

Calling Dreams

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Psalm 118:5-9 (NRSVUE)

- ⁵Out of my distress I called on the LORD;
the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.
⁶With the LORD on my side I do not fear.
What can mortals do to me?
⁷The LORD is on my side to help me;
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.
⁸It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in mortals.
⁹It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in princes.

“What happens to a dream deferred?” asked Langston Hughes in his 1951 poem titled *Harlem*. “Does it dry up/like a raisin in the sun?” Hughes poignantly and eloquently described what it meant to be Black in America – to live in a land of opportunity and promise; a land built on the ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; a land whose founding document proclaimed that all (people) are created equal. Yet to be Black in America was to be repeatedly told that the American dream did not include them. It was a message dictated by laws both written and unwritten, reinforced by segregation, economic oppression, and violence. “What happens to a dream deferred?” Hughes’s words formed the defining question of Black experience in America, provoking soul-searching by leaders and inspiring the output of a generation of visionaries and dreamers, from Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* to the speeches and sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr.

But Langston Hughes was not the only one who gave voice to these questions, to the deepest longings of the heart. Nor was he the first.

*I'm folding up my little dreams
Within my heart to-night,
And praying I may soon forget
The torture of their sight.*

*For Time's deft fingers scroll my brow
With fell relentless art—
I'm folding up my little dreams
To-night, within my heart!*

(“My Little Dreams” – Georgia Douglas

Johnson, 1922)

Georgia Douglas Johnson played a central role in the Harlem Renaissance, though she never lived in Harlem. Born in Atlanta in 1877, she attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music before returning to Atlanta, where she worked for a time as a public school principal and played the organ in a Congregational church. In 1903, she married Henry Lincoln Johnson, a prominent attorney and leading Republican in Georgia politics. When President Taft appointed Henry to a government position, they relocated to Washington, D.C. and moved into a house on S Street.

Henry preferred that his wife focus on being a homemaker and raising their children, but Georgia had other ambitions. Her poetry caught the attention of W.E.B. DuBois, who invited her to be a regular contributor to *The Crisis*, the journal of the NAACP that DuBois had founded. Douglas Johnson published her first collection of poetry, *The Heart of a Woman*, in 1918. Noted for its colorful use of metaphors and revelatory emotional expression, her collection was also criticized for not being race conscious enough. It was the last time Georgia Douglas Johnson would ever be criticized for glossing over race.

Her husband died in 1925, leaving Georgia to raise their two sons. She took a job at the Labor Department to support the family and put her sons through law school and medical school, respectively. All the while, she continued to write, producing poems, plays, and songs. During the 1920s and 30s, she was the most widely-read Black woman poet in the U.S.

It was during this time that she began to open her home as a place to foster and encourage Black artistic and cultural life. She hosted Saturday gatherings of many of the leading writers and intellectuals visiting Washington, some of them coming to D.C. just for the opportunity to be in her home. These gatherings came to be known lovingly as the “S Street Salon.” Over the next forty years, Douglas Johnson welcomed dozens of friends and authors, including Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Alain Locke, W.E.B. DuBois, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and others.

Even as their art flourished, these visionaries were all-too-aware of the dangers of being Black in America. They faced public discrimination daily. They endured the dehumanizing effects of segregation. They followed news reports of extrajudicial killings and kangaroo courts. Racial discrimination not only informed their work; it fueled it. Douglas Johnson became an outspoken advocate for anti-lynching laws. She made racial violence the subject of many of her 28 plays and hundreds of poems. The S Street Salon was a haven that sustained a cultural movement from the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights Era.

*The right to make my dreams come true
I ask, nay, I demand of life,
Nor shall fate's deadly contraband
Impede my steps, nor countermand.*

*Too long my heart against the ground
Has beat the dusty years around,
And now, at length, I rise, I wake!
And stride into the morning break!*

(“Calling Dreams” – 1922)

Georgia Douglas Johnson lived the reality of a dream deferred. She endured the double discrimination of being Black and a woman during a deeply racist and misogynistic time. She watched as Jim Crow pushed her husband out of politics and robbed them of much of their social influence. She wrote and spoke about the horrors of lynchings taking place across the country, refusing to soften painful details or downplay the depth of depravity among white supremacists. Yet, over and over again, she summoned the strength and the courage to overcome, rising above despondency but never abandoning the cause. Her poetry increasingly embodied a sense of hope rising from despair, the encouraging voice of the S Street Salon ringing clear in her powerful verse:

