

4:30

**ON LIBERTY**

**BY JUSTICE THURGOOD MARSHALL**

**PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA**

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**IT IS A PLEASURE TO SPEAK HERE ON THE  
ANNIVERSARY OF OUR NATION'S  
INDEPENDENCE. AS SOMEONE WHO RELISHES  
THE ABILITY TO DO AND SAY WHATEVER I  
PLEASE, INDEPENDENCE IS A CONCEPT NEAR  
AND DEAR TO MY HEART!**

**BECAUSE YOU WERE KIND ENOUGH TO  
INVITE ME HERE, I'M NOT GOING TO BORE YOU**

**WITH A SPEECH. I'M NOT EVEN GOING TO  
TELL YOU I'M NOT GOING TO BORE YOU WITH  
A SPEECH AND THEN PROCEED TO TALK AT  
YOU FOR 30 MINUTES. WHAT I'D LIKE TO DO  
IS TO SHARE A FEW STORIES, A FEW  
ANECDOTES, OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE  
UNDERSTOOD THE MEANING OF LIBERTY AND  
STRUGGLED AGAINST THE ODDS TO BECOME  
FREE. I THINK OF THESE PEOPLE BECAUSE  
OF THE RISKS THEY HAVE TAKEN AND THE  
COURAGE THEY HAVE DISPLAYED. I VALUE**

THEM NOT ONLY BECAUSE OF THE KIND OF  
PEOPLE THEY WERE BUT BECAUSE OF THE  
KIND OF NATION THEY INSISTED THAT WE  
BECOME. I RESPECT THEM NOT BECAUSE OF  
THE INFLUENCE THEY WIELDED BUT BECAUSE  
OF THE POWER THEY SEIZED. IT IS USEFUL, I  
THINK, TO RECALL THEIR STORIES NOT TO  
DWELL ON THE PAST, BUT TO SEE CONCRETE  
EVIDENCE OF *WHAT WAS* IN ORDER TO GAIN  
INSPIRATION FOR *WHAT CAN BE*.

DO YOU REMEMBER HEMAN SWEATT? HE

**WAS AN ORDINARY MAN WHO HAD AN  
EXTRAORDINARY DREAM: TO LIVE IN A WORLD  
IN WHICH AFRO-AMERICANS AND WHITES,  
ALIKE, WERE AFFORDED EQUAL OPPORTUNITY  
TO SHARPEN THEIR MINDS AND TO HONE  
THEIR SKILLS. UNFORTUNATELY, OFFICIALS AT  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS LAW SCHOOL DID  
NOT SHARE HIS VISION. CONSTRAINED BY  
THE SHACKLES OF PREJUDICE, AND INCAPABLE  
OF SEEING PEOPLE FOR WHO THEY WERE,  
THEY DENIED HEMAN SWEATT ADMISSION TO**

**LAW SCHOOL SOLELY BECAUSE HIS COLOR WAS NOT THEIRS. IT WAS A DEVASTATING BLOW, AND A STINGING REJECTION, A PAINFUL REMINDER OF THE CHASM THAT SEPARATES WHITE FROM NEGRO.**

**BUT HEMAN SWEATT HELD ON TO WHAT RACISM TRIED TO SNUFF OUT: A SENSE OF SELF AND A RECOGNITION OF PLACE, A DETERMINATION TO ATTAIN THE BEST, AND A REFUSAL TO SETTLE FOR ANYTHING LESS. HEMAN SWEATT KNEW WHAT WHITE**

**SEGREGATIONISTS TRIED TO FORGET: THAT  
NONE OF US, AFRO, WHITE OR BLUE, WILL  
EVER REST UNTIL WE ARE ALL TRULY FREE.**

**HEMAN SWEATT DID NOT PURSUE LIBERTY  
ALONE. JUST A FEW YEARS EARLIER, A  
COUPLE NAMED SHELLEY TRIED TO DO WHAT  
WHITE AMERICA HAD DONE FOR YEARS—LIVE  
IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF THEIR CHOICE.  
BUT TO WHITE HOMEOWNERS IN MISSOURI,  
SUCH AUDACITY WAS TOO THREATENING TO BE  
TOLERATED; IN THEIR VIEW, WHITES BELONGED**

**IN ONE WORLD, NEGROES IN ANOTHER. THEY  
COULD NOT SEE THE SIMILARITIES THAT  
LINKED THEM TO THE SHELLEYS: THE COMMON  
DESIRE TO EARN A LIVING, TO RAISE  
CHILDREN, TO OWN AND CARE FOR A HOME.  
THEY SAW ONLY DIFFERENCE. I GUESS TO  
THEM, IF THE UNITED STATES WAS INDEED A  
MELTING POT, THEN NEGROES EITHER DIDN'T  
GET IN THE POT OR THEY DIDN'T GET MELTED  
DOWN!**

**WHATEVER THE REASON FOR THEIR MYOPIC**



**VISION, THE SHELLEYS WERE FORCED TO DO  
WHAT NEGROES HAVE HAD TO DO FOR YEARS:  
USE THE ONLY WEAPON THEY HAD—THEIR  
RIGHT TO A DAY IN COURT—TO GAIN THE  
RIGHTS TO WHICH THEY WERE  
CONSTITUTIONALLY ENTITLED. FORTUNATELY,  
FOR OUR HISTORY, THE SHELLEYS WON THEIR  
SUIT, BUT EVEN IF THEY HAD LOST, THEY  
WOULD HAVE KNOWN MORE FREEDOM THAN  
THE WHITES WHO TRIED TO SHUT THEM OUT  
WOULD EVER KNOW. RACISM SEPARATES, BUT**

