

Is America Possible?

To My Young Companions
on the Journey of Hope

VINCENT HARDING

ESSAYS ON **DEEPENING THE AMERICAN DREAM**
A SERIES SPONSORED BY THE FETZER INSTITUTE



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Foreword

DURING THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, many observers of our culture have suggested that faith in the American dream is dying, that a collective vision of hope for the future is fading from view. It has taken a series of national crises—placing us all in direct awareness of our own vulnerability and mortality—to awaken us to the truth that the American dream is not dying, but deepening. Recognition of this truth has never been more essential as we rise to meet the challenges of our time with compassion and wisdom.

The Fetzer Institute’s Deepening the American Dream essay series explores the relationship between the inner life of spirit and the outer life of service. These essays describe some of the ways in which tending to this relationship (in communities and nations as well as ourselves) can, invariably, lead to more compassionate and effective action in the world. What’s more, each essay—in its own way—illuminates essential qualities to help us live with the authenticity and grace demanded by our times.

In the 1930s, the poet Langston Hughes observed that the origin of a deeper American Dream is not to be found in some distant, abstract idea but very near, in the stories of our own lives. His insight rings true to this day:

*An ever-living seed,
Its dream
Lies deep in the heart of me.*

The deepening we seek can be found in our own hearts, if only we have the courage to uncover and engage what is there.

Robert F. Lehman
Fetzer Institute Board Chair

Author's Preface

I HAVE CHOSEN TO ENTER THIS COLLECTIVE EXPLORATION of “Deepening the American Dream” by way of a somewhat autobiographical path, one that I originally opened in the chapter from *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* that is reprinted here. As a book of essays, *Hope and History*, originally published in 1990, was both a response and a companion to the prize-winning documentary film series *Eyes on the Prize*, a project for which I was fortunate enough to be the senior academic adviser. Sharing with my late wife, Rosemarie Freeney Harding, the powerful gift of working closely with Henry Hampton, the genius who conceived and guided the series—“through many toils and snares”—to its completion in 1986, we were granted the extraordinary privilege of helping create a film record of a transformative social movement in which we ourselves had participated so fully and to which our lives owed such a great and nurturing debt. Emerging from that setting, *Hope and History* was written with my fellow teachers in mind, suggesting ways in which they might share the *Eyes on the Prize* experience as a rich resource for exploring with students our great human capacities for transformative life and action. I saw these teachers, whether based in classrooms, prison recreation rooms, religious education programs, or a thousand other settings, encouraging their students especially to understand and identify with the work of all the magnificent human beings who have helped offer some authentic grounding to the audacious dream of “a more perfect union” in America.

Even though the subtitle for *Eyes on the Prize* is “America’s Civil Rights Years,” and that descriptor has served an important popular purpose, my own descriptive choice continues to be something more like “The Black-Led Struggle for the Expansion of Democracy in America.” That, of course, is a major concern of *Hope and History*. For it seems to me that this was the essential work of the extraordinary post-World War II humanizing movement that emerged with such authentic power out of the grassroots communities of the black South.

Passionately, insistently, often driven by fierce religious concern for the outcasts and by an amazing faith in the democratic potentials of our nation—and

ourselves—we urged the country to move beyond its own self-imposed social, spiritual, political, and constitutional barriers and break out toward our best democratic and human possibilities. At the same time, the leading participants in the local and national manifestations of the freedom movement—including women and children, whose gifts had too often been previously undervalued—were continually discovering their great hidden capacity for courage, creativity, leadership, and community building. Daring to dream the impossible, they hurled themselves into often dangerous and always unpredictable action that opened new human realities for us all. Meanwhile, the world was watching, often understanding more about the magnificent potentials of our nation and our people than we had discovered, or dreamed ourselves.

So my initial approach to the challenge of the American dream and its meaning comes in the form of the question that shaped the accompanying chapter: “Is America Possible?” For it seems to me that any exploration of a national experience of deepening, of maturing and honing, must urgently fold into itself the search for this nation’s capacity to discover and give witness to its own unique and hard-won gifts for becoming “the land that never has been yet.” This America was Langston Hughes’s stillborn child, waiting for the breath of life to rise from some deep place within us, daring to create and harbor great visions of redemption for us all. This is my historical and spiritual context for wrestling, dancing with the prospect of deepening the American dream.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I confess that I come with more than the question “Is America Possible?” Beyond, beneath, up against that rough and bloodied query, I know that I am also possessed by an urgent, sometimes illogical response that goes far deeper than any simple set of words that I can shape or fully understand. Instead, I find myself embracing Langston, Jimmy Baldwin, and Ella Baker; holding on to Florence and Clarence Jordan; calling out to Gwendolyn Brooks, to Malcolm, and to Martin; keeping Slater and Marian King and Fannie Lou Hamer close to Thomas Merton and his dear friend, Rosemarie Harding, and a gang, a company, a bunch of loving, dauntless witnesses too vast to name but not too vast to know—and to dance and wrestle with.¹ Along with all of them I shout and sing (“Make a Joyful Noise,” my mother used to say), not fully understanding why or how, I testify, “Yes, yes, yes, America *is* possible. It *will* be. It *must* be.”

At the same moment, in the midst of that slightly ecstatic declaration of hope, I strangely insist on knowing why, how, what is my evidence? Am I walking,

talking, shouting only by faith? (And what do I mean by *only*?) Am I forgetting all the past and present darkness of this land? And as I remember it all, perhaps Rebecca Solnit will speak to me, reminding me that “The future is dark, with a darkness as much of the womb as of the grave.”² And, of course, I choose the womb—partly because of that blessed woman spirit that has for so long been intrinsic to my being; partly because Mabel, my mother, and Rosemarie, my dear wife and coworker, still live on in me; partly because the paradoxical calling to midwifery seems increasingly to shape my understanding of what it means to be an elder in a land and a time longing to be born anew.

With that deep presence of the expectant womb affecting me, I have chosen virtually to gather and engage a group of my younger friends, relatives, and coworkers to help me with this dance, to support me in this sacred wrestling with the roaring question and with my answer. Because so many of my young companions are themselves still being born, because the energy of their emergence and the promise of their own creative contributions to the coming new nation are often the source of my hope, I decided to address these reflections directly to them. Essentially, the letter that follows revisits some of my experiences of the past two years, especially experiences with young people, and tries to explain and celebrate the ways in which these intergenerational encounters in my own recent journey have enlarged my capacity to hope, emboldened me to move with patience toward the possibilities of light, of deepening, redefining, and fulfilling the American dream.

Of course, as the following letter and the reprinted essay seek to make clear, I am speaking now not of some easy, placid, feel-good optimism, certainly not in the face of so many fearful, vengeful, empire-building, constitution-threatening elements at large in our nation. Rather, my conviction is based on rugged, often blood-stained hope, hope fiercely breaking out of the dark-womb beauty that I have experienced—directly and vicariously—in the past half-century of struggles for the creative transformation of “ordinary” women, men, and children who refused to give up their extraordinary dreams of new beginnings in Alabama, Mississippi, Soweto, Georgia, Oakland, Prague, Greensboro, Beijing, Chicago, Philadelphia, Berlin, Detroit—and every place else where humans live to nurture and embody their dreams.

Is America Possible?

To My Young Companions
on the Journey of Hope

Dear Jordan (with gratitude for the beauty you create on your violin and in your life),

Dear Cecil and Sonya (rejoicing in the powerful presence of Mama Victoria),

Dear Mark and Robert (as you continue to “Stand” and dance in hope),

Dear Mumia (with appreciation for your refusal to submit to the threatening darkness),

Dear Heber (expecting great things of you),

Dear Chivonnie (no, never in vain),

Dear Rachel and Jonathan (as you manifest the blessed beauty of your mother),

Dear Maisha, Omo, Taba, and Malika (take your great ancestral inheritance and continue to fly),

Dear Deb and Lucas (as you continue to love and hold each other while gently holding and loving the earth),

Dear Liza (let the power of the healing Spirit flow on),

Dear Cameron (as you continue to grow),

Dear Ruby, Nancy, and Cheryl (may love and hope always prevail; thank you),

Dear Pastor Sheila (because I know the Lord has laid her hands on you),

Dear Gloria and Phillip (thanks for keeping faith with Mama Freeny),

Dear Jamie and Stephen (go right on creating, growing, and teaching together),

Dear Maria and Santiago (beloved adopted sister and nephew, continue to chant and live your hope),

Dear Chicoby and Naisha (while Fella and I watch your beautiful rising),

Dear Raina and Eileen (as you go right on in love and hope),

Dear Ambassadors of Hope: Faleta, Sadé, Jessica, Eric, Eddie, Tyler, Jose, Sandina, Mandy, David, Ashley, Sarah, Chris K., Chris S., Stephanie, Loren, Victoria, Jeff, Mimi, Georgie, and Maliq (live up to your name),

Dear Leti (as you continue to manifest the best gifts of your father),

Dear Coworkers: Jean, Rose, Michelle, Malaika, Steve, Marceline, Simone, Daniel E., John, Daniel M., Linda, Tony, Lamont, Jesus, Karen, and Lisa (let us continue to work together),

Dear Project Team: Maaraidzo, Teena, Tania, Karen, donnie, Tanya, PJ, Olga, Malik, and Lali (with much gratitude and abiding hope),

I am very glad that our lives have touched each other, especially in the movement toward compassionate new possibilities for ourselves, our families, our communities, our nation, and our world. Because of the ways in which your lives have been a source of courage and hope to me, I am writing this letter to you, asking you to represent the hundreds of other younger people who are not named here but who have deeply touched my life.

Because of the ways in which your lives have been a source of courage and hope to me, I am writing this letter to you . . .

Not long ago, I was asked by friends and supporters at the Fetzer Institute in Michigan to share some of my thoughts about what it would mean to deepen—and expand—the American dream. Because I cannot think about the possibilities of creating a new America, “a more perfect union,” without thinking about each of you and the great possibilities of your own contributions to that new coming nation, I have put my thoughts, my hope, in the form of this letter to you. (Some of you may wonder about how you got included in the “young companions” category. Essentially, dear friends, that is one of the privileges I claim after passing my seventy-sixth birthday. I can create the category of “young” wherever I choose— even among those of you who are now exploring your fifties. I trust that you’ll receive the youth identity in the spirit in which it was given. Besides, you are surrounded by enough teenagers at the other end of my group of fellow travelers to draw you, dance you, right into a new life. “Come, go with us to that land where we’re bound.”)

Of course, dear ones, the receipt of such an unexpected and unrequested letter does not require a response—especially since its published nature will mean that you who are named here have been central inspirations in the creation of this letter, and I am very grateful to you and for you. You have already responded, and I am very glad.

Now let me go on with the essence of what I want to share with you. I have discovered that feeding my own hope in the best possibilities of this problematic and often dangerous nation requires that I regularly engage in several kinds of journeys. One pilgrimage takes me to the historical sacred spaces where women, men, and young people have lived and died for the redemption of this

land, especially in the tumultuous last half of the twentieth century. Another opportunity for embedding hope arises when I am able to participate with young people like you in the work of our contemporary attempts to create new platforms and visions of the possibilities for our nation and this world. For instance, in the spring of 2005, it felt very good to march with students from some of the historically black colleges and universities in Greensboro, North Carolina, and see at least one sign saying “ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE.” Although the quotation came from a recent Latin American conference, I wondered if the sign bearers knew that some of their own black student forebears had helped create that reality early in the 1960s.

