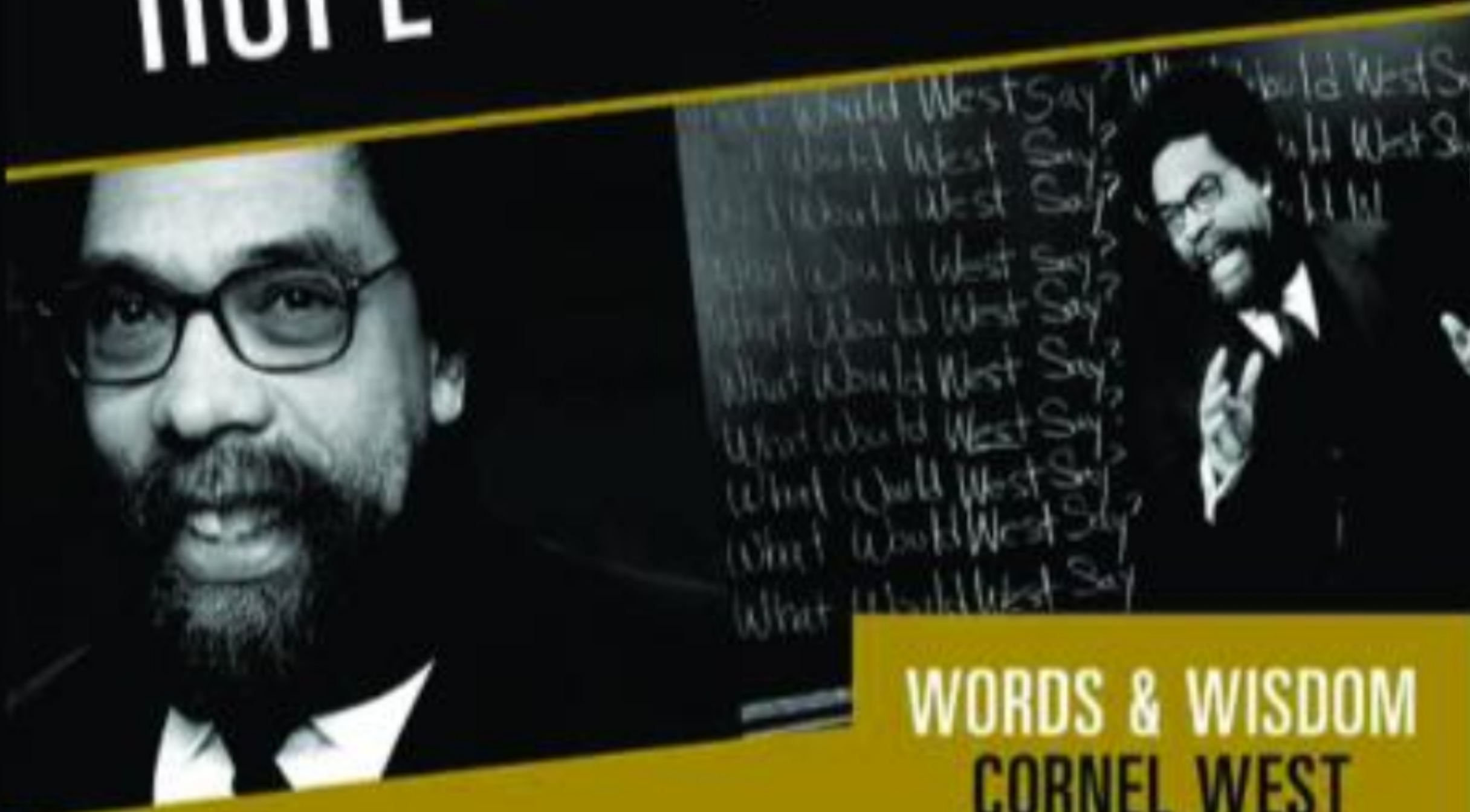




HOPE **ON A** TIGHTROPE



WORDS & WISDOM
CORNEL WEST

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Hope on a Tightrope

Words & Wisdom

By
Cornel West

16

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Selected Books by CORNEL WEST	i
CHAPTER ONE: STATE OF EMERGENCY	1
CHAPTER TWO: COURAGE	8
CHAPTER THREE: PHILOSOPHY	23
CHAPTER FOUR: IDENTITY AND RACE	39
CHAPTER FIVE: FAITH	62
CHAPTER SIX: FAMILY	79
CHAPTER SEVEN: MUSIC	95
CHAPTER EIGHT: LEADERSHIP	113
CHAPTER NINE: LOVE AND SERVICE	129
CHAPTER TEN: SOCIAL JUSTICE	142
CHAPTER ELEVEN: FREEDOM	157
CHAPTER TWELVE: WISDOM	169
AFTERWORD	185
GLOSSARY: WESTIAN CORE CONCEPTS	187
THE BOOKS AND MUSIC THAT MADE ME	190
BOOKS	190
MUSIC	194
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	205
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	207
FRONT COVER FLAP	208
BACK COVER FLAP	209
BACK COVER MATERIAL	210

Selected Books by CORNEL WEST

*Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against
Imperialism*

The Cornel West Reader

*Restoring Hope: Conversations on the Future of Black
America* (edited by Kelvin Shawn Sealey)

*Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America Race
Matters*

*Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary
Christianity*

*The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of
Pragmatism Prophetic Fragments*

*The War Against Parents: What We Can Do for
America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads* (with Sylvia
Ann Hewlett)

Jews & Blacks: Let the Healing Begin (with Michael
Lerner)

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To my beloved children,
Clifton West and Zeytun West,
and my blessed grandson,
Kalen West,
in whom
I am well pleased.



Image A

