

James Baldwin

THE ARTIST'S STRUGGLE FOR INTEGRITY

A Talk



APOPHASIS

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I REALLY DON'T LIKE WORDS like "artist" or "integrity" or "courage" or "nobility." I have a kind of distrust of all those words because I don't really know what they mean, any more than I really know what such words as "democracy" or "peace" or "peace-loving" or "warlike" or "integration" mean. And yet one is compelled to recognize that all these imprecise words are attempts made by us all to get to something which is real and which lives behind the words. Whether I like it or not, for example, and no matter what I call myself, I suppose the only word for me, when the chips are down, is that I am an artist. There is such a thing. There is such a thing as integrity. Some people are noble. There is such a thing as courage. The terrible thing is that the reality behind these words depends ultimately on what the human being (meaning every single one of us) believes to be real. The terrible thing is that the reality behind all these words depends on choices one has got to make, for ever and ever

and ever, every day.

I am not interested really in talking to you as an artist. It seems to me that the artist's struggle for his integrity must be considered as a kind of metaphor for the struggle, which is universal and daily, of all human beings on the face of this globe to get to become human beings. It is not your fault, it is not my fault, that I write. And I never would come before you in the position of a complainant for doing something that I must do. What we might get at this evening, if we are lucky, is what the importance of this effort is. However arrogant this may sound, I want to suggest two propositions. The first one is that the poets (by which I mean all artists) are finally the only people who know the truth about us. Soldiers don't. Statesmen don't. Priests don't. Union leaders don't. Only poets. That's my first proposition. We know about the Oedipus complex not because of Freud but because of a poet who lived in Greece thousands of years ago. And what he said then about what it was like to be alive is still true, in spite

of the fact that now we can get to Greece in something like five hours and then it would have taken I don't know how long a time.

The second proposition is really what I want to get at tonight. And it sounds mystical, I think, in a country like ours, and at a time like this when something awful is happening to a civilization, when it ceases to produce poets, and, what is even more crucial, when it ceases in any way whatever to believe in the report that only the poets can make. Conrad told us a long time ago (I think it was in *Victory*, but I might be wrong about that): "Woe to that man who does not put his trust in life." Henry James said, "Live, live all you can. It's a mistake not to." And Shakespeare said—and this is what I take to be the truth about everybody's life all of the time—"Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety." Art is here to prove, and to help one bear, the fact that all safety is an illusion. In this sense, all artists are divorced from and even

necessarily opposed to any system whatever.

Let's trace it, just for kicks, for a minute. And I'll use myself. I won't say "me," but it's my story. The first thing an artist finds out when he is very, very young (when I say "young" I mean before he is fifteen, that is to say, before, properly speaking, he or she can walk or talk, before he or she has had enough experience to begin to assess his or her experience)—and what occurs at that point in this hypothetical artist's life is a kind of silence—the first thing he finds out is that for reasons he cannot explain to himself or to others, he does not belong anywhere. Maybe you're on the football team, maybe you're a runner, maybe you belong to a church, you certainly belong to a family; and abruptly, in other people's eyes—this is very important—you begin to discover that you are moving and you can't stop this movement to what looks like the edge of to face, least of all the hypothetical misfit who has not learned

how to walk or talk and doesn't know enough about experience to know what experience he has had.

Well, one survives that, no matter how. By and by your uncles and your parents and church stop praying for you. They realize it won't do a bit of good. They give you up, and you proceed a little further and your lovers put you down. They don't know what you're doing either, and you can't tell them 'cause you don't know. You survive this and in some terrible way, which I suppose no one can ever describe, you are compelled, you are corralled, you are bullwhipped into dealing with whatever it is that hurt you. And what is crucial here is that if it hurt you, that is not what's important. Everybody's hurt. What is important, what corrals you, what bullwhips you, what drives you, torments you, is that you must find some way of using this to connect you with everyone else alive. This is all you have to do it with.

You must understand that your pain is trivial except insofar as you can use it to connect with other people's pain; and insofar as you can do that with your pain, you can be released from it, and then hopefully it works the other way around too; insofar as I can tell you what it is to suffer, perhaps I can help you to suffer less. Then, you make—oh, fifteen years later, several thousand drinks later, two or three divorces, God knows how many broken friendships and an exile of one kind or another—some kind of breakthrough, which is your first articulation of who you are: that is to say, your first articulation of who you suspect we all are.

Let me put it another way. When I was very young (and I am sure this is true of everybody here), I assumed that no one had ever been born who was only five feet six inches tall, or been born poor, or been born ugly, or masturbated, or done all those things which were my private property when I was fifteen. No one had ever suffered the way I suffered.

