

DAYLIGHT COME, AND HE GOT TO GO HOME

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-4xyg4PU-U>

I woke up this morning, and as is my habit, I turned on the news. Today, I was shook by the news that Harry Belafonte had died. Throughout the day, obituaries and reminiscences have appeared, each lifting up various parts of his 96 years – his singing, his acting, his activism, his pride in his heritage, his compassion for the oppressed, and his disdain for those who oppress. So I thought I'd add my own thoughts, bringing in one piece that I haven't seen mentioned in the coverage today.

Thirty three years ago, on May 21, 1990, a grand memorial service was held for Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppets. It took place at New York City's mammoth Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Harry was one of the speakers that day, asked to speak because of his collaboration with Henson and the Muppets on several occasions. His remarks that day included this:

. . . But greater than [Henson's] artistry was his humanity.

Unless you have moved among the wretched of the earth;

unless you have spent countless hours on the reservations of this country that house the Native Americans and the Indians who live out hopeless lives on their reservations;

unless you have moved among those who live in ghettos, contained by segregation and deprivation;

unless you have moved among vast peoples who sit on continents that are still struggling for their human rights and their dignity;

unless you have sat among tribes who care for children that face an existence of hopelessness;

you will never really understand Jim Henson until you have understood how he has touched the lives of those people.

Many have no hope.

Many mothers sit in many places, holding their children, desperately understanding that they will never be educated, they will never have a chance at life as it should be. And when they get a chance to see the smile of the faces of their children, as they develop the appetite to learn because they are watching Sesame Street, when they have developed the appetite to love in a loveless place because they have seen how friendly the Muppets and the creatures are to one another, when they find their own humanity in the humanity of these creations, then you have understood the real gift of Jim Henson and his colleagues.

I say this, because I have moved among those people, and I have seen in these wretched places smiles break out on faces that have never been familiar with the cause of a smile, and have come to life and have been touched in a profound way because Jim Henson said "There is hope, there is joy, there is the ability to love and to care and to find greatness in difference."

This says a lot about Jim Henson, and a lot more about Harry Belafonte. The two of them collaborated on a number of projects, including his appearance on *The Muppet Show*, in which they used song and skits and "children's stuff" to push the subversive idea that Harry spoke of at Jim's memorial: there *is* hope, there *is* joy, there *is* the ability to love and to care and to find greatness in difference.

And that's what made Harry Belafonte tick.

He *knew* that these things were true, because he

had seen them, embraced them, and spent his life trying to spread them to the world, often at significant cost to himself. The story of a Chrysler representative trying to pull the plug on a Petula Clark special featuring Belafonte is but one example. Chrysler rep: "Could you reshoot that song with Petula Clark? She touched his arm, and we think our customers might take offense to a white woman touching a black man's arm." Harry's producer: "No." The song stayed, as recorded, but it again put Belafonte against yet another of the Powers That Be and made things harder for him down the line.

But back the Harry and the Muppets . . .

Who could not laugh at Harry having an epic drum-off with Animal? (Think of Dueling Banjos, except with percussion. And Muppets.)

Who could not smile at Harry swallowing his frustration with Fozzy Bear continually coming in late as Harry directed the cast of the Muppet Show in singing The Banana Boat Song?

Who could not be entranced with Harry and several African-styled Muppets singing the Belafonte/Henson song "Turn the World Around" and not want to dance and sing along? [This is the song that Harry sang at Henson's memorial service after he finished his remarks quoted above.]

Harry Belafonte understood the power of song and story, especially to give voice and agency to those at the margins. In 2014, Belafonte spoke movingly at the New York Film Critics Circle Awards, when they honored the best director, Steve McQueen, whose film *12 Years a Slave* had been received to great acclaim.

The power of cinema is an uncontainable thing and it's truly remarkable, in its capacity for emotional evolution. When I was first watching the world of cinema, there was a film that stunned the world, with all its aspects and art form. They did a lot, at that time. The film was done by D.W. Griffith, and it was called

The Birth of a Nation, and it talked about America's story, its identity, and its place in the universe of nations. And that film depicted the struggles of this country with passion and power and great human abuse. Its depiction of black people was carried with great cruelty. And the power of cinema styled this nation, after the release of the film, to riot and to pillage and to burn and to murder black citizens. The power of film.

At the age of five, in 1932, I had the great thrill of going to the cinema. It was a great relief for those of us who were born into poverty, a way we tried to get away from the misery. One of the films they made for us, the first film I saw, was *Tarzan of the Apes*. [Ed note: *The movie is called Tarzan the Ape Man.*] In that film, [we] looked to see the human beauty of Johnny Weissmuller swinging through the trees, jump off, and there spring to life, while the rest were depicted as grossly subhuman, who were ignorant, who did not know their way around the elements, living in forests with wild animals. Not until Johnny Weissmuller stepped into a scene did we know who we were, according to cinema. . . .

A lot's gone on with Hollywood. A lot could be said about it. But at this moment, I think what is redeeming, what is transformative, is the fact that a genius, an artist, is of African descent, although he's not from America, he is of America, and he is of that America which is part of his own heritage; [he] made a film called *12 Years a Slave*, which is stunning in the most imperial way. So it's a stage that enters a charge made by *The Birth of a Nation*, that we were not a people, we were evil, rapists, abusers, absent of

intelligence, absent of soul, heart, inside. In this film, *12 Years a Slave*, Steve steps in and shows us, in an overt way, that the depth and power of cinema is there for now the world to see us in another way. I was five when I saw *Tarzan of the Apes*, and the one thing I never wanted to be, after seeing that film, was an African. I didn't want to be associated with anybody that could have been depicted as so useless and meaningless. And yet, life in New York led me to other horizons, other experiences. And now I can say, in my 87th year of life, that I am joyed, I am overjoyed, that I should have lived long enough to see Steve McQueen step into this space and for the first time in the history of cinema, give us a work, a film, that touches the depths of who we are as a people, touches the depths of what America is as a country, and gives us a sense of understanding more deeply what our past has been, how glorious our future will be, and could be.

Whether he was honoring greats like Steve McQueen and Jim Henson, or singing songs with Petula Clark and Fozzy Bear, Harry Belafonte was finding hope, joy, love, and greatness in diversity as he embraced the differences in the world. He worked not only as a leader in the US civil rights movement, but also against apartheid in South Africa and returned there years after apartheid fell to encourage South Africa's anti-AIDS efforts. He was a UNICEF ambassador and the Grand Marshall for the 2013 NYC Pride Parade. Read the various obituaries, and watch the various memorials, and you will see a man who moved among the powerless, and lived his life to give them the dignity that they deserve, the voice they lacked, and the rights that are their right.

The jam session in heaven tonight is going to be one for the ages, because daylight came and

Harry got to go home.

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