

Thursday February 23rd 2012, the Peace Islands Institute hosted Mr. Cornell Brooks to celebrate "African-American Heritage Month." He said, "This afternoon's celebration commemoration of African-American history month occurs at a peculiar moment in our civic history. It occurs at a particular and peculiar hour in the history of our democracy. It occurs at a particular date in the history of our post-racial democracy. It occurs at such a time where we have an African-American in the White House. We have African-Americans at the helm of some of America's most prestigious law firms. We have African-Americans leading some of our most prominent and prominent cities. We have such a mayor here today. We have such a mayor in this city of Newark."

"We have African-Americans who literally lead some of America's most august institutions. And so, the question might be rightly if not rudely post why celebrate African-American history month? Some might post the question at a moment in our history where we have so many African-Americans who have invaded the issuance of exclusivity who were literally walking into places where their forbearers did not walk only so many years ago. At a moment where we have African-Americans who in leadership positions at the Pentagon in the state department, in the White House, why should we celebrate African-American history month as a separate, a distinct occasion?"

"What I want to suggest to you this afternoon and answer to the question of why celebrate and the second question being whose history is it? And the answer to those questions, I like to answer them this way. First, African-American history should be required history or required reading. Secondly, African-American history is if you will inclusively inspired and inspiring history and third, and answer to those first two questions, I'd like to suggest to you that their history is in fact our history.

"In suggesting that African-American history should be required reading, I want to suggest that you first did it, must be understood that in order to appreciate the history to love the history, to delve deeply into the history, you have to have read the history. This history is extraordinary. It's extraordinary because it literally represents the core, the heart of our democracy. How can anyone understand the possibilities of the Fourteenth Amendment or the First Amendment, we're now understanding the blood, sweat and tears of the civil rights movement. How can you understand the implications of the equal protection clause or the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment in our constitution unless you understand four little girls being blown up in a church in Birmingham, Alabama in the 1960s?"

"How can you understand the implications, the possibilities of the Brown versus Board of Education decision unless you understand how Jews or Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants, Blacks and Whites, people of all colors or races or ethnicities came together in one special moment, in our history and dedicated themselves to the proposition that we are all created equal. That's not their history. That is in fact our history. You cannot understand American history unless you understand and appreciate and ultimately love African-American history. It has to be required reading. It has to be required reading because it is impossible to understand the American constitution if you don't first understand that African-American slaves were defined as 3/5 of a human being."

"You can't understand American history unless you understand the animating issues of this civil rights movement but also the civil war and to understand that, you have to understand and appreciate and ultimately love African-American history. I want to suggest to you that African-American history is not merely the history we find in a gilded pages of books in a library. It's not just about Black folk or White folk, but Americans who believe in the promise of America. So when we read African-American history, it's a history that's so new and so textured, so inclusive, it literally wraps it, it folds, embraces all of America. That's what Black history represents. And so people who want to vulcanize it, ghettoize it, circumscribe it and suggest that it is a history for them over there to be read and understood and appreciated by them, neither understand the history nor the country in which that history was written."

"When you turn the pages of Black history, whether or not you were born in a segregated America, whether or not your skin is my color or your color, it's your history. Because anybody who believes in the promises of the U.S. constitution, anybody who, when you go to Washington and walk the right marble corridors of the U.S. capitol built by slaves, anybody who stands on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, anybody who goes to visit a new memorial in which the words are inscribed out of a mountain of despair, a stone of hope, anybody who spends anytime in that great city has to come away with appreciation that their story is in fact our story as Americans. That's the legacy of social justice to which we are all members."

Mr. Brook's speech was followed by a Q&A session. We thank Mr. Cornell Brooks for his presence and for making this event possible.

Pictures from event:



