and who knew how to make others laugh. And while clearly obsessed by what he saw as a witnessing role, he was just as committed to the life of the senses; when he ate a meal, smoked a cigarette, sipped on a scotch, or touched another human being, **he did so with deep pleasure that was evident and with an incomparable elegance and care....** He was a man, like most people, with evident neuroses. He was not a saint.... But he was a prophet. (xii)

I will do my best to do justice to Baldwin's prophetic life. However, in the spirit of full disclosure, if you have seen even a brief video of Baldwin speaking, you know that written words could never fully convey his ineffable charisma. And if you are interested in learning more, **there are at least two great documentaries about Baldwin:**

1. [James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket](#) premiered on PBS in 1990, a few years after his death. (I was able to find it streaming is through an [Amazon subscription to the Sundance Channel](#). Both of these documentaries are also available for free through [Kanopy](#) which is available through many public library systems.)
2. [I Am Not Your Negro](#) from last year makes many connections between Baldwin's life and current events in our country.

I highly recommend both of these documentaries.

I am grateful that new work continues to be made about James Baldwin's life and work because when he died in 1987 from cancer, he was only sixty-three years old. As a point of reference, he was born only seven years earlier than Toni Morrison. And it was Morrison's review of Ta-Nehisi Coates's book *Between the World and Me* that compelled me both to read Coates closely—and to go back and read more of Baldwin. Morrison wrote: **"I've been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates."**

Morrison, of course, is far from the only person to find Baldwin's writing as relevant as ever. Even though he died two-and-a-half decades before the start of the

#BlackLivesMatter movement, Baldwin was always ahead of his time. Long before activists started emphasizing the importance of intersectionality—being attentive to the ways systemic oppressions like race, gender, sexuality, and class *intersect*—**Baldwin was writing boldly out of his embodied experience of growing up at the intersection of being black, poor, and gay** (Maxwell 3-4). Regarding what it meant in Baldwin’s lifetime to be black, poor, and gay, keep in mind that Baldwin was born in 1924. By the time the Civil Rights Movement started in 1954, he had already lived the first three decades of his life.

Indeed, in 1948, disillusioned with injustice here in America, he moved to Paris at the age of twenty-four. And because I want to begin to give you a taste of Baldwin’s incredible writing style, here’s just one sentence about his early days in the “City of Light”:

Paris is, according to the legend, the city where everyone loses his head, and his morals, lives through at least one *histoire d’amour* [“love story”], ceases, quite, to arrive anywhere on time, and thumbs his nose at the Puritans—the city, in brief, where all become drunken on the fine old air of freedom. (Leeming 61)

And **perhaps living in Paris was part of what gave him the courage to publish *Giovanni’s Room*, a play with strong themes of both homosexuality and bisexuality, in 1956, a full decade-and-a-half before the Stonewall Uprisings** launched the civil rights movement for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights.

And while *Giovanni’s Room* is a landmark text of LGBT literature, it is also much more than merely a historic text. Just as James Baldwin’s “Letter to my [14-year-old] Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation [Proclamation]” (published in his 1963 book *The Fire Next Time*) directly inspired Ta-Nehisi Coates to write a similar letter to his fifteen-year-old year son in the form of his book *Between the World and Me*—*Giovanni’s Room* directly inspired Barry Jenkins to create the film *Moonlight*, which won last year’s Oscar for best picture. In the words of one reviewer, *Moonlight* is:

not simply about characters — alienated gay black men — who resemble Baldwin's heroes. It also has some of the writer's sensibility. The film, like

much of Baldwin's work, feels as European as it does American: Its dark, oblique lyricism seems to come straight out of Michelangelo Antonioni or Ingmar Bergman.

In describing Baldwin's popularity today, I should also be clear that he was also in many ways a popular, bestselling writer and social critic in his own time. In May 1963, for example, he was on the cover of *Time Magazine*. And a few days later, he was invited to meet with Bobby Kennedy. At this time, RFK was still U.S. Attorney General, and his brother's assassination would not happen until that November. In looking back on that meeting, the differences in perspectives are both striking and hauntingly parallel to our own time.

Baldwin and his fellow racial justice activists entered the meeting hoping that President Kennedy would agree to personally escort a black child to school in the Deep South. They thought this would be a powerful act of solidarity—and that, “Anyone who spits on that child will be spitting on the nation.” But Bobby Kennedy dismissed this suggestion as a “meaningless moral gesture.”

Kennedy was also shocked when one of the activists in the room, who had been a Freedom Rider (helping desegregate the public bus system), told Kennedy that after the failure of the federal government to protect him and other activists from racist violence in the South, he could not imagine “fighting for my country” in the armed forces. Whereas Kennedy found this position deeply unpatriotic, Baldwin and the other activists were equally surprised at Kennedy's failure to understand how their experience of racial injustice had made them feel alienated from their own country (223). There are strong parallels between these two different sets of experiences and the corresponding debates today—for example, about whether NFL player Colin Kaepernick is being “unpatriotic” for kneeling during the national anthem.