**IT NEVER LIBERATES. HATRED GENERATES  
FEAR, AND FEAR, ONCE GIVEN A FOOTHOLD,  
BINDS, CONSUMES, AND IMPRISONS. NOTHING  
IS GAINED FROM PREJUDICE. NO ONE  
BENEFITS FROM RACISM.**

**AS I THINK BACK ON THESE COURAGEOUS  
PEOPLE WHO CAME BEFORE, I WONDER WHAT  
BECAME OF THE CHALLENGE THE SWEATT'S  
AND THE SHELLEY'S PROVIDED. THEY WORKED  
FOR LIBERTY. THEY FOUGHT FOR FREEDOM.  
THEY INSISTED UPON JUSTICE. THEY WERE**

OPTIMISTIC, AS I WAS, THAT RACIAL INTERACTION WOULD BREED UNDERSTANDING, AND THAT UNDERSTANDING, IN TURN, WOULD PRODUCE HEALING AND REDEMPTION. THEY WERE HOPEFUL, AS I WAS, THAT OVER TIME, AMERICA WOULD GROW TOWARD JUSTICE AND EXPAND TOWARD EQUALITY. HAD I THOUGHT IN THE WAKE OF *SMITH V. ALLWRIGHT* AND *SHELLEY V. KRAEMER* AND *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION* THAT I WOULD BE GIVING A TALK NOW ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF OUR

**NATION'S INDEPENDENCE, I WOULD HAVE  
PREDICTED THAT I WOULD HAVE SPOKEN WITH  
MUCH PRIDE AND OPTIMISM OF THE ENORMOUS  
PROGRESS THIS NATION HAD MADE.**

**BUT AS I SURVEY THE WORLD HEMAN  
SWEATT AND THE SHELLEYS LEFT BEHIND, I  
WISH I COULD SAY THAT RACISM AND  
PREJUDICE WERE ONLY DISTANT MEMORIES. I  
WISH I COULD SAY THAT THIS NATION HAD  
TRAVELED FAR ALONG THE ROAD TO SOCIAL  
JUSTICE, AND THAT LIBERTY AND EQUALITY**

**WERE JUST AROUND THE BEND. I WISH I  
COULD SAY THAT AMERICA HAS COME TO  
APPRECIATE DIVERSITY AND TO SEE AND  
ACCEPT SIMILARITY.**

**BUT AS I LOOK AROUND, I SEE NOT A  
NATION OF UNITY BUT OF DIVISION—AFRO AND  
WHITE, INDIGENOUS AND IMMIGRANT, RICH AND  
POOR, EDUCATED AND ILLITERATE. EVEN  
MANY EDUCATED WHITES AND SUCCESSFUL  
NEGROES HAVE GIVEN UP ON INTEGRATION  
AND LOST HOPE IN EQUALITY. THEY SEE**

**NOTHING IN COMMON EXCEPT THE NEED TO  
FLEE AS FAST AS THEY CAN FROM OUR INNER  
CITIES. A PULLMAN PORTER ONCE TOLD ME  
THAT HE HAD NEVER BEEN ANY PLACE IN THE  
UNITED STATES WHERE HE DID NOT HAVE TO  
PUT HIS HAND UP IN FRONT OF HIS FACE TO  
DISCOVER HE WAS A NEGRO. I AM AFRAID  
THE PORTER'S EXPERIENCE IS STILL TRUE.**

**BUT THERE IS A PRICE TO BE PAID FOR  
DIVISION AND ISOLATION, AS RECENT EVENTS  
IN CALIFORNIA INDICATE. LOOK AROUND.**

**CAN'T YOU SEE THE TENSION IN WATTS?**

**CAN'T YOU FEEL THE FEAR IN SCARSDALE?**

**CAN'T YOU SENSE THE ALIENATION IN SIMI**

**VALLEY? THE DESPAIR IN THE SOUTH BRONX?**

**THE RAGE IN BROOKLYN?**

**WE CANNOT PLAY OSTRICH. DEMOCRACY  
CANNOT FLOURISH AMID FEAR. LIBERTY  
CANNOT BLOOM AMID HATE. JUSTICE CANNOT  
TAKE ROOT AMID RAGE. –AMERICA MUST GET  
TO WORK. IN THE CHILL CLIMATE IN WHICH  
WE LIVE, WE MUST GO AGAINST THE**

**PREVAILING WIND. WE MUST DISSENT FROM  
THE INDIFFERENCE. WE MUST DISSENT FROM  
THE APATHY. WE MUST DISSENT FROM THE  
FEAR, THE HATRED AND THE MISTRUST.– WE  
MUST DISSENT FROM A NATION THAT HAS  
BURIED ITS HEAD IN THE SAND, WAITING IN  
VAIN FOR THE NEEDS OF ITS POOR, ITS  
ELDERLY, AND ITS SICK TO DISAPPEAR. WE  
MUST DISSENT FROM A GOVERNMENT THAT  
HAS LEFT ITS YOUNG WITHOUT JOBS,  
EDUCATION, OR HOPE. WE MUST DISSENT**



**FROM THE POVERTY OF VISION AND THE  
ABSENCE OF MORAL LEADERSHIP. WE MUST  
DISSENT BECAUSE AMERICA CAN DO BETTER,  
BECAUSE AMERICA HAS NO CHOICE BUT TO  
DO BETTER.**

**THE LEGAL SYSTEM CAN FORCE OPEN  
DOORS, AND SOMETIMES, EVEN KNOCK DOWN  
WALLS. BUT IT CANNOT BUILD BRIDGES.  
THAT JOB BELONGS TO YOU AND ME. AFRO  
AND WHITE, RICH AND POOR, EDUCATED AND  
ILLITERATE, OUR FATES ARE BOUND TOGETHER.**