

4:30

ON LIBERTY

BY JUSTICE THURGOOD MARSHALL

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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 COMMONEXCEPT 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.