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by
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I'm glad to be with you today—to be with so many of my friends on this great occasion. I always like to know who is in my audience, and one of the problems for those of us who speak in many different places is really knowing who our audience is. So I have a question for the people in my audience. In order to get a sense of who my audience is, I would like to know how many people are five years old? Would everybody in the audience who is five years old raise your hand? Is that everybody? Do I have anybody who is four years old? Do I have anybody who is six years old? Okay, so everybody is five years old. Now, can you name a famous black person? Can anybody name a famous black person? I just heard one. Martin Luther King. That's tremendous. That's really good. You just remember to yell louder next time.

There was a man named Carter G. Woodson; Carter G. Woodson was a historian. He taught school at a black college in Washington, D.C.—Howard University. He was concerned about the fact that when he went out to talk with young people—young black people in public schools in Washington, D.C.—none of the students could name a famous black person. He thought it was terrible that no young black people knew the names of famous black people; that they didn't know the name of Frederick Douglass; that they didn't know the names of black inventors; black leaders; or famous black military people. But, when he asked them to name a president, they could name a president: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln. They could name a president and they could name famous white people, but they couldn't name any famous black people.

So, Carter G. Woodson decided that we should have a time in the public schools where we would raise up black history. We would talk about black history to make sure that everybody, at least at one time during the year, would learn about black history. In 1926 he invented something that he called "Negro History Week." Negro History Week was held in February. Now, he chose February because February had the birthdays of two important people. First, it had the birthday of Abraham Lincoln on February 12. Abraham Lincoln was considered the most important president from the point of view of black people because he was the president during the Civil War, the war that guaranteed emancipation for black people in this country. But the other birthday that he wanted to raise up that very few people knew about at that time was February 14. February 14 was the birthday of Frederick Douglass. Now, Frederick Douglass didn't actually know when he was born because Frederick Douglass was born a slave in Maryland. After he had escaped from slavery and come to Massachusetts, probably around the time when he was living in New Bedford, he decided that he needed a birthday. One of the few advantages of not knowing your actual birthday, one of the few advantages of not having that recorded, is that you can pick any day you want. And so he picked February 14. I'm not sure why he picked February 14, but he did and that became the birthday that he always celebrated.

So, here was a week that had these two birthdays in it and that was the week that Carter G. Woodson concentrated on. He asked people in schools all over the country to use that week as a time to talk about the history of black people.

Now, we all know what happened. What happened was that black teachers in segregated schools in the South thought this was a marvelous idea. They began writing Carter G. Woodson to send down curriculum material, send down lists of books and send down books. When he couldn't find enough books for them to use, he started writing books—black history books for children—and he formed an organization called the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Every year it was the job of the Association to make sure that there was curriculum material for black schools to teach black history. And it was at black schools in the South where this happened. The white schools in the South, of course, weren't interested; and the schools in the North, that were supposed to be integrated, weren't interested either.

In the North, if you wanted to learn about black history, you had to go to a church. You had to go to a black church. The people in the black churches in the North were writing to Carter G. Woodson and asking for the same materials, but instead of putting them into the schools, they went to groups that met on Saturdays and Sundays and taught black children about their history. And then there were volunteer organizations, organizations of black women and black men that were formed in the North; they saw a great opportunity to teach young people and adults about black history. So you had black schools in the South and you had black voluntary organizations and churches in the North using this material and raising up black history every year in February during Black History Week, and after 1976, Black History Month.

Now, we, of course, know that Carter G. Woodson had to be a southerner. No northern black person would have picked February as Black History Month. August maybe, or July, but not February!

Once Carter G. Woodson had Negro History Week in place, he still was not satisfied. He always had the idea that we would somehow get this black history material into the general history of America, into the regular curriculum, so that there wouldn't be a segregated curriculum for black history—black history would be discussed like anybody's history in this country. And it is because of that desire and the successes of Carter G. Woodson that we do have the few bits of progress that we can point to around this country today.

Nowadays you can pick up a standard American history textbook for high schools and realize that there were more than two famous black people in the world. When I went to high school in Syracuse, New York, I knew that there were two famous black people in the world: one of those was Booker T. Washington, the other black person was George Washington Carver. That was how we celebrated Washington's birthday; we always thought we were celebrating the birthday of those two black people. But now we know; we can read in books about a number of famous black people and that is because of Black History Week and Black History Month. It is interesting that George Keverian, the Speaker of the House, can come down here today and speak to us about black elected officials. He can talk about the fact that the first two black state representatives in Massachusetts were elected the year after the Civil War. He can talk about that because of what we have done in this state to raise up black history, and that is an essential task for us.

For us, understanding our history is no luxury, no more a luxury than it was for a slave to learn to read and write.

When we were slaves it was illegal to teach us how to read and write. It was against the law to teach slaves how to read and write. When a black person learned to read and write that was not simply an individual act—that was an act of revolution. It was illegal. It was doing an illegal thing. To learn to read and write was breaking the law. And those black people who learned to read and write were early revolutionaries in the cause for black liberation in this country. And just as it was against the interests of the ruling people, the ruling classes, the ruling structures in this country, just as it was against their interests for us to be able to read and write, it is today against their interests for us to know our history. For when we know our history, we have a memory. When we don't have a history, we don't have a memory.

