

W.E.B. DuBois: Letter to a Black Schoolgirl, 1905

Background: DuBois received a letter from a teacher concerned that one of her very bright students was not applying her best efforts to education. The girl protested that studying was a waste of time because, as a black woman, she would have few opportunities to use her knowledge. His reply is excerpted below.

I wonder if you will let a stranger say a word to you about yourself? I have heard that you are a young woman of some ability but that you are neglecting your schoolwork because you have become hopeless of trying to do anything in the world. I am very sorry for this. How any human being whose wonderful fortune it is to live in the 20th century should under ordinarily fair advantages despair of life is almost unbelievable. And if in addition to this that person is, as I am, of Negro lineage with all the hopes and yearnings of hundreds of millions of human souls dependent in some degree on her striving, then her bitterness amounts to a crime.

There are in the United States today tens of thousands of colored girls who would be happy

beyond measure to have the chance of educating themselves that you are neglecting. If you train yourself as you easily can, there are wonderful chances of usefulness before you: You can join the ranks of 15,000 Negro women teachers, of hundreds of nurses and physicians, of the growing number of clerks and stenographers, and above all the host of homemakers. Ignorance is a cure for nothing. Get the very best training possible and the doors of opportunity will fly open before you as they are flying before thousands of your fellows. On the other hand every time a colored person neglects an opportunity, it makes it more difficult for others of the race to get such an opportunity. Do you want to cut off the chances of the boys and girls of tomorrow?

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Compare the Talented Tenth address to this letter. How, if at all, does DuBois's advice differ in the two documents?
2. What virtues and principles of constitutional government are addressed or implied in the document?
3. With what passages do you most agree? Disagree? Be prepared to explain your reactions to the document.