Indeed, I find it essential to constantly explore ways in which I can move spiritually, intellectually, and physically to introduce the searching young people of your generation to that magnificent band of elder sisters and brothers who earlier allowed their commitment, courage, faith, and creativity to take them out of safe, predictable places in search of a more just, more compassionate, and more democratic nation. And in the course of that bridging journey, I find myself empowered by the relentless determination of these veterans to continue their deep engagement in the struggle for the expansion of democracy in America. Many of these elders in struggle are now in their sixties, seventies, and older. To journey again with them is to be revived. To rediscover their spirit so alive in many of you is to be inspired, literally filled with the breath of new life.

In the spring of 2005, many of my life-giving journeys were joined when I participated as a resident historian in a fortieth anniversary pilgrimage to re-create the experience of the Selma-to-Montgomery march of 1965. The origin of this modern reengagement pilgrimage is itself a source of hope. Ever since the 1980s, Representative John Lewis (D-GA) and the Washington-based Faith and Politics Institute have provided the essential energy for this annual opportunity for congresspersons, their staffs, and their families to visit a major historical setting for the expression, expansion, and authentication of democracy in America—a history that most of them appeared to know very little about. Eventually, our group from D.C. was joined in the 2005 pilgrimage by hundreds of local black Alabamians and their multiracial co-creators from across the state and the nation, as well as a multiracial group of specially invited guests from South Africa.

For me, dear friends, it was important that our 2005 journey to Alabama began in Birmingham, where the flight from Washington landed. Back in 1963, Rosemarie and I had been invited to “Bombingham,” as black people then called it, by Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth (the amazingly courageous Baptist pastor, organizer, and leader of the Birmingham-based Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights) to participate in a seemingly impossible campaign to challenge and break down that city’s harsh and terroristic system of white supremacist segregation. Daring to take on the daunting task of facing armed official power with organized, disciplined, nonviolent resistance, informed by Jesus-shaped dreams of a new “beloved community,” the Birmingham people’s movement held great appeal for Rosemarie and me, especially since we originally came south in 1961 as representatives of the service committee of the Mennonite Churches—one of the original peace churches in America.

So in 2005, as I remembered Eugene “Bull” Connor, the stocky, red-faced, loud-talking police commissioner who was the primary public representative and enforcer for Birmingham’s apartheid system in the 1960s, it was fascinating to find myself one day seated at a meal across from the current police chief: an attractive and articulate African-American woman who had been a church friend of the four girls whose lives had been taken by the terroristic dynamite blast in 1963 that temporarily turned King’s dream into what he described then as “a nightmare.” To see the chief, to hear her speak of her commitment to the continuing creation of a Birmingham that once was declared impossible, to realize that *she* was once considered impossible, was deeply moving to me.

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Indeed, to see and hear all of that transformative story in Birmingham’s impressive official Civil Rights Museum, to see the children who offered themselves so fully and bravely during the marches of that spring campaign of 1963 now re-created as heroic pieces of metal sculpture—in the same Kelly Ingram Park where they had been knocked down by the powerful blasts from fire hoses and threatened by the bared teeth of snarling police dogs—was an extraordinary experience. Now, in their solidly sculpted form, the children silently claimed the continuing victory in a city they did so much to transform, repeating the story of how they overcame.

On this new visit to Birmingham, I realized that when these children had sung, in their audacious original days, “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me ’round,” they were declaring more than they knew for longer than they realized. For they were proclaiming that a new Birmingham was possible— if someone was willing to take the water blasts and nights in jail and risk the jagged bites of snarling dogs to make it possible.

My dear young friends, as I consider the gifts that these Birmingham children and their parents shared with us, the courage and audacity that made it possible for elementary and high school-aged children to rock the police paddy wagons with their enthusiastic singing of freedom songs as they headed into the darkness of prison, I am greatly encouraged. As I remember what the nation owes these children and their courageous families, it seems to me that modern pilgrimages to the park and the streets where they once risked their lives for the best hopes of democracy in America are at least as important as the fiftieth anniversary journeys to the beaches of France in 1995, remembering where others had offered themselves during World War II in the cause of democratic hope.

Indeed, I sensed something of these sacred meanings as we walked slowly on the streets of present-day Birmingham. For we were participating in what was a rare opportunity for Americans and South Africans to consider together the historical and contemporary meaning of those great twentieth-century struggles for the soul of America. On a certain level, it reminded me of a University Without Walls experience, focused on the struggle for democracy in this land. It would seem a necessary prerequisite for all who would claim the right to bomb democracy into the rest of the world, especially important for our traveling congressional companions who are regularly asked to vote billions of dollars for illegitimate transfers of a democracy whose modern story is still unfamiliar to them—and their children and their commander in chief.

Education and inspiration were bound together for me again in that 2005 visit when our Alabama democratic pilgrimage group was taken to the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery. The centerpiece there was *Mighty Times*, a powerful documentary and reenactment film on Parks’ life. Having first met her in 1961, I was especially grateful for the clarity that the film brought to her important preparation for the decision she made on the bus in 1955. This included her persistent, prior work with the local NAACP, especially as an adviser to its young people, and her years-long commitment to the Montgomery Women’s Political Council, the group of black women who were determined to

challenge the city's system of segregation in "public" parks, stores, buses, and places of employment.

As we sat in the small auditorium of the Parks Museum watching the film, it was clear that one of the most fascinating aspects of *Mighty Times* was the absence of even a glimpse of Martin Luther King during the first half of the film. This was a reminder that the iconic leader was actually a newcomer to the community when he and Coretta and their young child Yolanda arrived in 1954 in time for the twenty-five-year-old King to begin his ministry at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church while trying to complete a doctoral dissertation for Boston University's School of Theology. That early absence of the young King from the screen also helped us as pilgrims recollect and recognize the important role that the black people of Montgomery played in actually calling Martin Luther King to his unexpected ministry as spokesperson for and encourager of a community that had already begun to dream new possibilities for itself—possibilities that called them beyond the domination, humiliation, and exploitation they had experienced from most of Montgomery's white citizens and their white supremacist leadership.

That early absence of the young King . . . also helped us as pilgrims recollect and recognize the important role that the black people of Montgomery played in actually calling Martin Luther King to his unexpected ministry. . .

Indeed, it occurred to me that these were dreams that connected the post-World War II black community of Montgomery directly to that magnificent company of their courageous, newly freed foreparents who a century before had eagerly walked out of slavery filled with impressively complex visions of the freedom they believed to be the rightful possession of all God's children. *Mighty Times* also reminded us that in every similar situation, there were a few enlightened and courageous white allies who sometimes took great risks to walk faithfully toward transformation with their black sisters and brothers.

Before we left Montgomery, it was evident to our group of pilgrims that the capacity to dream and create new possibilities was still alive in that history-making city. When we were invited to gather at the Dexter Avenue Church where King had served as pastor, we were greeted by the extraordinary energy,

wisdom, and commitment of ninety-four-year-old Johnnie Mae Carr, one of the original members of both the Women's Political Council and the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). As president of the MIA at the time, Carr shared with us memories of the bus boycott that were clearly shaped by her vision of its central work. This work was much broader and deeper than obtaining riders' rights and humane recognition on the buses. Rather, her powerful message was that she and her contemporaries had been working for the opportunity to gain their rights and responsibilities as full citizens of their city, state, and nation. She challenged us to return to our own home bases and clearly examine the situation there, asking, "Are all citizens being given their rights?" Indeed, the power of her consistent decades-long democratic witness was so impressive that one of our South African companions, a woman deeply involved in courageous political leadership at home, said of Carr, "That's who I want to be when I grow up. I'm taking her back with me."

She challenged us to return to our own home bases and clearly examine the situation there, asking, "Are all citizens being given their rights?"

As we encountered the hallowed ground of Selma, the South African ambassador to the United States opened a similar connection when she recalled how often people at home and abroad had asked her to tell them what it was that kept her going through all the harsh, demanding, and dangerous years of their liberation struggle. Always, she said, at the heart of her reply were the words "the civil rights movement in America."

As you can imagine, dear friends, I could not let those words from my South African sisters pass me by. For they were really bearing witness to what I have long known and felt regarding our unique and important role as African-Americans in creating, transforming, and sharing the American dream. Without the tragic touchstone of our often terrifying experience in this land (an experience that we have continued to share, of course, with the earliest natives of our country), it would be easy for any such dream to become at best superficial and at worst evasive and false ("You've never been America to me"). It is we African-Americans—when we have been at our best—who have insisted that the most authentic American dream is of a nation that does not yet exist,

a transformed one whose complex richness we have occasionally sampled in harsh struggles for a new nation, one sometimes yearned for as “a more perfect union.” We sometimes courageously envision it as “the beloved community,” always accompanied by the demanding assumption that only long, hard sacrificial experiences of persistent, redemptive work can urge the creative dream into concrete historical manifestation.

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At the same moment, the words of the South African ambassador remind us all that no truly deep, faithfully human American dream can exist in a vacuum. Indeed, I knew that what the African sisters were really signifying to me was that the American dream cannot be fulfilled, cannot be deepened, until it enters into a creative, transformative engagement with the best dreams of humankind, seeking neither to submerge nor overwhelm nor stifle other human visions. Instead, only when we hear Hannah Arendt’s hard-won testimony—“It is when we are in dialogue that we are most human”—do we begin to grasp our best possibilities. So I heard the African sisters encourage us to continue learning how to share the dream of compassionate multiracial democracy by becoming creative learners instead of overbearing, heavily armed, tone-deaf teachers. I hear them urge us Americans—of every variety—to be global companions in the magnificent humanizing search.

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This matter of learning lessons of democratic possibilities from the African-American freedom movement came up again in several unforgettable moments when our bus-riding southern movement pilgrimage came upon the

famous Highway 50 (now Route 80), between Montgomery and Selma, and rode over the once-bloodied, contested Edmund Pettus Bridge. This is the bridge leading out from Selma across the Alabama River, where in March 1965 scores of voting rights marchers were tear-gassed and beaten with billy clubs by sheriff's deputies and state troopers on horseback and on foot as the marchers made the first of several attempts to walk in protest and pilgrimage to Montgomery, the state capital. Eventually, joined by thousands more supporters, they were able to cross the bridge and march—and dance—the fifty miles to Montgomery. The momentum of their movement provided the impetus and drew the necessary national and international attention and commitment that soon opened the way to the famous 1965 federal Voting Rights Act, creating an unsteady but very real new beginning in American social and political history, expanding democracy and deepening the dream.

Our itinerary in 2005 had set us up to start in Montgomery, where that original 1965 march had ended. Now as we bus-riding pilgrims approached Selma, no matter which direction we looked through our windows, it was impossible to miss the power and symbol of the presence of Alabama state troopers again. Only this time they were no longer threats to the pilgrims, but they had been sent by the scores—black and white, male and female, in cars and on motorcycles on both sides of the highway—to escort us with their wailing sirens and spinning lights. I wondered who would have dared to dream this technicolored reality back in March 1965. And I gave thanks for all the local black and white Alabamians who may not have dared show up as allies in 1965 but who were here now at the bridge. Perhaps, as has happened before, there were now with us even some of the original officials who back then had used guns, tear gas, and heavy batons to fiercely deny the possibility of this new America.

And I gave thanks for all the local black and white Alabamians who may not have dared show up as allies in 1965 but who were here now at the bridge.

I knew who else was there for sure. John Lewis, transformed from the living target of the troopers' wrath and bearer of so much freedom rider history, to become an honored teaching member of the U.S. House of Representatives. In his own way, also present and accounted for was the Holocaust survivor Rabbi

Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose white mane and burgeoning white beard had marked him at the head of the line in 1965 with Martin, Coretta, and the Nobel laureate and diplomat Ralph Bunche. The rabbi had been there on the original march because he had lived long enough in the shadow of Hitler's racist Nazis and had immersed himself deeply enough in the world of the biblical prophets that he knew he needed to be in that black-led company of the faithful forty years ago.