This is what happens in moments of cultural decay. This is what happens in moments of cultural breakdown. Moreover, to talk about cultural resistance at this time means to ask: How do we analyze this present moment and discern some sources of vision and hope? I look at culture from the vantage point of a black freedom fighter. We are not going to be here that long. Culture moves us—it helps create the structures of meaning, feeling, and purpose that keep the deep democratic tradition alive.

As bad as things are, we have faced worse conditions. We have always had courageous people willing to stand up and tell the truth, expose lies and bear witness to love and justice. We still have people who say they are willing to build on this tradition.

As our society faces deeper and deeper crisis, progressives are beginning to be heard again. People are looking to a variety of different voices and visions for leadership and direction, about how we can overcome these situations. For too long, Americans looked to the right. We have looked to neocons, Republicans, Reagan, Bush and Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld. They have pulled us deeper into a dark, bottomless pit. Yet if people are interested in looking somewhere else, progressive possibilities are reemerging.

Such progressive formations have been the history of black folk. There was slavery. Then there was a Constitution that never used that word but counted black bodies as three-fifths of a man. While America was celebrating its liberty, 20 percent of the inhabitants of the 13 colonies were enslaved. In 1829 you had abolitionist David Walker saying that America will eventually have to deal with its white supremacist slavery. It will end up a house divided against itself, split down the middle with war and bloodshed. They said he was crazy. He was dead eleven months after he published the great Walker's Appeal. Thirty-some years later, his prophecy came to fruition. America had to come to terms with its white supremacy in the face of major catastrophes and war.

