

The Fire Next Time

If ever there was a time in its history that America should be most ashamed of, it is the time of segregation. America wasn't kidding anyone during the time of slavery, — it was up front with its prejudice. Slaves were so because America claimed publicly that they were less than human. During the Civil Rights movement (which began in the mid 1800's with W.E.B. DuBois' careful request for tolerance, but which exploded during the more recent 1950's with the notable and outspoken Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who demanded freedom physically and mentally for all), the country hid behind its claimed "progressive" laws, speaking publicly about how interested it was to have equal rights, while thinking to itself those same prejudices were thought to have been killed during the Civil War.

It is no wonder then that a smart man, like James Baldwin, would see right through the guise. He knew the lies America told him, and he suffered the harsh reality of being black during the mid-twentieth century. This reality caught up with him many times, causing the young Baldwin to physically lash out at those who were prejudiced against him. In the first chapter of *Notes of a Native Son*, he talks of an incident during his late teen years, when he walked into a restaurant that refused to serve him:

"[The waitress] did not ask me what I wanted, but repeated, as though she had learned it somewhere, 'We don't serve Negroes here.' She did not say it with the blunt, derisive hostility to which I had grown so accustomed, but, rather, with a note of apology in her voice, and fear. This made me colder and more murderous than ever. I felt I had to do something with my hands. I wanted her to come close enough for me to get her neck between my hands.... Somehow, with the repetition of that phrase, which was already ringing in my head like a thousand bells of a nightmare, I realized that she would never come any closer and that I would have to strike from a distance. There was nothing on the table but an ordinary watermug half full of water, and I picked this up and hurled it with all my strength at her."

Baldwin's response was like many other Black Americans', who, unable to control their rage (which was completely justified) at their persecutors, turned to violence as a way to vent their anger.

It is remarkable, then, to see James Baldwin as a mature man. After leaving the States for a while to live in Europe, he returned to join in the fight for Civil Rights, feeling that his place was among those millions of Americans who said no to the unjust laws of the time. He came back as a changed man — one who had seen the world and had grown psychologically and mentally. His growth, which was due in a large part to his writing, became an asset to him as a leader of the Civil Rights movement.

Through his writing, Baldwin worked out his emotions, fears, and anxieties about himself and his place in the world. His books were his outlet; instead of striking with physical force, he struck out against his persecutors with verbal argument. His writing was not only for his own sanity, it was for others as well: he became one of the foremost writers for Civil Rights, and his books can be seen as a chronicle of the progress of the Movement. He was read by many young Black Americans, and was seen by them as a leader. He was an adult who had seen the bad side of America and had made tremendous personal progress dealing with a country that looked at him as less than a man.

The Fire Next Time is a testament: a book to which men can look for guidance. Written in an easy style that is the hallmark of his writing, Baldwin deals with the issue of racial prejudice. He tells the reader his story — how he was persecuted, how he felt, and his views on the subject — and through his story, he models a mode of behavior for his readers. He preaches non violence, much like his contemporary, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but he does so without being judgmental about the subject (a method of preaching King was well versed in). Instead, Baldwin talks to the reader as if he were telling his life story over a cup of tea, and explains the reasons for his views while entertaining the reader. Whereas King awed his audience with his power and elocution, Baldwin brought his audience much closer to himself, and in doing so, made his journey through the hell of the mid-1900's much more personal to the audience.

James Baldwin begins *The Fire Next Time* with a letter to his nephew (although it may well be addressed to everyone), in which he addresses the fears that he knows his nephew must be having, growing up in America during a time of great prejudice against him. The letter, addressed to family, personalizes the issues that are discussed within, bringing the reader into (if he is not already) Baldwin's world. He brings up every topic his nephew would wish to discuss regarding his place in America as a young black man: the reasons for the white man's hatred of the black

man; the people and prejudices he will have to face as he grows older; the hardship his parents had to endure to bring him into the world.

Baldwin also lays out his method of dealing with the hatred that his nephew will see. He believes that acceptance and love and understanding, not separation and hatred and ignorance, are the answer to prejudice. He places within his nephew's hands the ability (and necessity) to heal the situation:

“what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear... You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope.”

He explains to his nephew that those who hate are the ones who are inferior, and only through loving them, and teaching them, with care, right from wrong, will prejudice be eliminated.

Through the personalization of his words and the use of “nice” concepts, such as love and understanding, Baldwin immediately diffuses the feelings of those readers who are incensed and angry at the world for its wrongs against them. He does not meet the reader head on, instigating even more anger and aggression, but rather slowly consoles him, by sharing with the reader his understanding of their situation. He introduces the reader immediately to the ideals he preaches and respects, allowing them to think about his strategy while he relates his own story.

Throughout the rest of the book, James Baldwin recalls those events in his past that helped shape his beliefs. The story is very much a memoir of Baldwin's earlier years, during which he discusses his training as a preacher (along with his reasons for leaving the Church) and his meeting with the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam. These events were integral to Baldwin's beliefs and methods for achieving Civil Rights. Through his experiences with the methods of the Nation of Islam and the Church, Baldwin saw how *not* to achieve what he was striving for, and by discussing these different strategies for equality of race (such as the movement for a separate state of Islam within America), along with the events and beliefs that led to those strategies, Baldwin allows the reader to follow his logic, and arrive at his same conclusions.

