IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT: A BLACK FEMINIST CALLED BY GOD TO INFLUENCE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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(This paper was presented during the week of February 9-13, 1999 at the National Conference of the National Association of African American Studies in Houston, Texas. It will be published in the NAAAS Conference proceedings. The photograph provided was taken from Women of Hope—African Americans Who Made A Difference by Joyce Hansen, New York: Scholastic Press, 1998.)
What motivates a young Black woman to become a social activist when her own personal problems loom large and insurmountable? What forces compelled Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a young 19th Century African American woman, who was literally an orphan, to step to the forefront and champion the rights of poor, uneducated African American men, women and children? _Crusade for Justice -- The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells_, edited by her daughter Alfreda M. Duster and the _Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells_ edited by Miriam DeCosta Willis provide some answers to these challenging questions.

It is my contention that Wells-Barnett’s sense of duty, and, what we today would call her Black feminist activism were motivated and undergirded by her deep abiding trust in God and her practical application of Biblical teachings. Wells-Barnett received her early formal education from Christian missionaries and teachers who came from the North to teach newly freed former slaves at Shaw University (now Rust College) in Holly Springs, Mississippi (Crusade 9). The following quote from the introduction to the autobiography provides additional insight into the type of early educational influences which would ultimately shape Wells-Barnett’s thinking and development.

Both of Ida’s parents stressed the importance of securing an education, and at Rust she had the guidance and instruction of dedicated missionaries and teachers who came to Holly Springs to assist the freedmen. Ida attended Rust all during her childhood and was regarded as an exceedingly apt pupil. On Sundays her religious parents would permit only the Bible to be read, so Ida read the Bible over and over again. (Crusade XV)

Wells-Barnett’s diary reveals her very close relationship to God. She recorded in her diary such activities as her goings to and fro, her relationships with her male suitors, and her debts and expenditures. Yet, the most salient features of her diary in my opinion are her recorded prayers and at times her direct conversations with God. On January 3, 1887, for example, Wells-Barnett wrote:

God help me to be a Christian! To so conduct myself in my intercourse with the unconverted. Let it be an ever present theme with me, & O help me to better control my temper! Bless me for the ensuing year, let me feel that Thou art with me in all my struggles. May I be a better Christian with more of the strength to overcome, the wisdom to avoid & have the meekness & humility that becometh a follower of Thee. (Memphis Diary 128)

In her diary entries she would at times ask God for strength and wisdom, and in other instances she pleaded to God for help.

After she learned that the Tennessee State Supreme Court had reversed the ruling in her discrimination suit filed against the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, she wrote:

I have firmly believed all along that the law was on our side and would, when we appealed to it, give us justice. I feel shorn of that belief and utterly discouraged, and just
now, if it were possible, would gather my race in my arms and fly away with them.

O God, is there no redress, no peace, no justice in this land for us? Thou hast always fought the battles of the weak and oppressed. Come to my aid at this moment and teach me what to do, for I am sorely, bitterly disappointed. Show us the way, even as Thou led the children out of bondage into the promised land. (Memphis Diary, 141)

In my opinion, God heard her plea. And, he would later reveal to Wells-Barnett that he had given her the talents of speech and writing to use as weapons to wage war on those who would lynch and perpetuate injustices against African Americans.

Further, her own words reveal that she felt inspired and motivated by God’s words to do the work that she did. In one case, for example, "Frog" James (a Black man who was a drunken, penniless derelict in Cairo, Illinois) had been hung, shot, decapitated, and burned by a white mob for allegedly murdering a white woman (Crusade 311-312). Wells-Barnett suspected that James had not committed this crime and that the White sheriff, Frank Davis, had actually provided little or no protection for James while he was incarcerated. She believed that the sheriff had basically assisted the mob in the seizure and lynching of James.

Prior to this incident occurring, the Illinois Legislature had enacted a law which provided that any sheriff who permitted a prisoner to be taken from him and lynched should be removed from office (Crusade 309).

Wells-Barnett, a Chicago resident at this time, had discussed the case over dinner with her husband, Attorney Barnett. Her children were also present. Her husband told her that she should go to Cairo to investigate the case, to gather the facts and to come back to Chicago to publish them. Wells-Barnett was quite reluctant to take on this responsibility. In her autobiography, she states emphatically: "I objected very strongly because I had been accused by some of our men of jumping in head of them and doing work without giving them a chance" (Crusade 311).