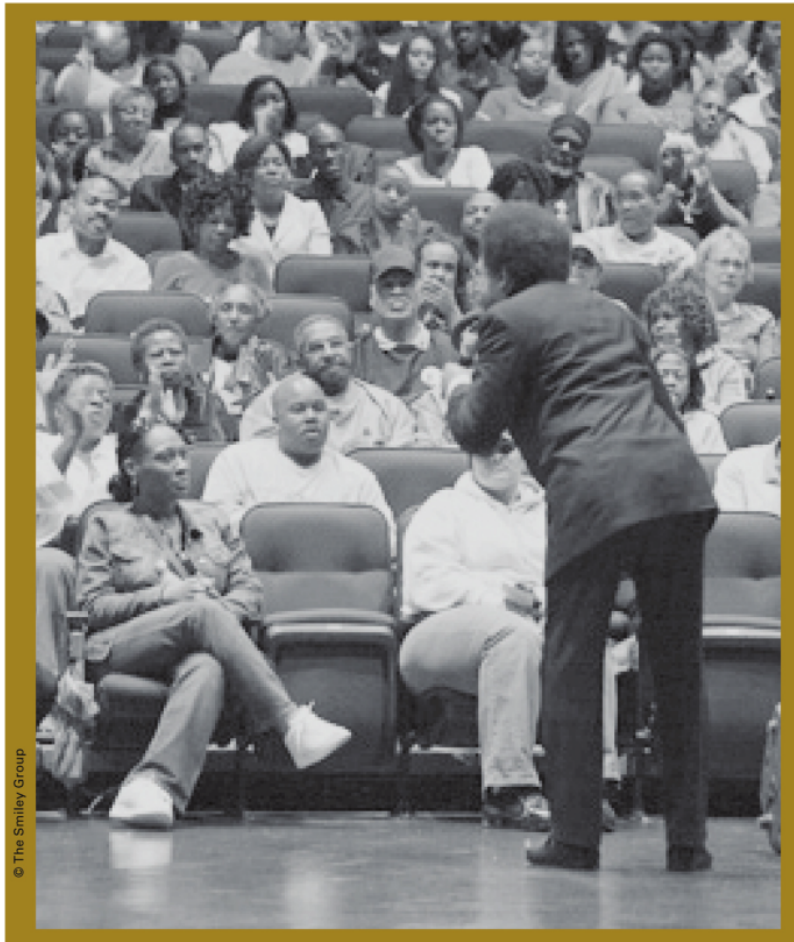
The Union won the war. White supremacy won the peace. After the Compromise of 1877, which ended Southern Reconstruction and began the era of Jim and Jane Crow, it was, "Here we go again!" From Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King, Jr., sooner or later, just as you had to break the back of white supremacist slavery to save democracy, you will have to break the back of American apartheid or you will lose your democracy.

In the '60s, while black youths were being hosed down in the streets, black folk came to the rescue again. Dr. King and civil rights activists like Fannie Lou Hamer and Robert Parris Moses helped save democra-

cy in America. There was the hypocrisy of America talking about freedom while oppressing black folk and noting that the Soviet Union had no freedom because it repressed and subjugated its citizens. Black folk came to the rescue.

What if they had killed Douglass in 1848? Or if Dr. King's house had been bombed a few minutes later in 1956? If Dr. King had returned early from that meeting with precious Coretta and the children, they would have all been killed. America would probably be much more authoritarian, if not crypto-fascist.

Now here we are in 2008. America finds itself looking to its blues people again to provide vision to a nation with the blues. That is a source of hope. Yet hope is no guarantee. Real hope is grounded in a particularly messy struggle and it can be betrayed by naïve projections of a better future that ignore the necessity of doing the real work. So what we are talking about is *hope on a tightrope*. (Image 1.1, 1.2)



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Image 1.1

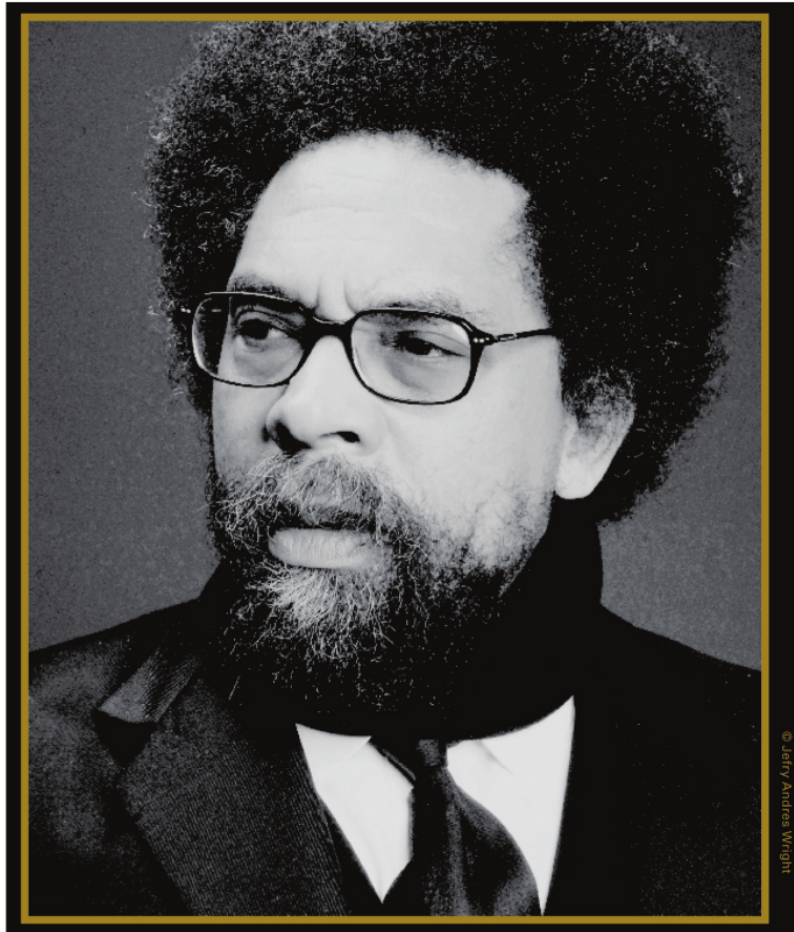


Image 1.2

When ordinary people wake up, elites begin to tremble in their boots. They can't get away with their abuse. They can't get away with subjugation. They can't get away with exploitation. They can't get away with domination. It takes courage for folk to stand up.

American democracy is great precisely because you have had courageous, compassionate citizens who were willing to sacrifice, to think critically, and connect with others to ensure that the Bill of Rights has had substance, that working people have had dignity, and that people of color have a status that ought to be affirmed. Think of the courage that went into that!

February is a serious month because we start talking about Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

And we can't talk about these freedom fighters without acknowledging white brothers like Elijah Parish Lovejoy, an 1834 graduate of the Princeton Theological Seminary. He was shot down like a dog by a pro-slavery mob because of his part in the abolitionist movement, fighting for a free press, and affirming the Bill of Rights.

Lydia Maria Child was a white sister who in 1883 wrote *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans called Africans*, in the same spirit as David Walker's *Great Appeal*.

Asian sisters like Grace Lee Boggs. Jewish brothers like Harry Magdoff. Well-to-do white brothers like Paul Sweezy. Brown sisters like Dolores Huerta. Brown brothers like César Chávez. Red brothers like Russell Means. We can go on and on. This is what makes a democratic tradition strong.

The democratic tradition says what? "Whosoever will, let them come."

It's critical to understand your history, and then be true to oneself in such a way that one's connection to the suffering of others is an integral part of understanding yourself. This is a deep problem these days. To be great in our times too often means to have great material prosperity and no moral magnanimity at all.

If you don't muster the courage to think critically about your situation, you'll end up living a life of conformity and complacency. You'll lose a very rich

tradition that has been bequeathed to you by your foremothers and forefathers.

In America, when we talk about a catastrophe, we talk about indigenous people. We talk about slavery. We talk about women coping with patriarchy and domestic violence. We talk about gay brothers and lesbian sisters being taught to hate themselves. We talk about workers crushed by the capitalist elite. It is a view from the bottom up—through the lens of the cross.

That view is too often a minority view within the Christian community because it requires too much love, too much courage. Who wants to pay the ultimate cost like Brother Medgar Evers? People are too scared. I understand that. I still love them. I affirm Medgar's courage because he dared to look at the world through the lens of the cross and paid the ultimate price.

Malcolm did it in the Islamic tradition. Martin certainly did it in his tradition. He bore his cross from age 26 until he was assassinated at 39. The American Empire is just so cross-averse.

America denies its night side until it breaks right through. There's no direct reference to slavery in the

original U.S. Constitution. That's not just a slight gesture. That's lying.

You can't get away with that. You end up fighting a civil war over an institution not invoked in the Constitution. That's a level of denial that's incredibly deep. You think you're innocent, yet you've created the catastrophe right in your midst. You try to sanitize and sterilize it so expertly that you think the funk is not going to hunt you down. But it never works.

It is unclear whether we're going to make it. I'm not an optimist at all. Brother Barack Obama says he has the audacity to hope. I say, "Well, what price are you willing to pay?"

It's no longer enough to be willing to die. You have to be willing to live the truth. Somehow, you have to be able to walk that tightrope.

We have too much cynicism around here. It's too easy. There's too much pessimism. Pessimism and optimism are the flip sides of the same coin. We should reject the whole coin.

When you're optimistic, you can stand apart to see how things are going. But when you're full of hope, you're in the midst of the muck. You're working it out with love power and a commitment to justice. Your unshakable connection to the story and tradition that shaped you is what sustains you.