The style of his relation to the reader of these pivotal events is a crucial element to convincing the reader of his conclusions. Baldwin is very plain in his descriptions, which is not to

say he is not eloquent with his choice of words; rather, he presents to the reader a thorough physical description of the course of the events, with only minor interjection of his feelings at the time. He does not explicitly point out the important aspects of his life, nor does he annotate the events with later conclusions (as if he were looking back and telling the reader what to think).

The descriptions tell all, and the reader is left to draw their own impressions:

“I do not know what I had expected to see. I had read some of his speeches, and had heard fragments of others on the radio and on television, so I associated him with ferocity. But, no — the man who came into the room was small and slender, really very delicately put together, with a thin face, large, warm eyes, and a most winning smile. Something came into the room with him — his disciples’ joy at seeing him, his joy at seeing them.”

While he does want the reader to understand why he chose against the Nation of Islam, Baldwin does not want to infect the reader with his own prejudices, and so he merely describes the situation, and doesn’t judge it. This allows the reader to experience the events the way he did, without any foresight as to the result of the events, making their own conclusions more steadfast.

In arguing the case for his belief in acceptance and love as the solution to the Civil Rights issue, Baldwin logically steps through his conclusions:

“In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation — if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women. To create one nation has proved to be a hideously difficult task; there is certainly no need now to create two, one black and one white. But white men with far more political power than that possessed by the Nation of Islam movement have been advocating exactly this.... They are expressing exactly the same sentiments and represent exactly the same danger.”

Baldwin’s arguments are difficult to refute — he gives many examples of the behavior he describes. By giving examples and then logically explaining them and their place in his arguments, Baldwin creates inertia towards his ideas; the reader (being human, and therefore capable of at least understanding some logic) feels compelled to agree with him.

Further, Baldwin intersperses his arguments with comments meant to reinforce the black man’s condition and view of the world.

“I am, then, both visibly and legally the descendant of slaves in a white, Protestant country, and this is what it means to be an American Negro, this is who he is — a kidnapped pagan, who was sold like an animal and treated like one, who was once defined by the American Constitution as “three-fifths” of a man, and who,

according to the Dred Scott decision, had no rights that a white man was bound to respect.”

Unrelentingly, Baldwin brings up the history of Black Americans, and consistently shows that the way things were is very much the way things are. He does, however, propose a way out; a way of thinking that will lead to the acceptance of the black man into America: by teaching the white man, through love and patience, the right and moral way to live — without hatred and prejudice. To ensure that the reader (whom Baldwin assumes is either black or a reformed white man) believes in his proposal, Baldwin relies on his logic and his ability to evoke in the reader those same emotions and thoughts he had (and has, as of the writing of the book).

There is certainly no argument that I believe in equal rights. My parents raised me as non-prejudicially as they could, and while my childhood friends were very rarely black (a function of the town on Long Island in which I grew up), I frequented New York City (where I came in contact with many different people) as well as read prodigiously. I was raised with religion, and although I was never very religious (in the sense of always going to Hebrew school or attending services on a regular basis), the lessons I learned about persecution and slavery (concepts the Jewish people understand well, through experience) related very conveniently to the issue of Civil Rights here in America.

Perhaps it is through the many stories I've read, museum exhibits I've seen, and discussions I've had that I see a very deep connection between Black American's struggle for equal rights in America, and the struggle of Jews' for freedom throughout the world, throughout history. I understand much of what Black America went through (and is still going through), in terms of the fighting against the beliefs of their persecutors and educating America about the morally correct way to behave. (There is certainly much fighting that is left to be done both by Jews and by Blacks.)

James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* serves as an example, to me, of the thought that must go into understanding one's place in the world, and devising a strategy for changing that place. His arguments are compelling — I agree with conclusions he draws from his experiences and, since I am well educated to the events of America's history, I understand the history that he uses in his arguments. Furthermore, I agree with his suggestions for resolving the issues; I have never been a proponent of the use of violence, and I have seen countless situations that have only been

made worse by its use (one merely has to look at world today to find situations where violence only leads to bloodshed and tears, and not to the resolution of the situation, such as the Palestinian Liberation movement in the Middle East). Baldwin's strategy of love and acceptance of one's persecutors is one that has worked in the past (such as the nationalist movement in India led by Mahatma Gandhi), one that is taught in the Bible, and one that should always be used.

My belief is that James Baldwin was (and is) correct in his strategy for resolving the Civil Rights situation. His solution is one that has proven effective in many circumstances, and at least helpful in the rest. His style of argument for his beliefs is also effective. By presenting the reader with detailed representations of those events that were pivotal in shaping his thinking, Baldwin allows the reader to arrive at the same solution that he has suggested. Moreover, by constantly reinforcing the beliefs of the reader, and providing insight into his logic and decisions, Baldwin provides the reader with both an intuitive and a logical course of action.