In 1965, at the end of the first day's march, Heschel had written in his journal, "I felt as if my knees were praying." This time, in the spring of 2005, surely accompanied by the rabbi's lively spirit, it was his two granddaughters, aged seven and five, who were praying. I was with them and their parents when they caught their first sight of the now famous sign that said "EDMUND PETTUS BRIDGE," and it moved me deeply to hear Gittel, the oldest child, exclaim to her sister, "Look, there's the picture from our house." Now as I offer my continuing query about the possibility of America, the rabbi and his grandchildren are surely part of the answer.

Later, beyond the bridge, I heard John Lewis say to the veterans of the original march who were with us, "President Johnson signed the great Voting Rights Bill in August 1965, but it was you who wrote that bill right here on the road to Montgomery in March 1965." When I heard those words, I knew that John was speaking not only to the veterans who first crossed Pettus Bridge but also, in the magnificent interweaving of time, to the up-and-coming Heschel children who walked while the bridge became a vision again. I knew they would eventually walk their own prayers, create their own new visions, and write the reality of their own new nation in their time. I will walk near them. And I suspect that some of you will be holding their hands.

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their own new nation in their time.

Not long after the 2005 Pettus crossing, the hope of our children opened again for me in another part of the country. This time it was in Baltimore, a very different place, where I went with my daughter, Rachel, for a rendezvous with another parent, Victoria Gray Adams, one of the magnificent heroes of the

original company of Mississippians who had done so much to move that state toward its own transformative possibilities in the 1960s. Now she met Rachel and me at another place in need of new opportunities—a place where children were gathered with Victoria’s son, the Reverend Dr. Cecil Gray, a scholar of African-American history and religion. Following in the steps of his mother, inspired by her, offering powerful witness to her lifelong teachings, Cecil, now a local pastor, had organized dozens of church and community members from Northwood-Appold United Methodist Church to develop a charter elementary school, beginning with grades K-3.

Bravely dreaming America into being, this community-based primary school designed its curriculum around the theme “Freedom, Justice, and the Creation of a New Democracy.” What Rachel and I saw, as we helped encourage the teachers, parents, and supporters, was a committed group of people ranging from recent college graduates to elders like Victoria and myself, who had chosen their inspiration from the creative Freedom Schools movement of the 1960s. At the heart of the schools’ mission in those days was the commitment of Ella J. Baker, the great activist, teacher, and mother of the movement. (Her ethic insisted that children be taught “to make a living *and* make a life.”) Later, in the fall, we received word that our young company of new Freedom Schoolers had already distinguished themselves by compiling one of Baltimore’s best attendance records for that term. With their parents, their teachers, and their community, the children were already signaling a commitment to Baker’s life-making. (Since our initial time with the young democracy seekers, Victoria Gray Adams has gone on to join the ancestors. Her life force surely remains for the children of Northwood-Appold School.)

As you may realize, young friends, Baltimore is not a city that is known for hopeful signs where humane social change is concerned. That is surely not the image national TV has provided. In our summer visit, however, Rachel and I found signs of hope everywhere around us, especially in the lives of vibrant young people. We were not surprised to see the connections that existed between these committed young change agents and the women and men who had dreamed and worked for a new world before them. That was certainly the case with the impressive young teacher-leaders who have been nurtured by the Algebra Project, including an outstanding group of high school and college-age youth who mentor and teach mathematics to younger students at Baltimore’s Stadium Middle School. The Algebra Project, as some of you know, was initially

created by Bob Moses, the thoughtful, spiritually grounded mathematician and philosopher who shared a great dialectical commitment to democratic transformation within the grassroots communities of 1960s Mississippi, long considered the most dangerous and terroristic state in the South.

We were not surprised to see the connections that existed between these committed young change agents and the women and men who had dreamed and worked for a new world before them.

Coming out of his native New York City, sharing life-risking hopes with the people of Mississippi, and working together with a band of young people who formed the backbone of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “snick”), Moses became a legendary community organizer beginning in the early 1960s. Together with his audacious coworkers in SNCC and with hundreds of courageous Mississippi residents, he had broken—at great cost—all the declared impossibilities of the region and begun the creation of a new set of realities for the unstoppable people in that impossible state, in the resistant South, and in the recalcitrant nation. Then, years later, not long after the major freedom movement campaigns had quieted, Moses and his family recognized that a new campaign was necessary: to open the absolutely essential doors of algebra and advanced mathematics to the millions of urban American youths who were being shut out of full participation in the economic and political life of the nation due to the absence of serious math programs in their schools and to the lack of student preparation for the courses that did exist. The Algebra Project has become a way in which young people in cities within and beyond Mississippi, with assistance from trained and committed adult helpers, can not only open the doors to a crucial academic subject matter but also envision and enact their own responsibility for creating and receiving the education they need to become full citizens of a modern democratic nation.

In the course of decades of learning, teaching, and organizing, Moses, his wife, Janet, their own children, and scores of other coworkers have nurtured many cohorts of young people who have not only mastered new ways of learning and teaching algebra but have also grown convinced of their own capacities to challenge the official educational gatekeepers on the local and national

levels. Moses and the Algebra Project are now moving— with supporters like me and other veterans and many concerned and committed citizens—toward the development of a national coalition to demand that high-quality public education become a constitutional right for all of our nation’s children.

While we were in the city, Rachel, Victoria Gray Adams, and I had the privilege and pleasure of sitting with the Baltimore representatives of the Algebra Project’s Young People’s Project (YPP). The project included approximately twenty African-American and Latino high school and college-age youth who were mentoring their junior high school counterparts. They were also openly challenging the Department of Education in the state of Maryland to respond more fully and effectively to the unmet needs of its inner-city public schools. At our meeting with the YPP students and their faithful adult teacher-associates, there were no speeches or lectures. Rather we shared with them how inspired we felt, as elders, to be sitting in dialogue with young people who recognize the importance of continuing the work of expanding democracy in our nation. We also encouraged the students to tell us their personal stories and about their collective tasks as Algebra Project workers. It proved to be a good format, an important opening. The young people seemed very eager to testify, for instance, about their individual struggles to overcome their own initial fear of math and eventually arrive at the point where they were now helping others understand complex concepts and break through to their own best possibilities.

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I was also grateful for the small group of mostly white math teachers who had originally been willing to sacrifice their time (and some of their preconceptions) to take the Algebra Project teachers’ training and now were crucial allies and encouragers of the young people and their bold leadership. And I was especially moved by the young man who wanted me to know—at the close of our discussion, when we were just about to leave—that he had a story that he hadn’t told in the gathering, a story of how the Algebra Project had saved his life, moved him away from a pointless, dangerous trajectory on the streets to a discovery of his

gifts and his capacity to share those gifts with friends who were also in danger of losing their way. This young man said he didn't want me to leave without hearing his story, and I let him know how glad I was to be intercepted by hope. This young man said he didn't want me to leave without hearing his story, and I let him know how glad I was to be intercepted by hope.

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Before leaving Baltimore, I was drawn once more into that urgent sense of possibility by another impressive group of young people. These folks were in their twenties and thirties, and I was fascinated by the name they had chosen for themselves: Young Clergy for Social Change. As they persistently tracked down our visiting group on a day filled with too many appointments, it was clear that they were determined to find and engage their elders. Indeed, their combined sense of urgency, fresh exploration, and commitment was impressive and encouraging. When we arrived at the appointed restaurant, six of the "young clergy" were patiently, eagerly awaiting us. These six were approximately half the total membership of their relatively new organization. They were mostly recent seminary graduates serving in Baltimore congregations or doing parachurch work. The group included five African-American men and one white woman. They all seemed wonderfully at ease with each other as colleagues, coworkers, and friends. What they appeared to want and need most was our eldering. Rachel, while much closer to their age than to Victoria's and mine, as usual slipped very easily into that role with us.

It soon became clear that these visionary young people needed assurance that it was OK for them to move their attention away from traditional church-building institutional concerns, to release themselves from the grip of megachurch dreams, in order to reach out to the broken people, neglected communities, and unjust systems of their city and nation and to participate actively in citywide justice and peace actions. Then, as is so often the case, those who came to me in search of succor, encouragement, and support became powerful sources of hope for my own life. For I saw in these bright, articulate, and compassionate young people extraordinary resources for the creation of hope

for Baltimore and America. These surely were keepers and transformers of the American dream at its best. Later that night, as we gathered in my hotel room and talked into the next morning, I knew that I had been touched by the new nation. They reminded me so much of so many of you. What a gift!

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As some of you know, I tend to be drawn toward the symbolic realities of life. So it is not surprising that my search for a ground of hope in the rebirth and redemption of America would take me from one old national city like Baltimore to another, Philadelphia. Our family had lived for a number of years in Philly during the 1970s when we first returned north from our base in Atlanta. Now I was briefly drawn there again in response to an invitation from my friends Will and Dee Dee O'Brien, who had been central to the life of *The Other Side*, the progressive Christian journal formerly based in that city. Sitting at the unpretentious and loving dinner table of the O'Briens, with their two vivacious young children and Dee Dee's elderly parents, I was reminded of the fact that there is a continuing community of white Americans mostly in their forties, fifties, and sixties who, like my Philadelphia friends, have consciously chosen to claim as their own the best heritage, hope, and heroes of our southern black freedom movement. Passing on both the history and the hope to their children and to their parents (when it's not too late), they become with us new dream shapers and old dream deepeners.

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So I was not surprised when it turned out that the two places Will and Dee Dee wanted me to visit in Philadelphia that spring afternoon and evening of 2005 were outposts of hope. Appropriately enough, our first stop was at Project Hope, a bustling nonprofit center three or four stories high that combined decent living facilities for formerly homeless people, offices for volunteers and other

professionals who provided social and community services for residents, and a commodious gathering place where I met with a fascinating intergenerational mix of some fifty to sixty residents, community organizers, political activists, social service workers, students, and others who were simply curious about the out-of-town visitor who they heard had worked with Martin Luther King Jr.

As usual, I was more interested in encouraging “democratic conversation” than I was in making a presentation. Once the conversation began— focusing on what we meant by democracy, what could be done to deal with homelessness in their city and around the country, and the role of religion in our work for democratic social change—a good cross section of participants dived into the process, sometimes surprised by the discovery of others who shared their concerns and who wanted to hear their views. This was one of Will’s favorite settings. It seemed at times like a community-based church setting where he and his family could practice the work of compassionate democratic wrestling and dancing toward the possibility of America.

Later in the day, moving in the same searching direction, we walked into the somewhat beat-up but very welcoming setting of Cookman United Methodist Church, located in North Kensington, one of Philly’s poorest and most drug-infested African-American communities. There it was clear that both Will and I had come home. For him, it was almost literal. This was the church he and his family usually attended. This was where they lived out their hope and commitment with other social-justice-oriented followers of Jesus. When we arrived, Dee Dee and the children were already there, helping prepare for the community supper that was part of Cookman’s welcome to me. It was then that I met the impressive Pastor Donna Jones and the extraordinary, solid group of women, men, and young people who composed the core contingent of a magnificent spiritually grounded ministry to (and with) the youth of this often forgotten and unclaimed community. (Of course, some of you Philly folks recognize this description of your wonderful home church. Thank you, my young companions, for sharing so much of your light and your life there.)