Then you discover, and I discovered this through Dostoevsky, that it is common. Everybody did it. Not only did everybody do it, everybody's doing it. And all the time. It's a fantastic and terrifying liberation. The reason it is terrifying is because it makes you once and for all responsible to no one but yourself. Not to God the Father, not to Satan, not to anybody. Just you. If you think it's right, then you've got to do it. If you think it's wrong, then you mustn't do it. And not only do we all know how difficult it is, given what we are, to tell the difference between right and wrong, but the whole nature of life is so terrible that somebody's right is always somebody else's wrong. And these are the terrible choices one has always got to make.

All right, I said the cat survived all that, and—this is a very crucial thing—you know dirty socks can make you feel like nothing but a dirty sock. You walk into a room and somebody says, “What do you do?” And you say, “I write.”

And they say, “Yeah, but what do you do?” And you wonder, what do you do? And what’s it for? Why don’t you get a job? And somehow you can’t, and finally you learn this in the most terrible way, because you try. You’re in the position of someone on the edge of a field, and it’s cold in the field, and there’s a house over there, and there’s fire in the house, and food and everything you need, everything you want, and you make all kinds of efforts to get into the house. And they would let you in; they would let you in. They’re not being cruel. They recognize you as you come to the door, and they can’t let you in. You get in, let us say, for five minutes and you can’t stay. When I was much younger, people said to me—this is very serious and not just a confession, I’m not just being self-indulgent—“All right, you were working, now stop working. Forget it! Have a drink. Why are you so serious all the time? You can’t write all the time, Jimmy. Relax.” Have you ever had

anyone tell you to relax?

All right, you get through all that and you make your first breakthrough, people have heard your name—and here comes the world again. The world you first encountered when you were fifteen. The world which has starved you, despised you. Here it comes again. This time it is bearing gifts. The phone didn't ring before—if you had a phone. Now it never stops ringing. Instead of people saying, “What do you do?” they say, “Won't you do this?” And you become, or you could become, a Very Important Person. And then—and this is a confession—you find yourself in the position of a woman I don't know who sings a certain song in a certain choir and the song begins: “I said I wasn't gonna tell nobody but I couldn't keep it to myself.” You've come full circle. Here you are again, with it all to do all over again, and you must decide all over again whether you want to be famous or whether you want to write. And the two things, in spite of all the evidence, have nothing whatever in common.

Now, what is it, at the point that the artist,

since I must put it this way, begins to come of age, that he cannot keep to himself? This is the trickiest part of the whole argument. I was having lunch today with a very good friend of mine and a friend of his—and they're both artists. The friend of the friend is a man I admire very much but the other one is a cat I really dig. My friend is an actor and there's a role which we all know he ought to play. In fact, we all know—anyone who loves him—that he has no choice but to play it sooner or later and we all know that he's a little afraid to. And God knows he should be. But he knows he's got to do it. And his friend was saying to him—and I paraphrase it very awkwardly—you must remember that most people live in almost total darkness. It is true, said this friend, that we drink too much, we suffer from stage fright and you may get an ulcer or die of cancer, and it is true that it is all very, very hard and gets harder all the time. And yet people, millions of people whom you will never see, who don't know you, never will know you, people who may try to kill you in the morning, live in a darkness which—if you have that funny terrible thing which every

artist can recognize and no artist can define—you are responsible to those people to lighten, and it does not matter what happens to you. You are being used in the way a crab is useful, the way sand certainly has some function. It is impersonal. This force which you didn't ask for, and this destiny which you must accept, is also your responsibility. And if you survive it, if you don't cheat, if you don't lie, it is not only, you know, your glory, your achievement, it is almost our only hope—because only an artist can tell, and only artists have told since we have heard of man, what it is like for anyone who gets to this planet to survive it. What it is like to die, or to have somebody die; what it is like to be glad. Hymns don't do this, churches really cannot do it. The trouble is that although the artist can do it, the price that he has to pay himself and that you, the audience, must also pay, is a willingness to give up everything, to realize that although you spent forty years raising this child, these

children, nothing, none of it belongs to you. You can only have it by letting it go. You can only take if you are prepared to give, and giving is not an investment. It is not a day at the bargain counter. It is a total risk of everything, of you and who you think you are, who you think you'd like to be, where you think you'd like to go—everything, and this forever, forever.