Later that evening after she had put her baby to bed, she fell asleep. Her 12 year old son, Charles, came into the room to wake her. He spoke to his mother, referring to her reluctance to go to Cairo to investigate the James case, saying: "Mother, if you don’t go nobody else will" (Crusade 311). Wells-Barnett was apparently moved by her child’s statement. She recalled: "I looked at my child standing there by the bed reminding me of my duty, and I thought of that passage of scripture which tells of wisdom from the mouths of babes and sucklings. I thought if my child wanted me to go that I ought not fall by the wayside" (Crusade 312). Accepting this responsibility as her duty, Wells-Barnett left for Cairo the next morning to conduct the investigation.

Here in this instance, Wells-Barnett expressed in her own words that she viewed her investigation and publicizing of injustices suffered by Blacks as "her duty." Who would have assigned her this "duty"? Who would have given her this dangerous and risky responsibility? I believe that she felt God had given her this responsibility.
Another very telling situation occurred when Wells-Barnett was offered money by Mr. Slayton, the head of the Slayton Lyceum Bureau. He offered to pay her to stop speaking about the lynching of Blacks. She stated:

I told him that there was no other excuse for my being before the public except to tell about the outrages upon my people; that I regarded myself as an instrument that had been chosen to do this and that I could not accept his offer.

I felt that having been dedicated to the cause it would be sacrilegious to turn aside in a money-making effort for myself. (Crusade 227)

Wells-Barnett, in this situation, reveals that she saw herself as “an instrument that had been chosen” to crusade against the lynching of Blacks. She felt that her cessation of speaking about lynching would become a money-making effort for herself, and that that in itself would be “sacrilegious.” The implication here is that she saw her speaking as a religious undertaking.

It is apparent to me that early in Wells-Barnett’s life God was sparing her for this special duty and responsibility. For example, Wells just happened to be down on the farm visiting her grandmother when the yellow fever epidemic struck the town of Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1878. The fever killed her mother and father and her infant brother, Stanley (Crusade 10-12). By the time Wells-Barnett was allowed to return Holly Springs, the epidemic had apparently subsided. Wells-Barnett had been spared from contracting the yellow fever and subsequent death from the fever.

Divine intervention also appeared to be the case in 1892 when Wells-Barnett, a newspaper woman in Memphis, had been invited to attend the African Methodist Episcopal general conference in Philadelphia (Crusade 58). She had been delayed in Memphis that week because she was trying to write anti-lynching editorials for the Free Speech (a newspaper of which she was part owner).

After publishing the paper that week, Wells-Barnett left Memphis, traveling to Philadelphia to attend the conference. She would later learn that her editorials had infuriated many leading white Memphians. And she would be informed that” a committee of leading citizens had gone to the office of the Free Speech", run the business manager, J.L. Fleming, out of town, destroyed the type and furnishings of the office, and left a note saying that anyone trying to publish the paper would be punished by death” (Crusade 61-62). She would also discover that “a mob had planned as her punishment to take her to Court Square and tie her to a tree without clothing and whip her to death” (Memphis Diary 2). From my vantage point, I believe that God intervened and spared Wells-Barnett’s life by allowing her to be far away from Memphis when these” leading white citizens” arrived at her newspaper office.
Wells-Barnett’s missionary spirit of caring and self-sacrifice are evident in her feminist activism. She demonstrates a Black feminist concept, which Professor Stanlie James calls “othermothering.” In James’ article entitled “Mothering—A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation?” she identifies Wells-Barnett as an “other mother” and “community other mother” (48). James explains:

Other mothers can be defined as those who assist blood mothers in the responsibilities of child care for short-to-long term periods, in informal or formal arrangements. They can be, but are not confined to such blood relatives as grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins or supportive fictive kin. (45)

Wells-Barnett, at an early age, became the “other mother” for her five younger siblings following the deaths of her mother and father. She would not allow well-meaning community members and family friends to separate the family. At the age of 16, she dropped out of school, passed the teachers examination and began teaching in the rural school district of Holly Springs, Mississippi. She accepted the role of nurturing and financially supporting her younger brothers and sisters (Memphis Diary ix).

James further explains the concept of the “community other mother.” She states:

Based on her knowledge... a community other mother is... in a position to provide analyses and/or critiques of conditions or situations that may affect the well being of her community. Whenever necessary, she serves as a catalyst in the development and implementation of strategies designed to remedy these harmful conditions. (48)

It is obvious that Wells-Barnett’s social activism would make her the quintessential “community other mother” for the Black community of the United States. She investigated numerous cases of lynching of Black men, women, and children throughout the U.S. She uncovered hidden information about the cases, and exposed the wrongs and injustices suffered by Blacks to many audiences in the United States as well as in Great Britain. To remedy the lynching of Blacks, it was her plan to especially enlist the aid of the British “to exert moral force against the lynching evil” (Crusade 189).