For reasons that I still find elusive to identify, my own entrance with Will into that very ordinary fellowship hall still leaves its mark on me. What I saw and sensed first of all was the presence of several street-connected teenagers who seemed marvelously at home in that church place. It was clearly their place. Then, when I had moved only a few steps into the room, I realized that there were four young men in a space that might have been originally set out as a

small basketball court, but these boys were then working very hard with a fully engaged male dance teacher who was making great demands on them as they prepared a praise dance for an approaching regional church conference. The song they were dancing to was “Stand,” and a powerful part of Duane Wilkins’s message to the young men he was teaching, in their baggy jeans and sweatshirts, was that the art of sacred dance was wonderfully masculine, that it had always been pleasing to God through the centuries, and that the Creator was surely pleased with their great devotion that evening.

As I watched them working assiduously to overcome errors and to get movements, positions, and connections right, in front of friends and neighbors (inspiring little Luke and Thea, the O’Brien children to try to imitate some of the moves over in a corner space of their own) and accepting the challenge of a tough, loving, and highly skilled teacher, I could not stop my tears. For I somehow believe that these young men will continue to get ready, will continue to stand. And later, as they eagerly sat in a circle with the other members and core workers of Cookman, as the group responded to my questions and prompts to tell me their individual and collective stories, I saw young people and adults who had not only found a home but had discovered previously unknown ways in which they could serve, create new possibilities, and help the children and young people of Kensington discover the beauty that could be found in the revival of old church buildings and in the revisioning of broken neighborhoods. More than one teenager spoke of how good it was to have a place to come to after school, knowing that they would find adults and other young people who would listen to their stories of frustrations, fears, and triumphs. This was a place where healthy snacks and space and time to do their homework were always waiting. I heard witness after witness testify to the extraordinary experience of having “one of the poorest black neighborhoods in Philly” become their community of hope, their home. (One day I hope that some of you will visit them and work and dance with them at Cookman.)

I knew Cookman was another sign. If Pastor Donna and her tough and dedicated compassionate little community could nurture their profound sense of belonging in such a place as Kensington, if they could dance their praise on the basketball court, could create home for each other and for the folks around them on Twelfth and Lehigh, could brave the occasional stray bullets to “Stand” in such a needy place, then who could deny the possibility of a new America? Indeed, it must certainly be that the young people of Cookman and their adult

comrades in hope are the new America, predicting, announcing its own arrival. It was especially exciting to see Pastor Donna's own twin sons, Mark and Robert, providing quiet, assured leadership among the young people, sharing in the dance, willing to stand alone and with others. Somehow it seemed clear to me that these are the true keepers, extraordinary deepeners, and creative transformers of the American dream. Do you recognize yourselves among them? I do.

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Without a doubt, the Cookman dancers of today are related to their 1960s brothers and sisters who sang their hope in the churches, jails, and threatened little houses of southwest Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama. And somehow I know they are no less connected to the Latinos who took to the streets all over the nation in the spring of 2006, that season of hope, that May Day of new beginnings. For just as "We Shall Overcome" became the anthem of all the seekers for a new, just, and humane America in those days, so can "Si Se Puede" ("Yes, it can be done. Yes, we can do it!") belong to all of us who believe in the transformative possibilities embedded in our lives and the life of our nation. So with all of its awkwardness acknowledged, we may still dare to say, "Yes, we can be transformers and transformed, together with all our newly arrived sisters and brothers." (I want to say more about that later.)

Dear companions, even as I write this, it is becoming more and more clear why the Philadelphia Cookman experience moved so deeply into me. That old church, that group of young people rising up in their neighborhood, reminded me not only of the possibilities of our future together. It also carried me into my own past, before the southern adventures of the 1960s, when I was able to share with others—like Will and Dee Dee and Pastor Donna—the risks and excitements of another large old church building as a base for ministry to and with a multiracial community and its magnificent youth on the South Side of Chicago.

Back in that day, as a participatory witness, I saw black and white people from very different backgrounds meet at Chicago's Woodlawn Mennonite Church, just as the Cookman crew was doing in Philly, and I realize now that

those are mutually reinforcing memories, solid materials for the dreaming of America. But that recent visit to the eastern cities was also something of a return to my native land. For as much as I love the stately, steadfast grandeur of the Rocky Mountains, whenever I approach the East Coast, I cannot escape the unmistakable power of that environment in my blood. So I realize that my own best dreaming requires both infinitely quiet, spacious skies and alabaster cities with all the exciting antic energy they bear into the world.

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I had almost forgotten that power of the America into which I had been born when my responses to two related invitations brought it all alive again and tied it to the working dream. In the spring of 2004, not long after Rosemarie's death and shortly before my official retirement from the Iliff School of Theology, I was asked to spend a semester the following year as a visiting professor at Drew University's School of Theology in Madison, New Jersey—an hour's train ride from my beloved New York City. For that geographical reason, for the sense it seemed to make in relation to my season of grieving, and for a variety of other reasons, I decided to teach a course on "Spirit and Struggle" during Drew's spring semester in 2005.

It had been a long time since I taught a class with a majority of African-American students, and I immediately sensed their exciting East Coast vibrations as they easily connected with my own. Then, when I invited four of the Veterans of Hope whom we had interviewed earlier in Denver to come and join the class in a weekend retreat related to the past, present, and future of the black-led struggles for compassionate democratic change in America, I was firmly grasped by another reason for my hope. In that intimate, conversational retreat session (held in the educational facilities of a local black church), the Drew students, perhaps empowered by their East Coast energy, seemed to find it very easy to slip out of the student-in-a-classroom box and take on the fiercely engaging role of persistent, heartfelt seekers who unashamedly hungered and thirsted for the righteous dream of a transformed America, beginning with their own needy spaces. I watched with great joy as the students almost literally feasted on the lives and experiences of our visiting Veterans, Joyce and Nelson Johnson,

Ruby Sales, and Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons. And it was equally rewarding to see the way in which the veterans were clearly inspired and renewed by their exciting engagement with my students. Still, powerful and encouraging as that beautiful encounter turned out to be, it was clearly matched in promise when I finally found my way back to the South Bronx that spring, responding again to an unusual invitation, which brought me beyond the traditional parameters of hope.

This time it was Mark Naison, a deeply grounded white historian of the African-American experience who teaches at Fordham University in my old home borough. He is developing an extensive oral history of the black presence in the South Bronx during the 1940s and 1950s. Having discovered my connection to that time and place, Naison invited me to visit my alma mater, Morris High School—a key institution in his South Bronx history—and participate in an oral history interview in that century-old educational setting.

At first I was hesitant. Morris High had invited me to receive an alumni award in the 1970s, and my family and I had visited at a time when both the school and the surrounding communities were sadly broken in spirit and in physical structures. For one thing, they were suffering from great official neglect and an epidemic of neighborhood owner-inspired arson that had mutilated or destroyed so many of the large walk-up apartment buildings that had once been home for my mother and me. My visit in the 1970s to a deeply wounded and dispirited Morris High had been filled with pain; I remembered the proud multiracial institution of the 1940s whose principal, Jacob Bernstein, had in those days courageously and creatively envisioned our becoming what he called “a little United Nations.”

But Mark Naison urged me to come and see a new or renewed Morris, one that was experimenting with new vision, new leadership. One of those leaders was a clearly committed and gifted African-born woman who was guiding the school in the process of becoming several smaller institutions, including one focused on democratic leadership and another on mastery of the violin and other stringed instruments. This time when I met the Morris students—mostly young people of color—my heart leaped toward them. So many had clearly caught a vision of their own best possibilities. They greeted me in the halls and classes with a sense of self-confidence, grace, and curiosity that marks young marchers, dancers and singers of new songs, and bearers of new hope. In other words, they reminded me of many of you.

When I left Morris after a stimulating interview and a conversation with some of the teachers, Mark drove me through a rainy afternoon to visit several of the places that I had last seen as burnt-out communities. And even though the rain kept me from the walking tour that was supposed to include Dawson Street, where I had once lived (and where a young Colin Powell's family had later come to occupy an apartment on Kelly, the next street), I could see that it was no longer a burned-out zone. Apartments, town homes, shops, community organizations, restaurants, and playgrounds all testified to possible resurrection and renewal. It seemed clear to me—even on that rainy day—that if my old school, my old neighborhood, my once beleaguered borough could begin again, so could my nation; especially if it were filled with the life of its magnificent children.

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Of course, I knew that the children could not and would not be left alone to re-create the dream—not even the East Coast children. Before the close of the summer of 2005, I received striking evidence to support that belief. An urgent, loving message came from the socially conscious actor Harry Belafonte. I had originally met Harry when he came to Birmingham in 1963 to help our brother Martin and the courageous local community led by the indomitable Fred Shuttlesworth. Continuing in the tradition of his decades of justice and peace work, Belafonte was now calling for a one-day “gathering of elders” in Atlanta, especially looking for creative ways to share our concern for the young African-Americans whose hope was too often being broken by their debilitating encounters with the nation's penal system.

Although the level of planning for the gathering did not match the power of Belafonte's creative, evangelical zeal on behalf of our youth, and though the televised news of Hurricane Katrina's terrifying arrival broke into the center of our meeting, I saw elders gather as veterans in the struggle for hope. Elders like Diane Nash, Jesse Jackson, Marian Wright Edelman, Minister Louis Farrakhan, Ruby Dee, Walter Fauntroy, Bob and Janet Moses, and Andrew Young. Elders like Paul Robeson Jr., who extended a hand of repentance and forgiveness to those with whom he had harshly disagreed in the past, doing so on behalf of the

future of the children. Elders like Dolores Huerta, who has always recognized the need for communion across racial lines for both youth and elders and our common work for “a more perfect union.” And there were dozens more. Ironically, there were too many well-intentioned elders assembled for the relatively brief gathering to take on more than symbolic meaning. Nevertheless, the elders had gathered on very short notice, at their own expense, declaring their concern for and commitment to the young people who must lead the next generation of dream keepers and dream deepeners.

As many of you know from personal experience, even before Harry Belafonte’s call to this gathering arrived, my family and I had been working with an intergenerational community of teenagers, college-age youth, and some of the social-justice-oriented adults in a project we call the Veterans of Hope. Bringing multiracial, interfaith youngsters together with older coworkers and “veterans,” we call the young people “ambassadors of hope” and introduce them to deep engagement with elders who represent decades of work for compassionate social change. Using dance, spoken word, mural art, and video creations, we try to encourage young people to respond to the history-laden elders and to discover their own best possibilities for eventually becoming transformative leaders themselves, capable of dreaming and creating a new America, opening a new history for us all.

When our summer 2005 ambassadors session was over, among its most powerful gifts was the testimony from one of our college-age coworkers. After her work with the younger people and with the elders, dance teacher Chivonnie Meekins said, “Now, if I should die tomorrow, I’ll know that I did not live my life in vain.” (No. Never in vain, my dear niece.)

I’m not sure that I yet understand the full meaning of that summer of 2005, but I am very grateful for those of you who participated in it, for those who supported and prayed for it, for those who were magnificent examples of the possibilities of America. For I know that gathering of ambassadors like you literally overflowed with immense and profound connections both to the past and to the future of our struggles for the new coming of this nation. It was bursting with the intimations of the “yesness” of its possibilities. I could not miss that. I could not forget that. Indeed, even in such a valley of shadows as Lowndes County, Alabama— where I was later invited into the heat of mid-August 2005 to join in a set of sacred remembrances of Jonathan Daniels, the twenty-six-year-old white Episcopalian seminary student from New England who was shotgunned to death because of

his active participation in the black-led Alabama voter registration campaigns of the 1960s—even there I knew the possibilities our ambassadors represented, the hope our Cookman Church youth danced forth; the answer to the question of womb or tomb was irresistible.