Now I, if I may put it this way, and all my tribe, if I may put it that way, find this very hard to do, and it's very hard on my mother, on my sisters and my brothers and all my friends, and it's very hard on me, and I may fail in the next two seconds. But then one has got to understand—that is, I and all my tribe (I mean artists now)—that it is hard for me. If I spend weeks and months avoiding my typewriter—and I do, sharpening pencils, trying to avoid going where I know I've got to go—then one has got to use this to learn humility. After all, there is a kind of saving egotism too, a cruel and dangerous but also saving egotism, about

the artist's condition, which is this: I know that if I survive it, when the tears have stopped flowing or when the blood has dried, when the storm has settled, I do have a typewriter which is my torment but is also my work. If I can survive it, I can always go back there, and if I've not turned into a total liar, then I can use it and prepare myself in this way for the next inevitable and possibly fatal disaster. But if I find that hard to do—and I have a weapon which most people don't have—then one must understand how hard it is for almost anybody else to do it at all.

And this is where the whole question in my own private, personal case of being an American artist, of being not yet sixty-five years old, and of being an American Negro artist in 1963 in this most peculiar of countries begins to be a very frightening assignment. One is dealing all the time with the most inarticulate people that I, in any case, have ever encountered, and I don't hesitate to say the

most inarticulate group of people we are ever likely to encounter, I or anybody else, for a very long time, at least in this century. Inarticulate and illiterate and they're very particular and difficult to describe away, unlettered in the language, which may sound a little florid but there's no other way that I can think of to say it, totally unlettered in the language of the heart, totally distrustful of whatever cannot be touched, panic-stricken at the very first hint of pain. A people determined to believe that they can make suffering obsolete. Who don't understand yet a very physiological fact: that the pain which signals a toothache is a pain which saves your life. This is very frightening. It frightens me half to death, and I'm not talking now merely about race, and I'm certainly not talking merely about Southerners. I am talking really about two-thirds of my public and technical allies. People who believe that segregation is wrong. People who march on

picket lines who yet have overlooked something else and are still under the illusion, I think, that what they've overlooked has something to do with social questions and in my particular case anyway that it has something to do with Negroes. I would like to live long enough—don't misunderstand me, but I would like to live long enough—to see that word or the use to which it's put struck from the American vocabulary. In effect, there is no Negro problem. The problem is that one is still in a kindergarten, an emotional kindergarten, and the Negro in this country operates as some weird kind of gorilla who suddenly is breaking up all the blackboards. I am tired not only of being told to wait, but of people's saying, "What should I do?" They mean, "What should I do about the Negro problem; what should I do for you?" There is nothing you can do for me. There is nothing you can do for Negroes. It must be done for you. One is not attempting to save twenty-two million people. One is attempting to save an entire country, and that

means an entire civilization, and the price for that is high. The price for that is to understand oneself. The price for that, for example, is to recognize that most of us, white and black, have arrived at a point where we do not know what to tell our children. Most of us have arrived at a point where we still believe and insist on and act on the principle, which is no longer valid, that this is such and such an optimum, that our choice is the lesser of two evils, and this is no longer true. Gonorrhea is not preferable to syphilis.

The time has come, it seems to me, to recognize that the framework in which we operate weighs on us too heavily to be borne and is about to kill us. It is time to ask very hard questions and to take very rude positions. And no matter at what price. It is time, for example, for one example, to recognize that the major effort of our country until today (and I am talking about Washington and all the way down to whoever heads the Women's Christian Temperance Union) is not to change a situation

but to seem to have done it. It is spectacular for example, to have been forced ultimately to bring in the entire whatever-it-was—militia, U.S. marshals—to get James Meredith into school, and from a certain point of view, which I do not at all share, I can see that one could say that no other country would have done it. It's escaped everybody's notice that no other country would have had to. It is easy to admire the sit-in students in the South, and nothing is more delightful than to talk to Martin Luther King, whom I very much admire. But it is too easy to admire a Christian minister, especially if you take no responsibility for what's happening to him or to those people that he tries to represent. It is hard to begin to understand that the drift in American life towards chaos is masked by all these smiling faces and all these do-good efforts.





James Baldwin (1924-1987) was an American civil rights activist and acclaimed writer of novels, poetry, plays, and essays. Baldwin had an extraordinary gift for lucid, impassioned expression rooted in everyday reality. His 1965 debate with arch-conservative William F. Buckley at Cambridge University on the topic, “The American Dream” remains one of the most profound performances of oratory in recorded history. Baldwin’s critiques of racial inequality, police brutality, and white supremacy are as consequential today as in the heat of the civil rights struggle.

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