We have to expose the social breakdown that produces the conflict that separates human beings from hope and courage and discipline and risk-taking.

We need to be true to ourselves. I say that to Brother Barack Obama all the time. "This above all—to thine own self be true; And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man."

To be true to yourself means finding yourself. This became something of a challenge for Sister Hillary Clinton. You need to have a self to be true to. You can find yourself, but what self is it? What's the substance of it? You can't discover it by simply checking the next poll.

And I'm not speaking just about Sister Hillary. This is what happens to most politicians. I pray to God that Obama is never reduced to that. American politics has a way of grinding the best out of a person. It

become prophetic or vengeful? Let's look at certain moments in history when black folk had to respond with astonishing courage to the vicious form of niggerization called terrorism.

One of the most courageous moments in American history took place in 1955. Very few people want to talk about it. In August 1955, Emmett Till was murdered by his fellow citizens, a victim of American terrorism, his body thrown into Mississippi's Tallahatchie River.

Emmett Till's body was brought back to Chicago. The funeral resulted in the first major civil rights demonstration in the 1950s. It was three months before Rosa Parks sat down in order to stand up for justice in December 1955. Fifty thousand fellow citizens of all colors walked by to take a look at Emmett Till. His mother left the coffin open so that everyone could see.

It was Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ, where Mamie Till walked to the lectern. She looked over at her baby, whose head was five times the normal size, and she looked into the eyes of the black folk of South Side Chicago, and into the eyes of America.

Tears flowing, Socratic juices at work, she said what? *I don't have a minute to hate. I'm going to pursue justice for the rest of my life.*

What spiritual maturity, moral wisdom, care, and love went into that statement. It was rooted in something very deep. It was rooted in a decision to keep track of the humanity of the very people who had dehumanized her son. This was not some isolated occurrence. There was a tradition that produced Mamie Till. It took the questioning of dogma like white supremacy very seriously.

My God. How profoundly courageous! Here's a grieving mother speaking on her son's behalf and speaking for the best of her tradition. Martin King's in the background. Fannie Lou Hamer's voice is there. A. Philip Randolph's voice is there—and many nameless and anonymous black leaders who knew they would have to deal with situations in which they were unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated for who they were.

Think of the courage of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when four young black girls in Birmingham became victims of American terrorism. It was the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963. Brother Martin cried in public. He did not know what to say. He wondered if nonviolence was a hoax when people killed babies in Sunday school. He looked at the parents. Tears flowed again. What did he say?

“Somehow we need to muster the armors of love and justice.” Now that’s a courageous people at their best.

When we try to specify the various forms and varieties of the courage to love, we really have to ask, “Love for what?”

When we talk about the courage to love, to think for oneself, it rests on the courage to love truth. The love of truth, wisdom, and justice is not the same as loving individual people.

When you talk about the courage to love real people, there is certainly a truth in pain, sorrow, and grief. That truth is very different from the truth found in abstract theory.

Now is the time for courage to love in a way that’s not sentimental. It’s a dangerous force that put Jesus on the cross. That’s the kind of love I’m talking about. You can touch it. You can feel it. You know that you’re empowered when you’re connected with that kind of love. Grandma displayed exceptional dignity and grace to cope politically, spiritually, and lyrically while keeping a smile on her face. She worked at Miz Ann’s