Fortunately, I had a well-prepared guide for that second exploration of the Alabama places where so many martyrs had paid the ultimate price for the authentication, expansion, and seed-planting of democracy in America. Indeed, I was in Lowndes County that summer of 2005 because Ruby Sales, that relentless carrier of democratic hope, had invited me to participate in the commemoration of the life of Jonathan Daniels. Back in 1965, when she was a teenaged SNCC worker, Ruby had stood with her dear friend Jonathan during those struggles. In the 2005 setting, she was able to remind me and others why it was so significant that the community meetings and interfaith worship services related to the Daniels commemoration that week were taking place in the large, almost cavernous courtroom that occupied the entire second floor of the Lowndes County headquarters building in Haneyville.

Ruby reminded me that this was the courtroom that was turned into a place of raucous celebration in 1965 when Tom Coleman was declared innocent of murder. Coleman was the local white community leader who had killed Jonathan and nearly killed Ruby before Jonathan shoved her out of the way and took the blazing shot into his own body. She remembered the time of Coleman's trial in 1965 when she was finally allowed to come in out of the drenching rain to testify in the segregated courtroom about the murder of her friend. This was a courtroom where no black folk were allowed to sit—even to escape the rain. It was there that a man sidled up beside her to voice the threat that he would cut her throat if she testified against Coleman. But she testified and lived to continue the story.

Now, during this summer of commemoration forty years later, the same courtroom had been chosen to house the exuberant public meeting that celebrated the lives of Jonathan Daniels and other martyrs of the Alabama struggle for democratic hope. On a Saturday evening in August 2005, it was here that two college-bound local black high school seniors were identified as the first Jonathan Daniels Scholarship Award winners. Fittingly and touchingly, Ruby was present to congratulate them, along with hundreds of other new witnesses, largely organized by the local Episcopalian bishop and his coworkers. The next day, a worship service gathered in the same courtroom. It was an extraordinary

collection of women, men, and children across color, class, and religious lines. There we experienced a communion service that would have warmed Jonathan's heart, just as it offered cautious hope and joy to Ruby.

What struck me was the extraordinary sense of exorcism that seemed to flood the courtroom on that weekend of remembrance. Both Ruby and I realized that there was a time, a very real and relentless time, when this courtroom existed in the terror-filled service of a powerful, seemingly unconquerable, and too long-lived American lie. This lie proclaimed that we are *not* all part of one family, one substance, one profoundly interdependent community of hope. In that time of Ruby's first coming and Jonathan's last, in those days of our nation's refusal to recognize and acknowledge its own best self, those who kept the keys to that courtroom laughed their raucous, mocking, threatening laugh in the face of Jonathan's and Ruby's courage to live the truth of their belonging, of all our belonging.

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Those people who declared their lie to be the only truth of the world said in those earlier days that they had the power, had always had the power, would forever have the power, to enforce the lie, to keep it alive, to destroy all who dared live another dream, a great truth. They had the guns, the money, the color, the political power, and all the blasphemous sermons and unjust laws.

But my dear young friends, those white power brokers had no songs. In the 1960s, the songs were alive in Ruby and Jonathan and in all those who sang out at the mass meetings and on the streets and in the jails: "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round." And "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." And "Black and white together, we're gonna let it shine." So on that August weekend in Haneyville in 2005, we retraced the path of sorrow that Jonathan and Ruby had walked from the prison to the place of his death and her traumatization—to find that the prison no longer existed. Moreover, the general store, the place of the murder, had become an altar of prayer and rededication to a new Alabama, a new America, and a new world. And the court of the upper room was a multiracial gathering place of hope where Jonathan and his martyred comrades were

honored. Now Ruby stood for many in that place as she addressed the crowd, inviting us all to go through the terror of our past to create a new nation, a more perfect union, a deeper American dream. And the songs remained, calling new singers to join the work of our forebears, like soldiers in the army of hope.

Somehow you young singers and your songs continue to play a major role in shaping the forces of my hope. Not long ago, I sat in on a gospel choir rehearsal at Earlham College, a Quaker-related school in Indiana. I was struck by the easy, relaxed way in which black students could take their white colleagues aside during rehearsals, help them with the pitch, the rhythms, the movement, and the spirit of the music, and then join together to create new songs that surged beyond the expectations of any of the members. I saw America becoming. I heard it sing. I heard you. (Yes, Stephen, yes, Jamie, I heard the Flobots calling for the new nation.)

I saw America becoming. I heard it sing. I heard you.

Later, in California, at the Claremont School of Theology, I was blown away by the Asian young woman whose lively, magnificently animated gospel-style piano playing for their choir clearly celebrated the untapped creative possibilities we bear for each other and for our world. And in that lovely spring at Drew, its chapel services were alive with the genius of a black music director who had helped a wonderfully engaged white pianist find her unexpected calling. He also guided an African-American pop singer to discover the sacred possibilities of her gift. Perhaps the communal household they shared with others was an intimation of the new America.

When I returned to Denver, there was another gift of hope embedded in the experience of music. This time, it was a reminder of the democratic wisdom available in the African-American classical music called jazz. I heard it again when McCoy Tyner, the master pianist and composer, brought his latest trio to our town. In a truly creative democratic encounter, we were able to hear each instrumental voice in its own integrity, in its mutually respectful and attentive listening to the others. And out of that seriously playful engagement, new creations constantly emerged, some quiet and thoughtful, others filled with powerful energy and unexpectedly soaring structures of life. For me, this was another model of new American possibilities at their creative best. Langston Hughes would have loved it—perhaps he was loving it.

Somewhat surprisingly, one of the richest contributions to my sources of hope from the world of music emerged unexpectedly out of the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. In the fall of 2005, several hundred of the involuntary pilgrims from New Orleans were brought to Colorado, especially Denver. Not long after they arrived, I found myself in the company of Lionel Baskins, a teacher of music in the New Orleans public schools. Baskins was blind, and one of the most important elements of his story was the time he had spent in that city's Morial Convention Center, the holding area where thousands of citizens reportedly had lived for days in great fear, without light, information, assistance, or hope. Recalling the experience of sitting there alone in that double darkness, filled with terrifying rumors of violence and betrayal from within and without, Lionel told me how he survived and overcame. To begin with, he gave himself as fully as possible to the creation of new religious songs, singing light into the darkness. One composition he sang to me was "They said I wouldn't make it / but I'm still holding on to His hand . . . / though the road has been very rough / I'm still holding on to the Master's hand. / I'll never let go of His hand."

Then, as soon as word of Baskins' presence reached dozens of his students who were also in the center, some arranged to keep a constant watch over him, to assist him whenever he needed to move. Eventually, he made it to an evacuation bus, and over many rough roads, he was eventually found by his Denver-based son in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. The last time I saw Lionel, he was playing and singing at an Easter service for a small congregation recently established in Denver by one of my former students. She, too, has known rough roads and is committed not only to continue walking toward a new place but also to help build a community of walkers who never lose sight of the roughness or of the possibility of new beginnings on the road.

In the company of such travelers, how can I miss the response to my own question? I am filled not only with the stories of Veterans of Hope, but I carry without fail the knowledge of young people like my two unofficially adopted nephews, one black, one white (whatever those words mean), who have known each other and have been known by me since they were elementary school children here in Denver. Now in their late twenties, Stephen and Jamie are spirit-grounded spoken word artists. Recently, they've developed a rap worship service based on the lives of two of our Veterans of Hope. Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, a SNCC veteran and religious studies professor and member of a socially conscious Sufi community, is one, and the other is Anne Braden, a

recently deceased model of what a southern white ally could be at her best. To see and hear my nephews call on their aunts and sisters, Anne and Zoharah, invoking the names and lives of these magnificent women is to be a witness to hope. I look forward to the CD that the young men and their Flobots band are creating in celebration of the two elders.

A similar flood of thoughts was nearly overwhelming when I entered into the powerful flow of May Day last year in Denver, surrounded by my adopted Latino relatives and one of my official nieces, Gloria Smith. At that point, I was especially grateful for the decision Rosemarie and I had made when we first began to visit the Southwest in the 1970s. At deep levels of our being, we somehow knew that we were intrinsically tied to the past, present, and future of the Latino and indigenous peoples of this area. Because of this tie, we began to seek out human connections on personal, institutional, and political levels. So I felt very much among friends on May Day 2006, especially as I sat to rest on a great perch at our state capitol building in Denver and watched with joy as the mostly young marchers and fellow travelers assembled to form a sea of immigration advocates estimated between 75,000 and 100,000. Some of you were there. Do you remember?

... we somehow knew that we were intrinsically tied to the past, present, and future of the Latino and indigenous peoples of this area.

In our work with the Veterans of Hope project and with its youth-focused intergenerational expression, the Ambassadors of Hope, we have been conscious of the special need to find ways to bring Latino, African-American, Asian, and Anglo young people into settings where they can work together to discover each other and to engage the related history of the struggles for the expansion of democracy in America. All toward their exploration of the variety of gifts they themselves possess for providing leadership in the ongoing work of making our new nation possible. These beautiful young people, these rising leaders in the never-ending struggle for the expansion of democracy in America, were on my mind and in my sight when a middle-aged Anglo man came to sit next to me that exciting May morning. I think he was partly drawn by my large lapel button, which reads "WAR IS TERRORISM," and partly by my blackness, which

apparently reminded him of twentieth-century struggles for racial justice in which he had been an ally.

Watching, enjoying, responding to the great feast of life in movement all around us, he smiled and said to me, “Didn’t we do all of this forty years ago?” I responded, “Yes, friend, and there is no hope for the future of a people’s democracy in America unless some of us are ready to do it at least every forty years.” “OK,” he said, “but my knees were in better shape back then.” I smiled from my perch and replied, “That’s why we have all these new young knees out here today. The struggle continues.”

“... there is no hope for the future of a people’s democracy in America unless some of us are ready to do it at least every forty years.”

Because I believe that, I regret the fact that I missed the chance to have more conversation with some of the “new knee” folks as they flowed by us. For when I saw repeatedly the T-shirt saying “I AM NOT A CRIMINAL,” I wanted to put my arms around some brown young shoulders and say, “Yes, yes, you are absolutely right, dear nephew, dear niece. You are not a criminal. But now tell me, who *are* you? Are you ready to become a leader in the struggle to make America possible, to take responsibility for leading our nation beyond its own criminal negligence of the weak, of the poor, of the young, of the outcast? Are you ready to press our country beyond its criminal ignorance of the world, ready to refuse to participate in its criminal use of military threats and military force—to have its own way?” And when I saw the inspired declaration emblazoned on hundreds of moving banners, announcing “WE ARE AMERICA,” again I wanted to engage the carriers with “Yes, yes; that is marvelous; and what is the dream of America, your dream, the one that lies deep in your heart? Is it Corky Gonzalez’s? Is it Dolores Huerta’s? Is it Maria Guajardo’s? Is it Martin King’s or Langston Hughes’s? Do you know ‘Ella’s Song’? Can we sing it together during this forty-year creation shift?”

... what is the dream of America, your dream, the one that lies deep in your heart?