Wells-Barnett in 1922 in another situation, emerged not only as a “community other mother” but also a kind of preacher. She traveled to Arkansas to investigate the case of twelve (12) Black farmers who had been jailed and sentenced to death for conspiracy to murder whites in order to confiscate their properties. Wells-Barnett would discover that the whites actually wanted to confiscate the property of these Black men, and that was the reason the Blacks had been falsely accused, jailed and sentenced to death (Crusade 403).
After the farmers relayed their stories to her, they prayed and sang songs, which to Wells-Barnett conveyed their hope in the hereafter. They didn’t express a hope of being freed from jail. After listening to their singing and praying, Wells-Barnett admonished them saying:

You have talked and sung and prayed about dying, and forgiving your enemies, and of feeling sure that you are going to be received in the New Jerusalem because your God knows that you are innocent of the offense for which you expect to be electrocuted. But why don’t you pray to live and ask to be freed? The God you serve is the God of Paul and Silas who opened their prison gates, and if you have all the faith you say you have, you ought to believe that he will open your prison doors too.

If you do believe that, let all of your songs and prayers hereafter be songs of faith and hope that God will set you free; that the judges who have to pass on your cases will be given the wisdom and courage to decide in your behalf. That is all I’ve got to say. Quit talking about dying; if you believe your God is all powerful, believe he is powerful enough to open these doors, and say so. Dying is the last thing you ought to even think about, much less talk about. Pray to live and believe you are going to get out. (Crusade 403)

After Wells-Barnett returned to Chicago and published the facts of this case, all 12 of the men were eventually freed (Crusade 404).

Wells-Barnett would also play the “community other mother” role when in 1910 she helped establish the Negro Fellowship League in Chicago, Illinois (Crusade 304). Wells-Barnett saw how many young Black men coming to Chicago easily got in trouble, and then they would find themselves locked in jail. To remedy this situation, she helped establish the Negro Fellowship League. The League provided a safe haven for young Black men coming to Chicago to find work. The League also provided sleeping quarters, a reading room, employment opportunities and Sunday worship services (Crusade 306).

In her efforts to establish the Negro Fellowship League, one can see her reliance upon a Biblical model for its structure and for its defense. When she was criticized for her inability to secure the support of leading Black citizens of Chicago to assist her with the organizing and operations of the Negro Fellowship League, she replied:

“Neither did Jesus Christ have any of the leading people with him in his day when he was trying to establish Christianity. If I remember correctly, his twelve disciples were made up of fisherman, tax collectors, publicans, and sinners. It was the leading people who refused to believe on him and finally crucified him” (Crusade 356).

She further informed her critic that like Jesus, she relied upon a number of people who held low status jobs -- “elevator man,” “redcap,” and “rag picker” (Crusade 358) -- to support the operation of the League.
Wells-Barnett, the Black feminist leader and social activist, was criticized by many Black leaders during her lifetime. The prefatory remarks to Thomas C. Holt’s article entitled: “The Lonely Warrior: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the Struggle for Black Leadership” state:

The feminist and anti-lynching spokeswoman, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, is one of the best representatives of the handful of prominent blacks who consistently espoused a strategy of protest during the ascendancy of Booker T. Washington. Yet the characteristics of her personality that gave her courage and independence to attack so vigorously the immorality of lynching at a time when a philosophy of accommodation was in the ascendancy also limited her ability to work with other Afro-Americans. Assertive and outspoken, intolerant of those whose positions contradicted her own, Wells-Barnett proved unable to participate effectively in other organizations, even those like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, that shared her basic philosophy” (Holt 39).

Given her beliefs about her duties and responsibilities, yes, Wells-Barnett would have had great difficulty working within the confines and constraints of highly structured organizations. She simply “marched to the beat of a different drummer.” She felt she had been called by God, and that he directed her Black feminist and social activist efforts. She was indeed, as the New York Times in 1894 sarcastically labeled her, a “mulatto missionary” (Crusade 218).

As one reads Wells-Barnett’s autobiography, one can not overlook the fact the she never completed the last sentence of the document. She stopped in mid sentence writing the word “go” (Crusade 419). I interpret the autobiography’s incompleteness as a challenge presented to its readers by the author. I believe she is encouraging her readers to take on the mantle of social activism and to “go” forward. For there are many social problems still to be dealt with that are confronting our communities today.
Bibliography