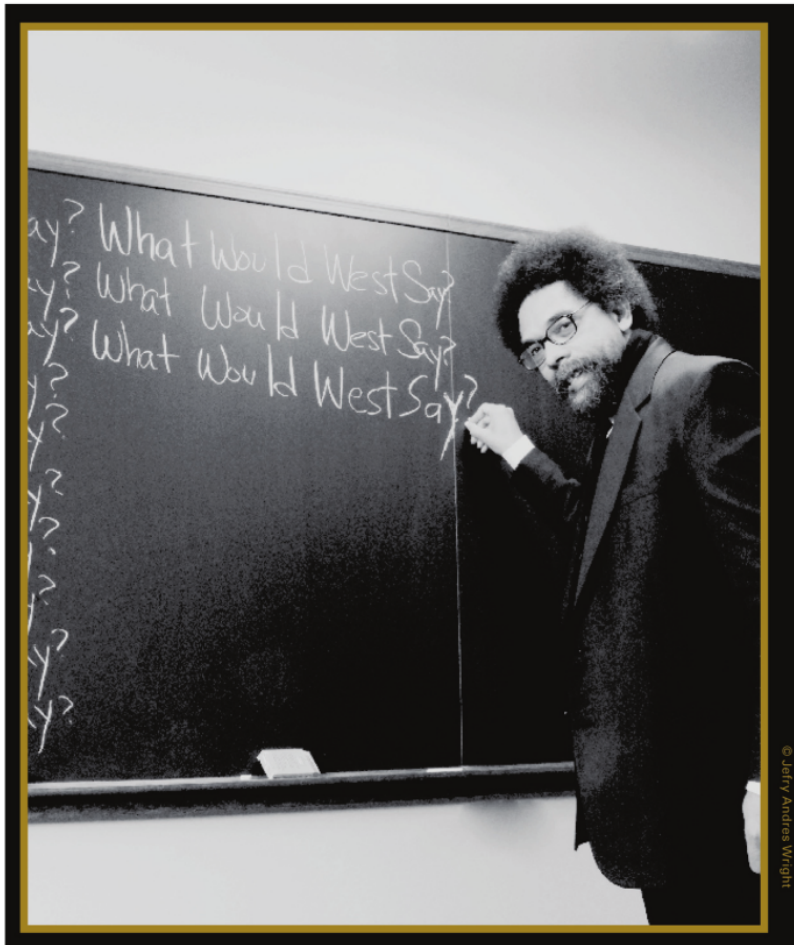


Image 2.1

house for over 42 years with no pension. But she was a queen on Sunday! That takes courage.

Where does that wellspring come from? It doesn't fall out of the sky. It comes out of a history of struggle. It comes from song, word, gesture, deed, family, institution, athletic networks, and musical apprenticeship. That's what has sustained us.

Young people watch TV, hear from their friends, listen to the radio, and watch videos. Is that the truth? If you accept uncritically and blindly, then it's clear you don't really have a love for the truth. You have a love for what people tell you. Or it can be love for prevailing opinion. Sometimes we just fall in love with lies.

Lies can generate some deep love. You can be addicted to lies and falsity as a way of dealing with life. You can fall for illusion, delusion, deception, and deceit.

I'm concerned about the younger generation. Traditions are not something you simply inherit—you have to fight for them. You want to keep them vital, vibrant, and strong. You have to learn how to be their stewards. You have to be willing to sacrifice for them. You don't gain access to traditions by osmosis.

Black people have never had the luxury to believe in the innocence of America. Although we've experienced the worst of America, we still believe that the best of America can emerge.

Any time you surrender a prejudice or give up a presupposition, that's a certain death. To learn how to die in this way is to learn how to live.

Paideia means "deep education"—learning how to die to live more intensely, critically, and abundantly. Because when you die, you give up certain assumptions and presuppositions to be reborn into a higher level of maturity.

Like falling in love—the old self dies, the new self emerges and merges into another self, grounded by the gift of grace. *Paideia* is the death that signifies rebirth. When I went to Harvard I had to be willing to die in order to emerge stronger—more courageous, perhaps more decent. Because in the end, love is the force that transcends death. All the rest is sounding brass and tinkling cymbals.

Love of wisdom is a meditation on and preparation for death because it's in that death that you are able to go through a transformation where your education in the deepest sense—or what the Greeks called *paideia*—can occur. This cultivation of yourself and

the maturation of your soul teaches you the difference between the frivolous and the serious, between the superficial and the substantial.

What kind of human being do you want to be? What kind of legacy do you want to leave behind? What kind of witness do you want to bear? The prophetic question remains: Are you willing to be in solidarity with those whose tears are flowing? These are profoundly human questions.

You're made in the image of God. You're a featherless, two-legged, linguistically conscious creature born between urine and feces. That's us. One day your body will be the culinary delight of terrestrial worms. You know that. Be honest. Put on your three-piece suit if you want to, but that's not armor against death.

The question is: Who are you going to be in the meantime, in this time and space? You don't get out of time and space alive.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was one wave in an ocean that says, *I am willing not simply to live and die for an*