Many times during that May day, I recalled my brother, David Carrasco of Harvard, who carries so much of this new America story in his own blended Mexican and Euro-American parentage and in his pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican scholarship, and who spent beautiful time with the Ambassadors of Hope in the summer of 2005. At one point during his summer visit, as he looked at and listened to the multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-generational group that had gathered with us on the Denver University campus, he said with a broad smile, “I see America coming right here.” He saw it not simply in the evidence of their complex ethnic diversity but saw it and heard it in the dreams they manifested in their spoken words, their dances, and their powerful mural art. Perhaps what he grasped was the need for such art, such dreams, such knowledge, such spirit-grounding, all wrapped up in the gathered lives of such young people and their elder and veteran companions. All for the nation to manifest the words Martin King spoke near the end of his life: “America, you must be born again.” For Carrasco knows that King was offering far more than a familiar religious cliché but was challenging us to a harshly magnificent and costly struggle against what he called the “triple evils of American life—racism, materialism, and militarism.” Carrasco knew that King was challenging us to move through the tomb of the “triple evils” to make our way toward the womb, toward the light of our best humanity, discoverers of the country that does not yet exist, the dream constantly being born.

King was offering far more than a familiar religious cliché but was challenging us to a harshly magnificent and costly struggle against what he called the “triple evils of American life—racism, materialism, and militarism.”

Still, it may be that the most significant encounter of that glorious May Day was one that involved no words, spoken or imagined. Toward the end of the massing of the powerful crowd, I saw not far from me a beautiful moving presence, part walking, part running, part dancing. It was the local troupe of Aztec dancers, keepers and sharers of the rituals of the pre-European civilizations who lived on these Southwest lands before they were Mexico, before they were wrestled away by the United States of America. Adorned in all their exuberant feathers, beads,

and gourds and playing their resounding drums, they were important to me—not simply because of the long creative history they represented and not only because some of our young ambassadors of hope were dancing among them but because these dancers had been a powerful presence at the memorial service for Rosemarie almost exactly two years before.

I sensed her presence with them and theirs with her forever dancing, loving, sharing life force. Such creative energy, such loving, compassionate, persistent, and sacrificial working, such individual and communal dancing through all the dark womblike places—those were Rosemarie’s hallmark. And my hope for the rebirth of our nation emerges not only out of the continuation of that loving mark that I see and feel in our children, Rachel and Jonathan, but there is more.

Earlier this year at a gathering of Ambassadors of Hope with FaithTrek, another youth project based at the Iliff School of Theology, I came once again in touch with that unmistakable woman-spirit and chose to receive it as a sign of hope. We had gathered on a Saturday afternoon as part of a monthly youth-oriented series we called Movies That Move Us. This time, we viewed *Fighting for Our Lives*, an excellent older documentary film focused on the early life and work of the United Farm Workers (UFW) and their struggles in the 1950s and 1960s on behalf of the Mexican and Asian-American migrant farm workers of the Southwest. It included some graphic scenes of local and state police brutally beating the UFW strikers and organizers. Later, when I asked the group to share what remained most forcefully in their minds from the film, one fourteen-year-old African-American young woman spoke of the police beatings and added, “I guess those men just didn’t know who they were. If they had known their history, they might have found that their own parents and grandparents had been beaten for trying to organize in the mines or the mills or somewhere not that long ago.” Then she added, somewhat wistfully, “Maybe they would have acted differently, if only they had known.”

Her name was Jordan Pettis, and her slight, graceful frame reminded me of what Rosemarie must have looked like at that age. Her wise, informed compassion was certainly familiar. Several weeks earlier, Jordan had agreed to play a violin solo for us. She came prepared that Saturday of *Fighting for Our Lives*. For her solo, she chose “Amazing Grace,” one of Rosemarie’s favorite songs. For me, the sign was not simply about Rose’s marvelous, embracing spirit but about the continuing presence of young people who understand our need to know our individual selves in order to join others in becoming our best collective creation,

our more perfect union. What possibilities rest on that ground! Following our history, we can create a new future. Amazing grace and amazing young people. Some come dancing; some come rapping; some come playing the violin. They comprise quite a new America team for the next forty years. Yes, you do, my young companions. Yes, you do.

I've seen your new America even behind prison bars. Early in the fall of 2006, after another visit to Pastor Donna and the powerful community of hope at Cookman United Methodist Church, I flew from Philadelphia to rendezvous in Pittsburgh with one of my dearest friends from the 1960s, Staughton Lynd. I had first met Staughton and his wife, Alice, in 1961 when he was on the faculty of Spelman College in the Atlanta University Center and Rosemarie and I had come to the city to begin our work as representatives of the Mennonite churches in the United States to the southern freedom movement. Like so many movement coworkers, the Lynds and Hardings remained in touch over the years as Staughton gave leadership to many elements of the New Left organizing action that eventually stood at the heart of the anti-Vietnam War movement. Eventually, he left university teaching to earn a law degree and work with rank-and-file labor organizers who were challenging the union bureaucracy. Alice also eventually studied law, and the two of them began working as public defenders in the Ohio justice system, especially focusing their attention on death row inmates.

Now Staughton and I were meeting to respond to a request made by Mumia Abu Jamal. Falsely accused of the murder of a Philadelphia policeman in December 1981, Mumia, a former Black Panther local organizer, had been sentenced to death and had served more than twenty years (almost half of his life) on death row in Pennsylvania prisons until his death sentence was legally overturned, but he remains in prison. I had read some of his courageous, insightful prison writings and heard him when he was a National Public Radio commentator, but we had never met. Then early in the summer of 2006, I received a call from Staughton, who had been occasionally visiting Mumia in the supermax prison where he was being held south of Pittsburgh. It turned out that Mumia had recently read my 1981 book *There Is a River* for the first time. He said he was very moved by it and asked Staughton if he knew me and if there was any chance that we might someday meet. So Staughton was calling to relay that message and its request. Of course, I was very grateful. Not long after, when I learned of the likelihood of a second visit to Philadelphia with the folks

at Cookman Church, Staughton and I conspired to connect that trip to a visit with Mumia.

Perhaps at another time, my young friends, I can give you the details of my responses to S.G.I. Greene, one of Pennsylvania's maximum security prisons. It reminded me of explorations I had made in the past to Colorado's version of that strange penal world. For now, I simply want to say that my visit with Mumia in such a harsh setting was nevertheless a time of great encouragement for me. After walking down many very long, chilling, blank-faced corridors and going through at least half a dozen very thick metal doors that were automatically unlocked for us (just as they were automatically locked for Mumia and his fellow prisoners), Staughton and I finally came to Mumia's pod and waited until he was delivered to the small, enclosed visiting area. Here we were separated from his chair by a thick glass window, and when Staughton and I went in, Mumia was already there on the other side of the glass, sitting by himself. (Staughton's status as an attorney had gained some relative privacy for our visit.) A sturdy figure with long dreadlocks, he smiled broadly and waved his steel-cuffed hands with both thumbs up as we walked in. It was as if he was our host in some unpromised land. For almost two unbroken hours, we sat facing Mumia as he shared his thoughts about *There Is a River* ("When will we get the next volume?" was his first probing, smiling question), about his very difficult—but not overwhelming—life in prison, his hopes for release, his great concern for the younger men around him, and his determination to keep focused on his unflagging commitment to the transformation of our nation into the land that never has been yet. (His large, strong hands seemed just right for someone who appeared to be very clear about his role as a fellow midwife in the rebirthing of America.) As he talked about his conversations with the younger inmates who sought his wisdom, I could tell that he had already begun working on the sacred mission of renewal, sharing my hope in the amazing possibilities that lived within those walls. Perhaps that was part of the reason for his ready smile and his great capacity to laugh behind the dividing glass.

Before we left, the glass became even more permeable. Mumia was very clearly pleased to see his black and white guests so comfortable with each other and with him. Besides, when I began (as usual) to ask him about his family, he not only shared the sadness of being apart from his wife and children for so long, as well as a sense of pride in their resilience, but when I asked about his own parents, we discovered that our mothers were both named Mabel, a lovely

parting gift. (Later the Lynds told me that Mumia had called them some weeks after our visit. It was the first time he had done that, and he wanted to express great appreciation for our time together.)

Somehow, my young friends, these memories of Mumia, his strength, and his compassionate commitment make me want to share one other thought about another of my relatively older “young companions.” Did you hear about Wesley Autrey, who at age fifty is one of your younger elders? Did you see what he did early in 2007? In a Harlem subway station that was very familiar to me, Brother Wesley leaped onto the tracks to cover and save another man from the wheels of an onrushing train. That he was black and his new friend on the tracks was white seemed totally irrelevant to Autrey. He also seemed unimpressed by all the fuss that was made about his courageous act. I thought his words were marvelous: “I don’t feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help. . . . I did what I felt was right.” I wonder what his two little girls, aged four and six, will remember from that time in the subway. Will they know that their daddy was creating a new America—on the subway tracks? And will they suspect one day that their father’s courageous, compassionate great leap was as much for them as it was for the man on the tracks? Will they—and we—recognize the possibility that Wesley Autrey was showing us something beautiful and challenging about the way to “the land that never has been yet”?

And just as I was bringing this very long reflection to a close, I came in powerful contact one more time with Pastor Donna of Philadelphia’s youth-centered Cookman United Methodist Church. She and her husband, Kim, recently chose to celebrate their twenty-ninth wedding anniversary with a week’s visit in Denver. The specific concern they brought was the recent outbreaks of drug-trade-related youth violence that seemed dangerously close to engulfing their church and its community. Deeper still was the recognition that their kind of outpost of hope in North Philadelphia could not carry out its magnificent but dangerous work of relentlessly loving service without finding continuing support—in more than financial terms—from individuals and communities of concern who shared their vision and commitment.

Toward the end of their Denver visit—when our series of conversations, testimonies, singing, hugging, analyzing, praying, eating, and laughing was finished—I asked them how their magnificent twin sons were taking the current times of crisis. It was then that the deepest purpose of their visit became clear. In the midst of all the trouble and darkness, their sons have boldly declared that

along with their love of computers and poetry and dance and sports, what they are most fully committed to as full-time work for their lives is a compassionate ministry of loving service in hard places. Just like their mother and their father. So this forty-year crew shift had really, perhaps unknowingly, sent their parents in search of all the scattered sisters and brothers, uncles, aunts, and grandparents who must somehow share and support their audacious stand at Twelfth and Lehigh, where the new America begins to be possible, offering great hope to a thousand corners like their own.

Now, I can't avoid a special memory that the Jones twins arouse in me. In considering their lives, what I remembered was a letter I read in the 1960s written by a young African-American woman, a college student, who was serving a term in a Tallahassee, Florida, jail because of her participation in a local sit-in desegregation campaign. In 1960, Patricia Stephens wrote from her cell to a friend, "We are all so very happy that we were (and are) able to do this to help our city, state, and nation. This is something that has to be done over and over again, and we are willing to do it as often as necessary." Well, dear ones, we are almost a decade plus forty years from Patricia's service, aren't we? One of my young Denver hip-hop performers recently wrote, "There is something I must do before I die . . . / And the Ancestors will show me." These are my children. These are our teachers. You are my children. You are my teachers.

May the ancestors show us all the way to a new America, deepening, opening, expanding the dream, blazing the path to the land that never has been yet—and yet must be.

Your uncle/grandfather/brother in hope,

VINCENT HARDING

May the ancestors show us all the way to a new America, deepening, opening, expanding the dream, blazing the path to the land that never has been yet—and yet must be.

Is America Possible?

The Land That Never Has Been Yet

This essay is an updated version of Chapter Ten in Vincent Harding's seminal book Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement, originally published by Orbis Books in 1990. The book is a series of interconnected essays that grew out of Harding's work as the senior academic adviser for the award-winning PBS television series Eyes on the Prize. Harding wrote especially with teachers—of many kinds—in mind; encouraging them to use the story of the post-World War II African-American freedom movement as a pathway into the deepest meanings of American democracy and the human spirit. It is compelling that the insight and vision rendered here are even more relevant today, nearly two decades later.