Returning to that historical debate, Kennedy responded that his Irish descendants had also faced oppression in America, but had pulled themselves up. He added that, “**With luck a black man could be president in forty years.**” For what it's worth, that prediction was fairly prescient. Barak Obama (who was not quite two years old at the time Baldwin and RFK were speaking) was elected President of the United States around forty-five years later. And it is important to consider the ways in which

the reluctance of Kennedy and other white leaders to fully be in solidarity with the struggle for racial justice contributed to the delay in achieving greater equality.

Along those lines, Baldwin retorted that Kennedy was partially right, but that most Irish people had immigrated to the U.S. much later than most African-Americans, and **an Irish-American was already president, while, in Baldwin's words, blacks are "still required to supplicate and beg you for justice"** (224).

There is one other similar episode two years later that I also wanted to be sure to share: Baldwin's 1965 debate at Cambridge University with the major conservative intellectual William F. Buckley, Jr. (1925 - 2008). Baldwin's assignment was to argue in support of the motion that "the American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro." In Leeming's words:

Baldwin had always been a successful extemporaneous speaker; he had learned his skills in the Pentecostal pulpit. But this was one of his greatest speeches, and all of Buckley's wit and reasoning prowess had little effect.... After comparing himself to the prophet Jeremiah, Baldwin proceeded in the allotted time to outline with admirable dexterity what it was like to grow up black in America, to realize as a child "that **the land to which you have pledged allegiance...has not pledged allegiance to you,**" to be shocked to discover that "**although you are rooting for Gary Cooper**" as he killed the Indians, the "**Indians are you....** [My ancestors] picked the cotton...under someone else's whip for nothing. For *nothing!*" Most uncharacteristically, the Cambridge students gave him a standing ovation, and Baldwin's position won 544 votes to Buckley's 184. (244-245)

Thankfully the debate was videotaped, and incredible clips from this debate are included in both of the documentaries I mentioned earlier.

But, of course, Baldwin was not interested in mere rhetorical flourish. He didn't just want to win debates. He wanted justice, liberty, and equal protection under the law. As to how that might be accomplished, I will invite you to consider two more brief excerpts of his writing. The first is the famous final paragraph of that searing long-form essay first published in *The New Yorker*, that was written as an open letter to his

nephew:

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*

As to whether we were more likely to achieve the founding values of our country (“that all [people] are created equal”) or to end up with apocalyptic violence (“the fire next time”), Baldwin had periods of serious depression in his life in which he did sometimes lose hope. But he also famously said in that inimitable way—at the intersection of “Henry James, the Bible, and Harlem”—that we had no other choice but to continue in the struggle for justice because, in his words, “**Despair is a sin.**” He added: “There are people who have proved to me that we can be better than we are” (225). That’s one reason we continue to gather in places like this sanctuary. We need one another.

In that spirit, Baldwin wrote these words his 1964 book *Nothing Personal*:

For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have. The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out. (227)

Even though Baldwin is no longer with us, his work continues to call us to act for peace and justice, to lean in to creativity and hope.

His funeral was held at New York City’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the same church in which more than a decade earlier he had been given an award for being a “prophet of the twentieth century” (387). Toni Morrison’s eulogy, later published in *The New York Times*, began with these words:

Jimmy, there is too much to think about you, and too much to feel. The difficulty is your life refuses summation — it always did — and invites contemplation instead.... I never heard a single command from you, yet the demands you made on me, the challenges you issued to me, were nevertheless unmistakable, even if unenforced: that I work and think at the top of my form, that I stand on moral ground but know that ground must be shored up by mercy, that “the world is before [me] and [I] need not take it or leave it as it was when [I] came in.”

Morrison concluded:

You knew, didn't you, how I needed your language and the mind that formed it? How I relied on your fierce courage to tame wildernesses for me? How strengthened I was by the certainty that came from knowing you would never hurt me? You knew, didn't you, how I loved your love? You knew. This then is no calamity. No. This is jubilee. “Our crown,” you said, “has already been bought and paid for. All we have to do,” you said, “is wear it.” And we do, Jimmy. You crowned us.

As we continue to reflect on the legacy of James Baldwin's prophetic life and work, I invite you to turn in your hymnals to #407. This spiritual powerfully represents the radical inclusion at the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and other oppressions that Baldwin embodied and lived. Accordingly, *The Welcome Table* is the title of the unfinished play that preoccupied Baldwin's mind right up until the end of his life (385). This final, unpublished play was about the “legendary performer Josephine Baker's home and her practice of adopting young people of all backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities into her family,” In that spirit, let's sing together ***The Welcome Table***.