



The Black Intellectual Tradition and the Great Conversation with Dr. Angel Parham

Lesson 5: W.E.B. Du Bois, Part I

Outline:

W.E.B. Du Bois History

- He was born in 1868 in Massachusetts. He was born 5 years after the Emancipation Proclamation.
- He was raised largely by single mother.
- Du Bois is descended from a black ancestor who fought in the Revolution and gotten his freedom from fighting in the Revolution.
- How the community came around W.E.B. Du Bois family:
 - He was cared for within an interracial community.
 - Both black and white members of the community took care of him and helped out his mother.

Early perceptions of color:

- He had almost no experience of color discrimination or segregation.
- He knew that he was exceptional in appearance, and recognized that most colored persons were poorer than the whites.
- He associated poverty with lack of opportunity and lack of thrift.

Further History of W.E.B. Du Bois

- He was conscious that he was a quite brilliant child. He didn't feel he was held back because of his color.
- He was able to soar intellectually.
- In contrast with Frederick Douglass, Du Bois has a relative privilege. Du Bois goes on to the intellectual heights. They were brilliant in their various ways.
- Early on, it was clear that he should go on to college.
- At this time if you were to have any possibilities of going to college, you would need to know Latin or Greek.
- The community (Hosmer, teacher) looked out for Du Bois in setting him up for success to get to college.

Du Bois College Life



- Black and white leaders and pastors came together and made a determination about where to send Du Bois. He was smitten with the idea of going to Harvard, but he was to be sent to Fisk.
- He wonders what it would be like to be in a place with all black people.
- When he gets to the south, he is immersed in the black community for the very first time.
- He slowly comes to form a sense of blackness. This forged for him a lifetime calling of working on behalf of the African American people, principally through the means of education.
- He does eventually get to Harvard.

W.E.B. Du Bois Writing

- *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W.E.B. Du Bois
 - This is a collection of essays published in 1903.
 - It probes the heart of issues of race and justice in the United States.
 - He combines keen social analysis with such moving personal reflections and with beautiful writing.
 - This is an American classic.
- *Of our Spiritual Strivings*, first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*
 - The inner struggle of being black and being American is referred to as **double consciousness**. There is a need to choose between them.
 - There is a desire to be whole, but it also does not seem quite possible.
 - **Life behind the veil**: you can't quite get to the fullness and promise that America has because of your blackness.
- *Of the Dawn of Freedom*, chapter two of *The Souls of Black Folk*
 - The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line.
 - He brings out the issues of the Civil War and Reconstruction.
 - We are poised at the beginning of the 20th century, what are the possibilities?
 - There is a note of hope – the sun, where children sing.
 - Then it gets dragged down into despair.
 - Are we going to overcome the color line? Will we realize this promise of beauty or be dragged down into the depth of despair?
- *Of the Meaning of Progress*, chapter four of *The Souls of Black Folk*
 - What is this American project? To what extent can the least among us realize the benefits of this project and its promise?
 - W.E.B. Du Bois Teaching
 - He starts out very optimistic about the work to find a school and to make his own contribution.
 - He has to travel quite far into the countryside in order to find a school to teach in.



- How do you keep the students coming back and to make the long term investment in education?
- Even if it just studying what is good and beautiful and cultivating virtue for its own sake, this liberal learning is good in all circumstances.
- He is trying to call the children's attention to something higher. There is something good and beautiful to be had in this learning.
- Du Bois leaves his school and returns after 10 years. Josie was dead. She was overcome and died of a broken heart.
- Josie's life is a microcosm and commentary for education and opportunity and for realizing not just an ability to survive, but to flourish in one's soul.
- Du Bois ends on the note of the Jim Crow car. This hammers home how much work is yet to be done.