Some years ago, I came across one of the most intriguing book titles that I have ever seen. It was set forth in the form of a question: *Is America Possible?*³ Even without delving into its contents, I was struck by the playful seriousness of the inquiry, the invitation to imagine and explore the shape and meaning of a “possible” America, an America still coming into existence. The idea itself, of course, was not new, simply its formulation. But since then, everywhere that I have paused to reflect on the powerful, flooding movement of the black struggle for freedom in America, I have been called back to that title, to its query and challenge. For it is a question that has always been at the heart of the African-American quest for democracy in this land. And wherever we have seen these freedom seekers, community organizers, and artisans of democracy, standing their ground, calling others to the struggle, advancing into danger, and creating new realities, it is clear that they are taking the question seriously; shaping their own answers, and testing the possibilities of their dreams.

... it is a question that has always been at the heart of the African-American quest for democracy in this land.

Is America possible? Yes, they say, sometimes testifying to their vision with great eloquence: “I have a dream that one day . . .” Sometimes joining their vision to magnificent biblical images, they proclaim, “I’ve been to the mountaintop. I’ve seen the Promised Land.” Or in the marvelously mundane messages of their freedom songs, they express great hope: “If you don’t see me at the back of the bus / And you can’t find me nowhere / Just come on up to the front of the bus, / and I’ll be riding up there.”

Envisioning very specific expressions of America's possibilities, they sang, "I'm gonna eat at the Holiday Inn . . . one of these days." And the great hope and vision were ultimately caught up in the anthem of the movement, in the stanzas that came from the past, as well as in the ones forged in the heat of the post-World War II struggle: "We shall overcome. . . We'll walk hand in hand. . . The Lord will see us through. . . The truth will make us free. . . Black and white together. . . Our children will be free. . . The whole wide world around."

Somehow, in a time like our own, when the capacity for imagining appears to be endangered, both by the technology of television and the Internet and by the poverty of public dreams, it seems especially crucial to introduce our students to the meaning of such a question as "Is America possible?" And it is absolutely necessary that they discover the significance of the biblical text: "Where there is no vision the people perish." Indeed, it is precisely in a period of great spiritual and societal hunger like our own that we most need to open minds, hearts, and memories to those times when women and men actually dreamed of new possibilities for our nation, for our world, and for their own lives. It is now that we may be able to convey the stunning idea that dreams, imagination, vision, and hope are actually powerful mechanisms in the creation of new realities—especially when the dreams go beyond speeches and songs to become embodied—to take on flesh, in real, hard places.

. . . it is precisely in a period of great spiritual and societal hunger like our own that we most need to open minds, hearts, and memories to those times when women and men actually dreamed of new possibilities for our nation, for our world, and for their own lives.

This is why we turn to the world of dreams and visions that became flesh and blood in the African-American freedom movement. This is why we return to Rosa Parks and wonder aloud what visions of black and white together were in her mind and heart as the bus approached her stop on December 1, 1955. This is why we listen and laugh when her friend and mentor E. D. Nixon tells us that his dream of a new America for his grandchildren had eventually changed to a vision of a new nation that he could see and feel and experience in his own lifetime. It is in search of that power of imagination and action that we

approach Malcolm X, realizing that the best heroes of democracy's shaping were constantly opening their dreams and visions to change and were never satisfied to get high on dreams alone.

Because we need new dreams in each generation, new visions for each time, we ask ourselves and our students about the dreams that moved the fourth-grade-trained Fannie Lou Hamer to challenge an entire political party and its president and leader, Lyndon B. Johnson. We seek to know more about the visions that kept her working for the poor and the marginalized until she died. Because we believe in the power of the imagination, especially when linked to committed lives—even when the lives and dreams go astray—we look deeply into the eyes of Black Panther founder Huey Newton and understand why a longtime resident of his community, shocked by his murder in 1989, could nevertheless say, “To us, Huey Newton was a hero. The Black Panthers were a thing to identify with, along with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.”⁴ What a gathering of dreamers!

If we dare, it may still be possible to encourage such audacious—and necessary—dreaming on behalf of a more just and humane America today. With some encouragement, our teaching may yet find a way to engage the centers of imagination and open visions of a possible America in places where no one ever expected to find them. (As we have seen, we can do this by entering the dreams of those visionary workers who have gone before us, hearing and speaking their words, singing their songs, exploring the hope that moved their lives, and finding the mysterious connections that exist between them and our own deepest centers of creativity.)

If we dare, it may still be possible to encourage such audacious—and necessary—dreaming on behalf of a more just and humane America today.

Exploring the world of the African-American freedom struggle, we might grasp firmly one seminal statement of vision, one powerful answer to the key question “Is America possible?” and walk with our students into the depths of that experience. Considering Octavio Paz’s description of poetry as “the bridge between history and truth,” it would be exciting to explore a classic poetic statement of the archetypal African-American dream of democracy and see if it can help bring some fundamental truth and hope to the life and times of our students, especially in this decade of awesome transitions. If I were to choose

such a vehicle, it would be Langston Hughes's magnificent poetic summons, "Let America Be America Again." Such a work could easily occupy us for days or weeks as we touch all its levels, entering all the hope and receiving with gratitude all the visions shared by Hughes well over a half century ago.

To provide a setting, to mix poetry with biography and history, someone (not necessarily the teacher) might explore what America was like in 1935, when the poem was written. What was it like to be black in New York or on lecture tours through the South or on troubled waters somewhere, far from tours and cities and help? In the midst of a profound national depression, how could a black man dream? Indeed, we are pressed to raise the larger question: What is it that makes for dreams, for visions, for some audacious movement beyond the "is" to the "ought," even in the midst of the most desperate and dangerous situations? But returning to the specific context before us, we can best respond by looking more closely at Hughes himself. We see his Harlem-based, world-traveling life. We grasp the remarkable span and fidelity of his work. And everywhere, we recognize his firm belief in the life-giving purpose of dreams, as well as his sense of responsibility for sharing that belief with those who were younger. In a thousand ways throughout his work, we hear him say, as he did in "Dreams:"

*Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.⁵*

Against that background, we can approach the larger poem, "Let America Be America Again," as a way to strengthen our own wings and to speak to our students through song. As we use the poem to encourage an experience of flight in us all, it may be good to go right to the heart of the work. Invariably, I have found students of all ages responding deeply and fully to this poem, opening themselves both to its larger vision and to its implications for their own apparently dreamless lives. Sooner or later, it becomes clear that they have not been encouraged in the nurturing of dreams and visions. Or they have closed themselves against the most personal levels of their being. Even more frequently, they have been taught by word and example that they have no role in the dreaming of America, in the work of storming the impossible. Once they feel permission, once the life-giving power of their own imagination is touched at some vital point, it is amazing how quickly and how well they find their voices and their visions.

Of course, my own experience is not a substitute for each teacher's own path of discovery. Rather, it is simply offered as a word of encouragement. In the same way, these brief reflections on this poem provide only an idea of what has proved helpful when I have shared Hughes's call—from maximum security prisons to Sunday school classes. In many ways, the poem is its own commentary and encouragement, its own faithful reflection of the central dreams of so much democratic struggle in this land:

*O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—
The land where every man is free.⁶*

So we begin with a marvelous and stimulating set of ideas and images for our students to explore. What does he mean by these two lines: “The land that never has been yet— / And yet must be—”? Already we are offered a sense of vision, of hope, of dream, of a land that does not yet exist. On one level, it is a familiar approach to the entire American hemisphere, as conjured up in the minds and hearts of those who have come here, voluntarily or enslaved. But Hughes takes it further than the usual semipassiveness of inner dreams. For he encourages us to recognize that this nation is still in process, still coming into being, still on its way to the fulfillment of its best self. And once that image is suggested, then the natural question flows: What would America's “best self” be like?

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Earlier in the poem, Hughes refers to the essential dream of founders, immigrants, and slaves, of building a “homeland of the free” on these shores. Here he opens up the vision and looks for a land “where every man is free.” (Of course, we stop to wonder if Hughes would use the word man today.) And it is more than academic for us to press on to the question: What does it mean to be free, in America, in the twenty-first century? Constantly tantalizing, nudging, and calling forth, we might inquire, What would this country be like today if we

were all free—free to become our best selves (and who might *that* be) and free to create “a more perfect union” for us all?

What would this country be like today if we were all free—free to become our best selves (and who might *that* be) and free to create “a more perfect union” for us all?

Such questions only begin the conversation, suggest directions for the imagination, and invite a variety of sometimes conflicting dreams. Hughes goes on to contribute more concrete images when he writes:

*The land that's mine—
The poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—
Who made America*

His owners of America are a fascinating group, similar to many that we have seen in places like the Poor People's Campaign and the Rainbow Coalition. Indeed, there is almost an echo here of the classic, prophetic, justice-obsessed strands of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Hughes envisions the land, God's land, as belonging to the outcasts, the workers, the unexpected. Are these really the ones who *made* America? And if that is so, what are the implications of such truth for the future of the nation? How should it be shaped and directed and governed and cared for, if our country really belongs to poor people, Native Americans, African-Americans, Latinos, and all the laborers “who made America”? What would a country be like that gave its greatest attention, care, and concern to such people? What would a country be like that took its major leadership from owners like these?

Even as we attempt to play with such ideas and visions, it becomes clear that they may not present the greatest challenge to our capacity for seeing the unseen. For it is possible that the most arresting aspect of Hughes's dream is not a matter of who owns America but his assumption that the primary owners also have the fundamental responsibility for fulfilling the original dream of a “homeland of the free.” Isn't this the essential message in these words?

*Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.*

At the center of this vision is a dream of a land that does not yet exist and a vision of its creation placed in the hands of very ordinary men and women. What do our students—and their teachers—think of such a vision? In other words, to whom do we think America belongs, and who has the essential responsibility for its future? Are we prepared to abandon the cynically safe responses to these questions, responses like “It belongs to the people with the most money, the best lawyers, and the greatest access to the levers of political power”? Do we know that such supposedly realistic responses eventually stunt and finally destroy all the dream ports of our spirit, break all the wings of our hearts? And that they warn our students against ever dreaming or ever believing that they can fly?

At the center of this vision is a dream of a land that does not yet exist and a vision of its creation placed in the hands of very ordinary men and women. What do our students—and their teachers—think of such a vision? In other words, to whom do we think America belongs, and who has the essential responsibility for its future?

Eventually, Hughes also insists that we confront one of the most daunting realities of all dreams concerning the creation of a more just society, of an America more faithful to the truth of our joint ownership. As we have seen throughout the African-American freedom struggle and in other movements for the expansion of democracy, all visionaries must count the costs. And the next Hughes stanza reminds us of the ever-present opposition that sets itself against dreams of hope and flights of freedom:

*Sure, call me any ugly name you choose
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again, America!*

Do we know from our own hard experiences or can we recall or imagine some of the names that women and men who nurture such dreams have been called? Communist? Unpatriotic? Crazy? Naïve? Unrealistic? Troublemaker? Agitator? The list is much longer, of course, and if the responses were confined

simply to name-calling, they would be easier to take. But as we have seen, in this country and abroad, anyone who vows seriously and publicly to “take back our land” from “those who live like leeches” off the lives of ordinary people is mounting a significant challenge to the status quo. It would be helpful to have our students reflect on what those words might have meant to Hughes when he wrote them and later on when he was “investigated” by a congressional un-American activities committee. What might they have meant to Martin Luther King Jr., or what do they mean now to Diane Nash, Bob Moses, Zoharah Simmons, or Jesse Jackson— or to those unknown, endangered, and courageous people who have vowed to fight the scourge of drugs in their local communities?

