

AN AMERICAN CREDO

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I AM an American. I lay no claim to an ancestry which arrived here by the *Mayflower* or by the slave-ship of 1619. I do regard myself, however, as a representative of blended humanity, carrying in my bloodstream the three great races of man—Caucasian, Negroid, and Mongolian. Some of my ancestors came from Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England. Others came over in chattel-ships from Africa. Others were indigenous to American soil and met the colonists when they arrived. They all fought it out here and fused their bloods. I am the product. Therefore I will resist every attempt to categorize me, to place me in some caste, or to assign me to some segregated pigeonhole.

Nobody gave me my freedom. I owe it to no political party or the goodwill of any group. I inherited it. Some of my forefathers fought for it at Appomattox, Petersburg, and Richmond. Others toiled for it in Carolina tobacco fields, paying their masters dollar for dollar, and bought it. Others paid for it with their health, sanity, and their lives, jumping overboard from slave vessels or lying in swamps and crawling through the night into the shelter of the Underground Railroad. Others pulled a "mass strike" when the Union Armies invaded the Confederacy and helped disintegrate the labor force of the rebellious South. The Proclamation of Emancipation which Lincoln signed in 1863 was but the historical and documentary recognition of an accomplished fact.

As an American I inherit the magnifi-

cent tradition of an endless march toward freedom and toward the dignity of all mankind. And though my country has not always loved me, yet in the words of the poet, Claude McKay, "I must confess I love this cultured hell which tests my strength." Loving it as I do, I am determined that my country shall take her place among nations as a moral leader of mankind. No law which imprisons my body or custom which wounds my spirit can stop me.

That my country may accomplish this great task of history, I must make myself worthy to be called an American. I would bring shame and disgrace upon the United States' flag if I tolerated for one moment any practice of discrimination, segregation, or prejudice against any human being because of an accident of birth which has determined race, color, sex, or nationality and helped to shape his or her creed.

For history moves in strange and unpremeditated ways. But for an error in navigation or a perverse trade wind the pioneers who reached Massachusetts would have landed in Virginia. As it was, the Virginia cousins became great slaveholders and slave breeders. The Massachusetts cousins became great slave traders and great Abolitionists. The North Carolina cousins became small cells of Unionism within a slaveholding state. The Pennsylvania cousins became Quakers and operators of the dramatic Underground Railroad.

Many of these ancestors of the 19th century had the vision of men who saw

AN AMERICAN CREDO

that a country cannot exist half-slave and half-free. They saw the abolition of slavery as the logical extension of the 18th century Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. The record of that vision is scattered on historical markers by gullies and streams in Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee, and up and down the southeastern coast. They knew of no other way to destroy the slave mart save through sword and fire and blood.

But they have left for me and my contemporaries of the 20th century the task of destroying the incidents of slavery—segregation, discrimination, and prejudice. The Civil War was an inadequate answer to the slavery issue. Families were hopelessly divided among themselves; brothers and cousins fought on opposite sides of the lines. Spiritual and psychic wounds still fester in the Southland. The virus of an understandable hatred, the hatred of a conquered and expropriated people, has spread to every corner of our country. Its tentacles will engulf us unless we reach the heart of the monster.

And so, with my feet rooted firmly in the moral precepts of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States and all the preachments of humanitarian tradition throughout the history of man, I take my stand against the institution of segregation and all of its incidents. For segregation is a monster, dividing peoples, thwarting personalities, breeding civil wars. It must be rooted out of our national life. It must be replaced by individual codes of conduct and by federal and state laws which recognize and protect the individual. It must go during our life time.

But even while taking this stand, we must learn from the mistakes of our ancestors. Force is not the way. Bloodshed is not the answer. We deserve to go down

in history as the most bankrupt generation ever produced, if with the total cultural and spiritual resources of the globe at our disposal, we cannot fashion superior instruments to those of civil war, of riots, of personal retaliation, and of mass resentment. We must span the chasms of internecine strife. We must heal the wounds even while removing the cancerous growth. It can be done. It must be done.

For me the process means an individual revolution in my thinking. I must see each man or woman as the product of his biological and environmental background. The forces of history of which he may be totally unaware have helped to shape his attitudes. His immediate environmental experiences have moulded his conduct. A lyncher in Texas may become a liberal leader in California. Had he been born in Africa, Mr. Bilbo might have become a great protagonist for the freedom of colonial peoples. Had I been born in South America, I might have hated North Americans for their inconsistencies.

The evolutionary law of survival teaches me I must be an integrated personality. I cannot be rent asunder by harboring personal prejudices or racial resentments. I want to spend my time finding the common denominator of mankind, and prejudice or hatred is an emotional waste. I will not vent my hatred for stupid customs and laws upon the individuals or public officials who seek to impose such practices upon me. I seek to destroy an institution, a mores, a disease—not a people. I must look beyond the human factor to the cultural structure, even though it be expressed in human terms. With my eye on the institution, the individuals who shape and are shaped by this institution fall into proper perspective. By every cultural, spiritual, and psychological resource at my disposal I shall seek to destroy the institution of segregation.

I will not submit to segregation myself

COMMON GROUND

so long as I am able to speak out fearlessly against it, or so long as my physical strength endures. Where segregation laws exist, of whatever variety, I shall attack the constitutionality of those laws. Where confronted with these laws in person, I shall resist them. If the refusal to abide by segregation statutes means imprisonment, I shall choose prison. If it means death, I can say only that my brothers and cousins are facing death every day. If I am not ready to give my life yet, I will leave the South where I was born and reared and find some spot in regional exile where I may still attack again and again such laws and customs. If my country is finally conquered by a national tide of prejudice which makes it impossible for me to breathe a free air, I will leave my country and find a new asylum, in the best tradition of the pioneers who helped to found America. For me there can be no compromise with segregation and discrimination.

I do not intend to destroy segregation by physical force. That would entail human waste and would not gain my objectives. I hope to see it destroyed by a power greater than all the robot bombs and explosives of human creation—by a power of the spirit, an appeal to the intelligence of man, a laying hold of the crea-

tive and dynamic impulses within the minds of men. The great poets and prophets have heralded this method; Christ, Thoreau, and Gandhi have demonstrated it. I intend to do my part through the power of persuasion, by spiritual resistance, by the power of my pen, and by inviting the violence upon my own body. For what is life itself without the freedom to walk proudly before God and man and to glorify creation through the genius of self-expression?

I intend to destroy segregation by positive and embracing methods. When my brothers try to draw a circle to exclude me, I shall draw a larger circle to include them. Where they speak out for the privileges of a puny group, I shall shout for the rights of all mankind. I shall neither supplicate, threaten, nor cajole my country or her people. With humility but with pride I shall offer one small life, whether in foxhole or in wheatfield, for whatever it is worth, to fulfill the prophecy that all men are created equal.

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