

Preserving to Remember

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There are few things as dangerous as giving a historian a microphone and a captive audience and letting him stand between you and your dinner. So one of my tasks is to be smart, witty, and brief. I'd like to begin, as historians do, with a story. As I was working on this talk, I received a letter. It began, "Dear Radical Historian." Now, when a letter like that comes to Washington, D.C., you know it's not going to be good. The writer asked: "What happened to the Smithsonian I love, the place that celebrated the greatness of America? I am so sorry that your museum exists because you will explore things that are better left unspoken. You will talk about moments that are difficult, that we do not need to talk about. After all," he continued, "America's greatest strength is its ability to forget." He went on to suggest that he hoped the museum would disappear. I have to be honest: I was thrown off when he signed the letter with "best wishes for your continued success."

As I wrestled with my talk for today, I thought about that letter, and especially the comment that "America's greatest strength is its ability to forget." Then I thought about somebody who meant a lot to me: Mamie Till-Mobley. She was the mother of Emmett Till, the teenaged boy from Chicago who was brutally murdered in Mississippi in 1955.

Mrs. Till-Mobley was an amazing woman. She talked to me in painful detail about what happened, about her response, and about her desire to make sure that the world saw and understood what had happened to her baby boy. She told me, "As the years go by, sometimes I struggle to remember the story, and then I look for my touchstone. That touchstone is the picture of Emmett." Many of you have seen that photograph: a 14-year-old wearing a grin and, as she put it, an ugly tie. That photograph helped her to remember. Whenever she talked, she had that photograph nearby. During one of our conversations she said to me, "You know Lonnie, I wonder what will happen when I'm gone. I wonder who will remember." And then she said, "I really hope that institutions like yours will find a way to help people to remember."

As we talk about preservation issues, we are simply trying to find concrete ways to help us remember. I'll bet everyone in this room has felt the power of an object or an oral history to

move, to challenge, to help us to remember. The other day at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, we brought in a new object for our collection. It was an old, ratty table made of cheap wood. But this table was from a plantation in South Carolina, where it had been used by enslaved Africans. When you look at it, you know it was made to be disposable, not to last long. And yet it lasted so long that it has a rich history to tell. You can see indentations where people put their hands and their plates, and you can imagine the stories, the discussions, the despair, the concerns, the anger, the hope, the belief in a better day, that went around that table.

There are thousands of objects—some in your collections, many that you have yet to find—that can help us to remember. But the question really is, why is it so important to remember? The great American author James Baldwin wrote these essential words **[not in *The Fire Next Time*, but in an essay, “The White Man’s Guilt,” published in *Ebony* in 1965—it’s okay to leave out the details]**: “History . . . does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it, . . . and history is literally present in all that we do.” Baldwin’s wonderful words should remind us that a people, a nation, is shaped and continues to be shaped by its past. And some, like the writer of the letter, revel in forgetting.

Forgetting is dangerous. Forgetting is irresponsible. Think about what we often forget. We often forget how our diverse past—with struggles, with tragedy, with collaboration—shaped the nation that we are today. We forget the tragedy of the Trail of Tears and the resiliency of Native people to survive against all odds. We forget the ability that African Americans had to find joy and a sense of family from deep within the bowels of slavery. We forget the issues raised by the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. We forget what these moments in history tell us about the limits of the promise of American life. And much too frequently, we forget our ability to blur racial, ethnic, and gender lines to collaborate as we did during the Civil Rights Movement, a collaboration that made America better. So part of what is important as we wrestle with the question of preservation is to remember that we preserve so we can remember. We need the inspiration of the past to give us a reservoir to dip into to help us live our lives.

The importance of inspiration came home to me when I was on a trip to South Africa two weeks after Nelson Mandela was released from prison. He went to a town called Pietermaritzburg, where he was given the Freedom of the City, the South African version of the key to the city.

There were thousands of people in the square, and Mandela stood on the top of an old colonial red brick building. He spoke first in Zulu, then in Xhosa, then in N'debele, and finally in English. He said that in his 27 years in prison, what inspired him, what gave him confidence, what helped him to believe, was the African American experience. He talked powerfully about Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. And then he talked about Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Rosa Parks, and Fannie Lou Hamer. His words were deeply affecting, as I thought of the power that comes from the American past.

Who could not be moved by the oratory, the commitment to racial justice, and the ultimate sacrifice of Martin Luther King? Who could not be moved by the quiet determinism of John Lewis or César Chávez? We are all made better by embracing the lessons and the challenges of a diverse American culture. We are all made better when we dip into that reservoir that comes only when you remember. And I would suggest to you that as we wrestle, as Americans, with questions about who we are and what our core values are, we begin to understand notions of equality, resiliency, optimism, and spirituality. Where better to look than in a diverse past to understand the roots of those notions.

So, in essence, we preserve not just for preservation's sake, but to help us remember. I would argue that we face five challenges that limit our ability. The first challenge is the seduction of the hunt. Those of us who care about preservation get excited about finding things to preserve. We spend a lot of time creating initiatives that address how we save America's cultural patrimony. We often sweep in with the subtlety of a steam shovel, scooping up collections in order to preserve them. Yet that is not enough. We preserve, and yet we sometimes neglect. I work at the Smithsonian Institution, a place that has preserved millions of artifacts. But often we don't know what we have.