Hughes also insists that we confront . . . an America more faithful to the truth of our joint ownership.

Whatever the meanings, it is likely that many of those people who have worked for the expansion of democracy and freedom in this land would feel the resonance of Hughes’s powerful affirmations:

*O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!*

In many ways, the first, accusatory pronouncement has always been easier to make for those who have fought against injustice, segregation, and exploitation. They (we) have seen the great distance between the nation’s magnificent potential and its present reality, and they (we) have announced it loudly: “America never was America to me!” But Hughes and the subsequent history of the movement for freedom and democracy have continually made it clear that while such an initial declaration is surely necessary, it is not sufficient.

Always, everywhere, the second statement, the more difficult commitment, must follow: “America will be!” This is precisely the point at which our students and all of us who sense the inadequacies and injustices of the present and past must be encouraged to cultivate not only indignation and anger but also vision

and hope. There is no humane future without them. So Hughes is able to predict the coming of a more just and more democratic America partly because,

*An ever-living seed,
Its dream
Lies deep in the heart of me.*

The dream, the seed, and the inner vision of a new nation are crucial. And all of us who are willing to hear the call are challenged to be the bearers, nurturers, and waterers of the seed of the tree of democracy that grows deep within our hearts. So the question becomes more urgent: What is the America that we dream, that we hope for, that we vow to help bring into being? If Langston Hughes (and there are many Langston Hugheses) is right, then ordinary people, whose lives still carry the struggle and hope of all the early workers and makers of America, bear the central responsibility for the re-creation of the nation.

What is the America that we dream, that we hope for, that we vow to help bring into being?

In the 1950s and 1960s, while Hughes was still alive, a generation of African-Americans and their white allies took up the challenge, crafted their own versions of the dream, and committed their lives to its fulfillment. Indeed, the work was carried out with such fervor and fullness that one of Hughes's Harlem-based contemporaries, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr., could stand in the midst of that movement and declare, "We are the last revolutionaries in America—the last transfusion of Freedom into the blood stream of democracy."

What do our students know of all this, think of all this? What does the name Powell or the Abyssinian Baptist Church mean to them? What shall they do with the idea of an America in process, an America that is not a finished, sharp-edged block of white granite but is instead a malleable, multicolored gift of clay; still seeking, taking, giving shape, purpose, and direction? Even more important, how shall our students respond to the challenge of Hughes's dream, Hughes's hope, and Powell's audacious declaration? Is this call for dream keepers, reality shapers, and life-giving revolutionaries too old and out of style? Is this a time of permanently broken wings? Are we in a place without healers? "Is there no balm in Gilead?"

Is this call for dream keepers, reality shapers, and life-giving revolutionaries too old and out of style? Is this a time of permanently broken wings? Are we in a place without healers?

Clearly neither Langston Hughes, sainted poet of democracy, nor any of those who made the movement that helped transform the last years of his life, would settle for broken wings or aborted transfusions. Rather, it is fascinating that Hughes, ending his poem in the 1930s, and the founders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) opening their campaign in the 1950s, used the same religiously charged imperative: *to redeem*. In this supposedly more secular age, when too many of us tend to be uncomfortable with the age-old memories of a religious spirit that “can make a way out of no way,” we are still faced with Hughes’s last words, his repeated challenge, his call for something resembling religious fervor to rise up in our ordinary lives:

*We, the people, must redeem
Our land, the mines, the plants, the rivers,
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again.*

Now, in the early years of a new millennium, when the “impossible” has sprung up live among us again and again, it may be possible to rescue such words from mere sentimentality, to let them call us and our students from temptations toward nihilism and indifference.

How? Perhaps we begin simply by listening together to the incantation “We, the people,” allowing its vibrations to inhabit us, asking each other about its original source and its meaning in our current setting. Gathering against our hesitation to dream “a more perfect union,” we may begin to play, to imagine, to dare envision some of what Hughes was (and still is) calling for. Gathered together, protected in the sacred circle of our common work from our own fears of exposure, we might ask each other what it would mean to redeem or rescue our land, Mother Earth, from its erosion, from our chemical pollutants, our nuclear waste, our garbage, and our greed. How might the land be rescued from its concentration into fewer and fewer hands, ever more distant from the ordinary owners that Hughes identified?

The challenge is powerful, especially when we absorb into our beings the ecological, economic, and political developments that have taken place in America since Hughes died in 1967. For now we must place new meaning on saving our mines, recovering or replacing and remaking our disappeared and dilapidated industrial plants, rescuing our dying rivers and our denuded mountains. Indeed, one of the most important responses to the call of the poem would be the projection of our imaginations into the twenty-first century, bringing together the older, valiant dreams with all that we have seen and heard and felt since World War II regarding the struggle for democracy in America and across the globe.

Because we have been given years that were not his, it may be that one of the greatest challenges of the poem is to dream beyond its creator, to recapture the best dreams of Ella Baker, Huey Newton, and Harold Washington and to join forces with the dreams of Angela Davis, Jim Lawson, Grace Boggs, and Myrlie Evers. We need these dreams badly. They are marvelous sources of advanced ideas about democracy. They would likely ask us to nurture the living seed within us and imagine how our cities might become safe, enthralling, and nourishing places, especially for our children. They would ask us to look somewhere between the isolation of the suburbs and the desolation of so many inner cities to dream a way of housing our people in places worthy of human dignity and community. They would encourage visions of a health system that would care for the needs of all our citizens. They would invite us to dream of schools and neighborhoods where children of all races, cultures, and economic groups are taught together to become responsible, compassionate citizens in an ever-expanding democratic society.

We need these dreams badly. They are marvelous sources of advanced ideas about democracy.

Taking up Hughes's unmentioned concerns, those living beyond him in a struggle for a new America might ask us to envision a nation free from the scourge of drugs, in both our personal and collective lives. They might nurture dreams of a society in which training for nonviolent peacemaking took priority over military "preparedness." They might call us to a time when our relationships with other nations would be more neighborly, more mutually supportive in the

great multinational healing tasks we have to accomplish. Remembering King, we know these rainbow warriors would urge us to dream a world in which our country will work with others to seek economic justice for all the basic-goods producer nations who are now broken and exploited, a world where the United States takes the path of peace with all who are now threatened by our immature and unwise search for military-based “security.”

Continuously, persistently, I hear all the heroic voices of struggle joining Hughes in a common message. It says loudly that the work of discovering, exploring, and developing this true America is our work—we, the people, are in charge. Is it too much to ask our students to consider their role in this life-seeking action, both as dreamers and as workers? Are there noncoercive ways in which we may invite them to live beyond their presently defined self-limits, to participate in the re-creating tasks that await; beginning with themselves and stretching out to all “the endless plains” and the wounded cities of our land? To dream such dreams, to grasp such visions, to live lives anchored in great hope is certainly to develop ourselves and our students in the best traditions of the freedom movement, of all movements for justice, compassion, and democracy. Eventually, we might discover that it is also the path to our best personal humanity.

... the work of discovering, exploring, and developing this true America is our work—we, the people, are in charge.

Once, in the midst of the African independence struggles of the early 1960s, I remember hearing a poet of that continent say, “I am a citizen of a country that does not yet exist.” Perhaps this is the paradox into which we must allow Hughes to move us. Together with those we teach, we are officially citizens of the America we now know, but we need to give our greatest energies to the creation of the country that does not yet exist. Hughes calls us to envision it, to encourage our students to use all the magnificent but underdeveloped faculties of their imagination to begin to bring it into being, and to share that work with those who have gone before. Ultimately, Langston Hughes spoke both for our personal lives and for our nation when he wrote:

*Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.*

It is a message for all of us who are committed to teach. We are the nurturers, the encouragers of all the dreams and seeds deep in all the hearts where the future of a redeemed and rescued land now dwells. So we must hold fast and see beneath the snow, calling others to recognize their own magnificent possibilities, to see and plant and join our hope with theirs. Today, we are called to sing in our dreams and say with our actions that America (the America of Langston and Malcolm and Ella and Anne Braden and all the marchers and mourners and organizers) is possible, is necessary, is coming.

Today, we are called to sing in our dreams and say with our actions that America . . . is possible, is necessary, is coming.

Notes

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

- 1 James Baldwin was a major voice in the literary expressions of the post-World War II rise of the African-American freedom-seeking community. Ella Baker was an extraordinary teacher, organizer, and human rights advocate who was deeply related at different times in her life to the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and, as a key adviser, to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Florence and Clarence Jordan were white southern founders of Koinonia Farm, the interracial, pacifist, Christian community in Americus, Georgia, that provided shelter, sustenance, and hope for many freedom movement participants—including Rosemarie and me. Gwendolyn Brooks was a magnificent African-American poet of the post-World War II period. She was poet laureate of Illinois. Slater King was a native of Albany, Georgia, who became vice president of the Albany Movement in the early 1960s. Fannie Lou Hamer was one of Mississippi's most powerful and courageous grassroots leaders in the 1960s. Thomas Merton was a Kentucky-based Trappist monk and one of the few white Americans who caught an early sense of the deep spiritual meaning of the freedom movement.
- 2 Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), p. 6.

ESSAY: "IS AMERICA POSSIBLE?"

- 3 Henry Etzkowitz, ed., *Is America Possible? Social Problems from Conservative, Liberal, and Socialist Perspectives* (St. Paul, Minn.: West, 1980).
- 4 *New York Times*, August 23, 1989, p. A15.
- 5 Langston Hughes, "Dreams," in *The Dream Keeper* (New York: Knopf, 1946), p. 7.
- 6 This and subsequent quotations from "Let America Be America Again" are from *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1970*, ed. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (New York: Garden City, 1970), pp. 193-195.
- 7 Adam Clayton Powell Jr., "Seek Audacious Power," *Negro Digest*, August 1966, p. 8.

The Author

VINCENT HARDING (1931–2014), historian, author, and activist, was a native of New York City and held Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in history from the University of Chicago. From 1961 to 1964, he and his late wife, Rosemarie Freeney Harding (1930–2004), worked in various capacities as full-time teachers, activists, and negotiators in the southern freedom movement. They were friends and coworkers with Martin Luther King Jr. and many other movement leaders. In 1968, after several years as chairman of the History and Sociology Department at Spelman College in Atlanta, Harding became the director of the Martin Luther King Memorial Center and the chairman of the nationally televised CBS *Black Heritage* series. Harding was one of the organizers and the first director of the Institute of the Black World, founded in Atlanta in 1969. After holding several research positions and visiting professorships, Harding served as professor of religion and social transformation at the Iliff School of Theology on the University of Denver campus for nearly a quarter of a century and later as professor emeritus and a trustee at Iliff. He lectured widely in the United States and overseas on history, literature, and contemporary issues.

With his family, he was active in various movements for peace and justice. He and Rosemarie conducted workshops and led retreats on the connections between personal spirituality and social responsibility. In 1997, they established the Veterans of Hope Project at Iliff, an interdisciplinary, interfaith, and intergenerational venture in gathering and sharing the stories of women and men who have worked for decades to create a more just and compassionate world. After Rosemarie's death, Harding, his children Rachel and Jonathan, and other family members and associates provided leadership for the project. Harding is also widely known for serving as senior academic adviser to the PBS television series *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years*.

Harding's essays, articles, and poetry have been published in books, journals, and newspapers. His books include the classic *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (Harcourt, 1981), *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Orbis, 1996), and *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (Orbis, 1990).

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