If we were in a hospital, a mental hospital, and we met someone who didn't have a memory, we would say that person had amnesia. A person who has amnesia is sick; amnesia is a mental disorder. When you have amnesia, you don't know who you are because you cannot remember who you were. We, as a people, must make sure that we always have our memory, that we do not ever again suffer from the mental illness of amnesia. Because when black people do not remember their past, they have amnesia; and, like people with amnesia, they do not know what to do next because they cannot remember what they just did. Or, to be more specific, they do not know how to act toward the next person they see because they do not know how someone acted toward them yesterday.

If any one of you had amnesia this moment, if you awoke and had no memory, you would not know why I was here. You would not know why you were sitting there. You would look to the left and look to the right, and you would not know if you should just remain sitting there smiling or whether you should get up and run out of this building as fast as you could.

As a people in this city and in this state, when we forget where we were, when we forget who our friends were and who our enemies were, when we forget those things, we make bad judgments into the future. Do not forget that there are people right now who want to take our history away. If you had amnesia right now, you would, of course, after you had gotten over the initial fright, ask someone: "Where am I?" You would ask me: "Where is this place? Where are we? Tell me where we are." And I, who did not have amnesia, could tell you where you were; but, of course, I could tell you anything. I could tell you *anything.* I could lie, and you could not know it was not the truth. It is in some people's interest to take our history away. It is in some people's interest to take this very opportunity to lie to us.

For us, understanding our history is no luxury, no more a luxury than it was for a slave to learn to read and write. It is no luxury. At this moment in this city there are people who are trying to take away our history. They are trying to take away the correct history of Martin Luther King. They are trying to make Martin Luther King into something he never was. They are trying to make the Civil Rights movement into something it never was. They are trying to revise it by watering it down until it has become something that even Ronald Reagan can say was okay.

We know personally how we are under attack. We know as a community how our community is under attack. And we must always be conscious that our history is under attack. Our role on a day like this, in a month like this, is to make sure that all of the five-year-olds we know can name great black people and to make sure all of us remember the history that we have been through, and we must study and find out about those parts of our history that we did not live through so that it remains as true and as real as all the other parts of our history.

I could tell a lot of nice stories about how we got here and things like that, but I will end by pointing out the exhibit on the African Meeting House out in Doric Hall. The African Meeting House is a building just a few blocks away from here that always needs to be in black people's consciousness, not only in this city and this state but in the whole country and probably everywhere there are black people. It is a building that was constructed by black people, literally by black labor, in this city in 1806. It is now the oldest black church building still standing in the United States. It symbolizes a number of things, but the most important thing I think it symbolizes is that black people, in a tiny community of free black people here in Boston, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when most of their fellow black people, when most of the people of African descent in this country, were in

slavery and in the South, this little, exceptional community of free black people decided that they had to form a solid communal base and that that base would revolve around a church.

That church could not be in somebody else's building, but that church had to have its own place. The place that they chose for the church couldn't be in the same community where everybody lived but somewhere new. And so this group of black people who were living in the North End decided to buy a piece of land in the West End, what we now call Beacon Hill. They bought that land, and they built the African Meeting House. When it was completed in 1806, it became a center where black men and women controlled a space.

In that controlled space, they allowed all of their politicians of that time, all of their leaders, all of their speakers, to come and argue and struggle over what they considered most important. Of course, they talked about their treatment in Boston. And, of course, they talked about whether they should go to the public schools or set up their own schools. They decided to set up their own schools. They talked about where they were going to be employed and what kind of jobs they should have. And, of course, they had fun: parades, bands, music. But the major issue for them was the fact that most blacks were still in slavery and most of them were in the South. And they wanted to do everything possible to help those black people who were enslaved. They were free, but they did not see themselves as separate from the rest of black people who were enslaved. They were here in Massachusetts, but they did not see themselves as separate from black people who were in Mississippi, Georgia, and South Carolina. They had a base from which they were connected to all black people.

Black people in Boston today must develop that base and understand that they are connected to all black people in this world. There will be no excuse for us, no excuse for allowing black people to suffer oppression anywhere just because we have a little bit more freedom here. No black people should suffer oppression in South Africa. There is no legitimate government in South Africa. The only legitimate people in South Africa are black and colored people who are struggling to be free. It is no different; it is all the same memory. Just as black people in this city were the center of the Abolitionist Movement, we must regain and maintain our responsibility. Black people here and in other cities in this country must remain at the center of the movement to end oppression in South Africa. That is what that little building tells us. That is the history that people will try to take away from us. We have already heard how it's none of our business, how we are getting too radical, how the African National Congress might shoot somebody. Let us not worry about that. We must speak out of our memory, and that is what we do today. What we do today is raise up our memory. We must raise up everything that we have already been so that we can make the right decisions for the future.

Byron Rushing is a Massachusetts State Representative and is currently Chairperson of the Massachusetts Black Legislative Caucus.