Here's an example: I wanted to do a major exhibition on slavery. I looked through all the Smithsonian's holdings, and the attic was pretty bare. Finally somebody said, "But we do have a pair of slave shackles." So I ran to that storage area, looked at those shackles, and noticed something was wrong. The research had given them a date of 1852. But when I did my research, it turned out they weren't slave shackles. They were handcuffs from the Boston Police Department from 1888.

We need to recognize that in our desire to preserve, research and scholarship are an essential part of the equation. I would estimate that at the Smithsonian, only 30 percent of those millions of objects have effective scholarship that explains and contextualizes. The other 70 percent will never benefit from the necessary scholarship. If we are going to be good stewards, we have to make sure that an intellectual component accompanies all our preservation efforts. Preservation without research is simply nostalgia—a missed opportunity to find a richer past, to discover something to help people live their lives today.

The second challenge is broadening our notions of what worthiness is. So much of the past is shaped by little-known moments, by intimate stories, by things that often we forget. We need to value ordinary objects for both their personal and their historical meaning. For me this point came home clearly early in my career. I was looking at some photographs in a woman's home. One of them was a late-19th-century portrait in an oval frame, and in the frame was a membership card from the NAACP dated 1913. She told me that I had to take the card if I wanted the photograph. She explained that the man in the picture, her grandfather, was an early member of the NAACP living in rural Tennessee. As soon as he got his membership card, he put it in the frame because he wanted everybody who entered his home to know that he was a member of the NAACP. That information transformed the story in ways that would not have happened without my interaction with the woman. Part of our challenge is to cast as broad a net as possible so that we find the stories that will make us rich—rich in meaning, rich in possibility, and rich in history.

The third challenge is providing systematic access to our collections. I have been amazed at the collections I found all over the country. I realize that often it's just a matter of luck, and yet the riches in many of your institutions are mind boggling. But many minds aren't boggled because we don't have a chance to know what's there. The key is to create a collaborative network that allows more systematic access to these wonderful holdings. In some ways preservation without effective access is just plain selfish, and a missed opportunity. As we ask what needs to be preserved or what's missing, without systematic access we can't know the answer.

The fourth challenge, and maybe the most interesting one, is embracing community and community memory in the process of preservation. We all talk about community-driven collections and working with communities. And yet often we don't invest the resources—staff time and money—to recognize that community-driven collecting requires a long-term, reciprocal

relationship, not one that ends in a year or two. I became a much better historian when I realized the richness that came from marrying my academic training with community memory. We need to find more ways to be *of* the community and *shaped by* the community.

Let me tell you about Save Our African American Treasures: A National Collections Initiative of Discovery and Preservation, a program of the National Museum of African American History and Culture that is supported generously by Bank of America. Unlike many museums, ours did not have “stuff” when it was created. Much of the cultural patrimony of black America is at risk today because it is still in people’s basements and attics. What will happen to all this material? We wanted not only to begin saving it, but also to make sure that when we went into a community, most of the material we discovered was preserved either in people’s homes or in local museums. This regional collections initiative is less about what the Smithsonian *collects* and more about what the Smithsonian *preserves*.

We have discovered some amazing material. A woman in Chicago brought us a World War II-era Marine Corps uniform belonging to her father, one of the first 50 black Americans in the Marine Corps. It was a wonderful opportunity to help the family preserve it in their home. Someone else brought 75 letters written by the great heavyweight champion Jack Johnson while he was in prison, talking passionately about the injustices he had faced but felt he could overcome—and we all know he didn’t. These letters were so important that we suggested that they go to the DuSable Museum of African American History so they would stay in Chicago. Another woman told us she had a Pullman porter’s cap that had belonged to a relative, but she believed it wasn’t that rare. As I looked at it, I realized that it was in fact the rarest of the rare: a white cap, one of only about 500 made throughout the entire history of the Pullman porters, and it had the original metal tag on it. The woman shared some stories about family members who had been Pullman porters. Our initiative is an opportunity to think about how we preserve, collect, and share stories, but most important, how we empower the public to remember. Ultimately, that’s one of the greatest gifts we can give.

The fifth challenge that all of our institutions face is to re-center the diverse experiences that are reflected in our collections. Even in culturally specific museums, often our holdings are treated as important but ancillary to the central narrative of America. We need to reframe that view, because so many transformative moments are a result of what happened with this diverse populace. Race and ethnicity are the central stories of the American experience. We can craft

opportunities for the public to see that these stories are not ancillary. We can use the objects of America's past to stimulate memory.

The past is a wonderful but unforgiving mirror—a mirror that reminds us of this nation's ideals and promises. It is a mirror that makes visible those who are often overlooked. It is a mirror that gives voice to the anonymous. It is a mirror that challenges us all to make our communities and our country better. That's what remembering can do—not remembering out of nostalgia, or remembering simply because we're seeing neat stuff, but remembering that helps us make America better. Through that remembering we hold America accountable to its promises and its ideals. Through that remembering we honor people like Mamie Till-Mobley who lived their lives not crushed by tragedy but inspired to help us all understand what that tragedy meant and how it could change America.

I am honored to be with you tonight as a small part of this conversation, because this challenge of remembering is so great. There are few things as powerful as a nation steeped in its history. And there are fewer things more noble than honoring all our ancestors by remembering.

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