

OUR GIANTS SPEAK

THE ROLE OF THE BLACK WOMAN DURING SLAVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION

The overarching role of black women in the periods of enslavement and reconstruction has received only little of the attention which it so richly merits. Black women have played a major historical role in the life of Black America and of our nation as a whole. In this series, we show the strength of our unsung heroines, from whence, many believe, has sprung our backbone.

Charlotte Hawkins Brown (1862-1961) was an outstanding educator and women's leader. In the following five-part series of letters, we see the problems with which she struggled in trying to keep the Palmer Memorial Institute (which she founded) solvent and growth-producing. This journal is a shining testimony to her brilliant, persevering spirit in the face of challenge, and we are most honored and pleased to present them to you.

CHARLOTTE HAWKINS BROWN, ON FOUNDING AND FUNDING THE PALMER MEMORIAL INSTITUTE

Part III of Five Parts

May 24, 1920

... You will be very much pleased to know of some of the wonderful things I have been able to do for the negro womanhood of North Carolina this year. I have been called upon to deliver addresses all through the state to white women, pleading for better consideration and justice at their hands for the negro woman.... I shall see you in June, when I am home and give you a recital of the forward moves that North Carolina has made along this line....

Our own people here in the

community have pledged another \$1,000 towards the completion of the building, don't you think it is wonderful. They are going to work their farms harder than ever this year to make that money good and when you realize that we have to have 25 or 30 families, it makes their gifts all the more remarkable. One man and his wife, who 19 years ago when I came here, did not have a penny in the bank, no home, was a tenant, is giving \$100 altogether as his thank offering. He is one of my local trustees now, owns his own home, about 30 acres of valuable farm land and a nice little Ford car, which he has used for transportation purposes. As you know we are 10 miles from town. He is only one of several who has taken my advice and council and made themselves worthwhile assets to the community. It is very gratifying to me, friends, to be able to live and feel the appreciation of these people for whom I have poured out every atom of energy and devotion I have at my command. You who have helped me thought the years should be equally gratified that you could share in the uplift of a community of this kind....

Key Questions:

1. What are three main issues in this article?
2. What does this article suggest about our life situation today?
3. How many words did you look up in the dictionary? (If we do not use a dictionary daily, and for every word whose FULL meanings we may not know, we cannot grow individually and assure the best use of our resources for group freedom and a better America.)

**V*A FACTS

Q -- Due to a financial emergency, I am thinking about surrendering my National Service Life Insurance policy. I am hesitant to do this because I have had this policy since World War II. Is there an alternative available to me?

A -- You may consider the option of applying for a maximum policy loan. You can receive 94 percent of the policy's cash value at five percent interest. This would permit you to repay the loan and keep your insurance in force.

Q -- Does the Veterans Administration recognize common law marriage?

A -- The VA will recognize "common law" marriage if the state in which the parties reside does so. Proof of the "common law" marriage must be established to VA satisfaction to qualify for benefits. Contact your nearest VA regional office for assistance.



BLACK EMPOWERMENT

By Dr. Nathaniel Wright, Jr.

Human Rights Activist

ARE "LIVING TOGETHER" DIRTY WORDS?

Among many groups of people the custom of "trial marriages" (or espousal partnerships) prevails. In the Lutheran countries of Scandinavia and parts of Germany, what some flippantly speak of as "the pig in the poke" approach to marital partnership is often avoided by trial periods of living together.

The issue raised by what is said here has particular relevance in our present day when staid and conservative parents suddenly have had to face the fact that their sons, daughters (or both) have made a home in a legally premarital (or non-marital) fashion. We spoke not long ago with one woman who had been widowed and who then married a widowed clergyman. Her five children were older than his three. When she told of visiting the unmarried families among her children, she was asked how her somewhat more than straight-laced husband looked upon such arrangements. Her reply: Well, his own children haven't yet gotten to the stage where he must deal with the situation on a visceral (or "gut") level. But he shows a benign and resigned acceptance of what neither he nor I can control in my children."

Some societies have tackled the problem by marrying their girls young. In such societies, new problems often arise when the boys must

marry late. Either, as in Bermuda where the law of primogeniture (first son as prime inheritor) has prevailed, there has been widespread and open promiscuity. Or, as in such a Moslem country as Algeria, male prostitution abounds in the homosexual tea or coffee houses where males associate freely, since females must remain covered, must stay at home and are subject to instant death if found "defiled."

Still other societies, as in tribal Africa and among the Eskimo (and other Indian groups of North, Central and South America) every woman ideally has a protective male who also serves as actual or potential sex partner. The early European explorers among the Eskimos were surprised at being offered a "wife" with whom to sleep, although at home there might have been a secretive "woman" rather than a wife.

The new trends among our own young people today suggest several things which may give us good grist for our reflective mills.

One is that their new non-legalized associations or unions imply at least a feeling of inadequacy concerning our traditional or inherited American patterns of holy wedlock. Surprisingly, these new departures are not really "new" but are a return to previous ways once sanctified by time and even possibly

today by the teachings of religion.

Our young people who choose partners and make their own private commitments are rejecting the notion that "a wedding makes a marriage." There has been, perhaps, something insufficient or even crass in the idea that we work feverishly for some wedding day—remaining discreetly apart meanwhile—then, Presto, "They live happily ever after."

As one intensely thoughtful young person, who had not adopted the new ways but who was unwilling to censure them, remarked: "I see young people as saying in effect that formal marriage is but one step—far more important to some than to others—in a process of growing mutuality. There is nothing magical about a wedding or about any other step in relating to, or becoming a part of, another person's life."

In Biblical terms, we have the unwed relationship of Mary and Joseph, the earthly parents of Jesus. While many persons have always submitted to the traditional collective mind of Christianity that, in some deeply significant sense, Christ's birth was divinely accomplished, the ancient Hebrew custom which permitted Mary and Joseph to live together as espoused husband and wife has been to such persons often like a thorn.

The longest traditional teachings of the Christian religion have held that a marriage ceremony ratifies and publicly confirms what is transpiring or has already transpired between two persons who are committed to a process of growth into mutuality.

In many parts of our own South, blacks for generations understandably shunned practically every contact with the "white man's laws and authority," designed as these were to demean or devastate black people. Thus one local custom grew up of bringing one's "bride" to Sunday church. If a man simply brought "his woman" to church in those days, everybody knew that the woman from then on was to be called "Mrs. 'Liza" rather than "Mizz 'Liza."

When we look at the new life habits of our young people, we should be reminded in a positive way that all life is growth and that legalisms are not (and may sometimes run counter to) the process of life as growth.

Precipitous change may be, at times, more nearly a too large dose of summary rejection, when the tempering of our feelings with a sense of historical perspective and reciprocal or parental acceptance may have been just what was needed to preserve our family bonds and to save the day.

I'M NOT SIGNIFYING!

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