

# Monifa Edwards

## A Devotional on Finishing the Job

NPR's *Code Switch* podcast recently featured a powerful two part series from School Colors, a podcast about how race, class and power shape American cities and schools. Featured on the podcast was 64 year-old Monifa Edwards. She was asked to read aloud, for only the second time in her life, the speech she gave at age fourteen. This speech was delivered when she graduated as valedictorian of Junior High School 271 in Brooklyn, NY. Here is an excerpt: [aesop\_quote type="pull" background="#5283ff" text="#ffffff" align="left" size="1" quote="Our ancestors were brutally forced to an unknown land to be enslaved and looked down upon as animals by the white man. They were separated from their tribes and unable to speak to their own people because of language barriers. Forced to speak the language of their oppressors, they have since that time been struggling from what was considered the lowest of worldly creatures, slaves in bondage, to achieve a respected place in the world. Today, black people are still technically in bondage...We students have a responsibility to our people. We are the might and the strength of our race. We of young blood set the pace. We are the hopes, the dreams, the future that must be fulfilled." parallax="off" direction="left" revealfx="off"]

The community that gave birth to such a gifted young lady is a story well worth learning. However, it is the final sentences of her speech and her reflection on it 50 years later that I believe calls to us all. She writes, [aesop\_quote type="pull" background="#4379f2" text="#ffffff" align="left" size="1" quote="Black and Puerto Rican students must go on to high school and finish, go to college and finish and come back to our communities and finish the job that has been left unfinished for over 400 years. Be black, be beautiful, be brilliant and be yourself." parallax="off" direction="left" revealfx="off"]

When the podcast interviewer asked her how she felt reading her speech 50 years later, she replied, "It feels very odd. I hear a lot of this being said again today. It's like certain things were not resolved in all these years. As I read it now, it seems youthful, naive, optimistic. And I thought that by now, that work would be done..." Fourteen year-old Monifa told her classmates they must "finish the job." 64 year-old Monifa thought "that the work would be done."

## Nehemiah Finished the Job

Nehemiah had a similar concern. While he was in Persia serving as the King's cupbearer, Nehemiah learned that his people, who had survived years of exile, were in Jerusalem living in the physical and psychological destruction their oppressors created. It weighed so heavily on him that King Artaxerxes noticed and discerned that Nehemiah was suffering from "sorrow of the heart." When asked what was wrong, Nehemiah replied, "...How can I not be sad? For the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins, and the gates have been destroyed by fire" (Nehemiah 2:3). Bravely, Nehemiah asks and receives permission and provision from the King to return to Jerusalem to attend to his people and repair what was broken. Nehemiah finished the job amidst threats and attempts

of sabotage by those who were displeased that “someone had come to seek the welfare of the Israelites” (Nehemiah 2:10).

## Barriers to Finishing the Job

Many of us know his experience all too well. There are those who are displeased that we seek out the welfare of our own people. The blatant opposition of those from outside of our community is alive and well, yet so many of us continue working unashamedly on behalf of our people! Sadly, at the same time, there is even reluctance from among us to intervene and advocate for rebuilding our ruins. The truth is, there are many reasons why people fail to get involved civically (i.e. voting), interpersonally (i.e. mentoring), or socially (i.e. strategic advocacy) on behalf of their own people (too many reasons to outline, but many of them rooted in religious legalism, colonized mindsets and internalized racism). But there is something that should bring us hope and assure us that the job will be finished. This hope is rooted in what I call The Mordecai Theory.

## The Mordecai Theory

The book of Esther tells of how Haman influenced King Ahasuerus to authorize the genocide of the Jews living under his rule. When Queen Esther, a Jew herself, was asked by her cousin Mordecai to plead with the king on their behalf, her response was one of reluctance because there was a chance she could be killed for approaching the king uninvited – for challenging the status quo, for speaking truth to power. After she expressed her reluctance, Mordecai gave Esther a blunt response (Esther 4:12-14), which she took to heart and which offers relevant commentary for us today.

The Mordecai Theory is as such:

- 1) You are not the exception. You are not exempt from oppression, no matter your status.
- 2) Your reluctance to be involved in the cause will not stop the cause from succeeding.
- 3) Your wellbeing is connected to the wellbeing of the community.
- 4) You are called to a specific work and the community needs you to carry it out.

Whether you are resolved like Nehemiah or reluctant like Esther, you are still called to finish the job that our people began. Not just the job of demanding the righting of the wrongs against us, but also the job of living fully in your God given purpose through whatever passion, giftedness, and skill He has given to you. Study Micah 6:8, Ephesians 2:10, Isaiah 58 and pray for guidance. When Yeshua Ha Mashiach returns, may he greet you with “Well Done” for finishing your part of the job.