The Other Wes Moore, by Wes Moore

The Other Wes Moore is much more than “the story of two boys living in Baltimore with similar histories and an identical name,” one free and successful and the other spending the rest of his life behind bars. It is a story about convergences and divergences of all sorts. A story of strangers meeting and becoming friends, neighbors, adversaries, and lovers. Of grownups and children whose paths converge and diverge in an endless and complex cycle of human relationships. Concentric circles created, broken, renewed. Of potential dilapidated. The story of fatherless children bringing fatherless children into the world. Of mothers with varying degrees of competence and ability who stay behind to put the broken families back together again. Of youth, hitchhikers adrift on the ocean of indifference, picked up by navigators with faulty compasses, leading them to certain doom. Yet it is also the story of the few lucky enough to be redeemed from the muck!

It is the story of race, class, and how simple human decisions and government policies can forever change the trajectory of a life, and many more. Of the “collapse of the American inner city” and crushing poverty and the instability and precariousness they engender in the lives of Black Americans. It is a treatise on the American dream; a dream fulfilled for some while for others, it is deferred and deferred until it is no longer viable.

In short, The Other Wes Moore is a story about people and places in the American polity, and how they interact and affect one another to produce the dynamic, intertwined histories that define what it means to be American. This is a story as intensely human and empathetic as has been written by masters of the craft in the American story-telling project. So, in so many ways, this is a quintessential American story, a story as tragic as it is uplifting.

Wes Moore convinces us of what America gets right. He also makes clear something is fundamentally wrong with a society in which one becomes a breadwinner at childhood, a parent while a teenager, and a grandparent even before one has exited young adulthood. A society that takes money away from education to put into prisons. And until we willingly and honestly begin to engage what Moore calls the “preexisting conditions” grounded in systemic inequities and incompetence, we are all depleted.

The memoir does not provide an absolute answer to the fundamental question it poses and interrogates. Why does one Wes Moore succeed where the other fails despite the indubitable evidence of their similar intelligence, potential, and desire to be something better? What role does their socio-economic and physical environment play in their outcomes? A good story does not give pre-packaged answers to life’s conundrums; it
merely invites us to reflect on them and locate our own answers. Yet, Wes Moore’s memoir is not without a conclusion.

In a study abroad trip to South Africa, Wes Moore discovered the African humanistic concept of *ubuntu*. A world-view based on human dignity, ubuntu finds its value in the recognition of our shared humanity, that a person is a person only through others. This philosophy helped South Africa navigate the minefields of the post-Apartheid dispensation. Since, according to Moore, “even the worst decisions we make don’t necessarily remove us from the circle of humanity,” we must do all we can, like the good shepherd, to bring the lost sheep back into the fold.

The book is therefore a call to action that should jolt all who read it out of our indifference or apathy.

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