*Your world is as big as you make it
I know, for I used to abide
In the narrowest nest in a corner*

*My wings pressing close to my side
But I sighted the distant horizon
Where the sky-line encircled the sea
And I throbbed with a burning desire
To travel this immensity.*

*I battered the cordons around me
And cradled my wings on the breeze
Then soared to the uttermost reaches
with rapture, with power, with ease!*

(“Your World” – 1962)

When we think about poetry in the life of faith, we are naturally drawn to the Psalms. Often referred to as “the Prayerbook of the Church,” the Psalms reveal an honest reckoning with faith, sometimes in ways that might seem frankly too raw to appear in the Bible. They employ descriptive imagery and metric structure to weave together a rich tapestry of expression ranging from lament to celebration, from doubt to assurance, from despair to hope. Psalm 118 includes some of the favorite lines in our tradition:

*This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalm 118:24)*

*The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes. (Psalm 118:22-23), and*

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. (Psalm 118:26)

But before any of those words, Psalm 118 recounts the deliverance that God provided for God’s people from captivity in Egypt and from violent attacks by their enemies, and extols the steadfast love of God.

*Out of my distress I called on the LORD;
the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.
With the LORD on my side I do not fear.
What can mortals do to me?
The LORD is on my side to help me;
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.
It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in mortals.
It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in princes. (Psalm 118:5-9)*

This is poetry that can only be written by one who has known hardship and suffering, bearing witness to a faith forged through conflict and oppression, yet overcoming fear and despair to anticipate a brighter time, a better day. The light may only come in glimpses. The day may only be a brief respite from the struggle. And yet, even though the road is long, there is always the steady assurance of God’s presence, a confidence born of faith and trust.

We are daily faced with assaults on our sense of hope. Masked and heavily armed militias terrorize neighborhoods. Citizens are gunned down during protests, then falsely portrayed as violent extremists by a government more intent on spinning their narrative than pursuing

justice. Authoritarianism is on the rise around the world and in our own nation. The latest batch of Epstein files names more people in positions of power across business, politics, academia, and show business that participated in or profited from his despicable actions. We are led by an administration that regularly and aggressively obfuscates the truth and assassinates the character of anyone who disagrees with their tactics. Racist statements and actions are brazenly posted to social media, then are defended and even celebrated by significant portions of the populace. Decades of climate science are ignored, and regulations that protect air and water and soil are discarded. Election integrity is preemptively questioned and debunked theories are recirculated, weakening the fundamental principles of democracy. Social service funding is slashed, forcing more people to choose between paying for medicine, food, or rent. An increased sense of isolation following decades of hyper-individualism leads to an overwhelming sense of nihilism and a devaluing of life. All the while, the mental health crisis gripping our society deepens. Where do we find hope?

I find that I am praying more earnestly these days – not necessarily more frequently or for longer periods, but just with a longing to hear God’s voice. And I am finding a desire to be more connected with others who are working toward a common goal, because those connections strengthen my resolve. I take some comfort in knowing that no matter how bad things get, many before us have faced worse and endured. I’m not ready to give up on the world just yet. The dream of the beloved community may be deferred, but it remains. I see it in the determination of those who keep showing up at great personal risk. I hear it in the hymns sung by hundreds of Minnesotans bearing witness to their faith. I feel it in a church finding its voice after too many years of playing it safe and longing for the past.

It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in princes...or presidents, whether their name is Donald or Joe or Barack. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in politicians or poets...or even pastors.

*I Shall rebuild my world today
Without a sob or sigh,
Assembling and securing it
Ere fleeting time deny.*

*I shall rebuild my shattered world
More wisely than before,
Shall fashion it with faith and prayer
And love shall be the door.*

*And when I have rebuilt my world
Uncircumscribed and free
I shall invite all humankind
To share my world with me.*

(“Share My World” – 1962)

Though Georgia Douglas Johnson was active in her church, she never wrote about her faith as such. Yet her work is suffused with the themes of our faith: the chastisement of the prophets, the hopefulness of the gospels, the intimacy of the psalms. Inspiration does not have to derive from scripture to be sacred. As our Black History Month celebration comes to a close, I pray that we will draw strength from the knowledge that our story didn’t begin yesterday and that it won’t end tomorrow. We stand in a long line of dreamers whose strength has been bequeathed to us. I’m calling on the dreamers today. Let us never rest until that sacred dream becomes a

reality – not just for some, but for all. Give thanks to the LORD, for God is good. God’s steadfast love endures forever. Amen.



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