

Introduction & Preparation: *Up from Slavery* Booker T. Washington

This text by Booker T. Washington offers the group the opportunity to discuss what it means to have an identity and how family and our own history shape who we become. When we consider our ability to reach out to other people or communities to lend our service, what role does our identity play? When we have a place in a longer history and tradition, what does it do for us? How do people whose identities have been lost through enslavement, displacement, war, or other tragic circumstance build a new identity for themselves?

In this passage, Booker T. Washington tells us the story of how he got his name. It begins during a roll call at school when he hears other students being called by two names. He makes a decision that “Booker,” being only one name, is not good enough. So he chooses a second name for himself: Washington. Later in life, he discovers that his mother had given him the second name, “Taliaferro.” So he becomes “Booker Taliaferro Washington.” What is in a name? What does Booker’s name mean to him, and why did part of his name “disappear?” The author reveals that his missing past and the need for an identity had a significant impact on who he became. He tells of how he fantasized about having “an honored and distinguished ancestry which I could trace back through a period of hundreds of years.” Washington explores what it means to be without such advantages. In the end, he decides that there are advantages and disadvantages to having a history. But, for Washington, his lack of ancestry served as a powerful motivator for him to “leave a record of which my children would be proud, and which might encourage them to still greater effort.”

As you move into a discussion about this passage, encourage the group to consider how our past often shapes our view of ourselves. Do our histories influence our character and our actions? Does the presence or absence of history motivate us, as they did Washington? Or do they limit us to a rigid set of expectations? Guide the group to think about how the awareness of one’s past may help a person to understand her present self. Participants can consider how the examples of their family members or stories they have heard about their grandparents have made them respond to things that happen in their own lives. How much of what we inherit—the genes, the customs, the traditions—do we recognize as reflections of the past? Do we inherit the bad with the good? Is Washington a model for us on how to build an identity that is completely our own?

Understanding our past can also help us understand other people. How might the knowledge of someone’s history allow us to better understand that person? When does knowing about a person’s past keep us from knowing that person? With the group, explore the different ways that people teach themselves and form their identities. What role does awareness play in our own education and in the formation of our identity? In community service, we may encounter people who are rebuilding their identities. What do we need to do as volunteers to respect and support the personal journeys of those around us?

Possible Questions to Raise

- What would be the benefit of naming yourself?
- Why do people care about where they came from?
- How great is the effect that your past has in your daily life?
- Do communities often share a common past?
- Is it harder to learn from yourself than from others?
- How does knowing about our past change the way people understand us?

Up from Slavery
Booker T. Washington

From the time when I could remember anything, I had been called simply “Booker.” Before going to school it had never occurred to me that it was needful or appropriate to have an additional name. However, when I heard the school-roll called, I noticed that all of the children had at least two names, and some of them indulged in what seemed to me the extravagance of having three. I was confused because I knew that the teacher would demand of me at least two names, and I had only one. By the time the occasion came for declaring my name, an idea occurred to me which I thought would solve this situation.

When the teacher asked me what my full name was, I calmly told him “Booker Washington,” as if I had been called by that name all my life; and by that name I have since been known. Later in life I found that my mother had given me the name of “Booker Taliaferro” soon after I was born, but somehow that part of my name seemed to disappear, and for a long while was forgotten. But as soon as I found out about it, I revived it and made my full name “Booker Taliaferro Washington.” I think there are not many men in our country who have had the privilege of naming themselves in the way that I have.

More than once I had tried to picture myself in the position of a boy or man with an honored and distinguished ancestry which I could trace back through a period of hundreds of years, and who had not only inherited a name, but also a fortune and a proud family home. And yet, I have sometimes had the feeling that if I had inherited these and had been a member of a more popular race, I should have been inclined to yield to the temptation of depending upon my ancestry and my color to do for me that which I should do for myself. Years ago I resolved that because I had no ancestry that anyone knew of, I would leave a record of which my children would be proud, and which might encourage them to still greater effort.

The influence of ancestry is important in helping any individual or race move forward, as long as not too much reliance is placed upon it. The very fact that a boy is conscious that, if he fails in life, he will disgrace the whole family record—extending back through many generations—is of tremendous value in helping him to resist temptations. The fact that the individual has behind him and surrounding him a proud family history and connections, serves as a stimulus to help him overcome obstacles when striving for success.