

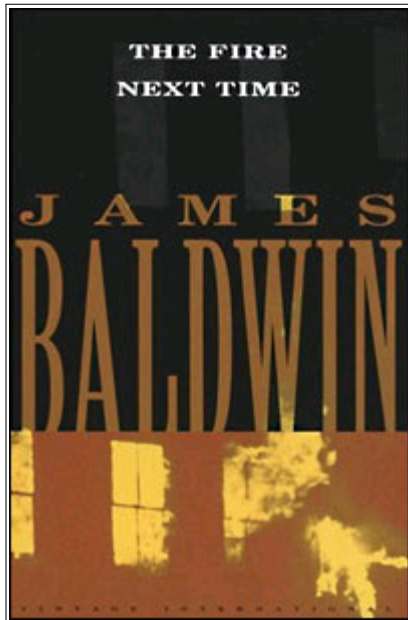


September 6, 2007

You Must Read This

By Eboo Patel

An Author's Companion in Rage, Exile and Return



"I was convinced that the very soil of this country rejected people of my Indian ethnicity and my Muslim faith. So, like Baldwin, I left. ... And I took along his essays for commiseration. I wanted a companion in exile."

All Things Considered, September 4, 2007 · I started reading James Baldwin's essays because he gave voice to my rage. The rage of growing up other in America. Of trying to scratch the darkness out of my skin. Of wanting my father's name to be Sam, not Sadruddin.

I was convinced that the very soil of this country rejected people of my Indian ethnicity and my Muslim faith. So, like Baldwin, I left. He to France, me to India. And I took along his essays for commiseration. I wanted a companion in exile.

But when I read his work more carefully in India, I found myself squirming with discomfort. Accused of stealing bed sheets from a hotel in Paris, Baldwin was thrown in a French jail, where he could neither plead with the police officers, nor demand his due-process rights. Those were American values that were disregarded in France.

Baldwin allowed me to admit that my own Americanness was coming to the surface in India. I made small talk with the waiter, surprising my Indian friends, who thought such people were below them. I might have felt marginalized in America, but two days in India was all I needed to realize that there was no magical place called home on the other side of the world.

Many essayists are like lawyers — they tell stories to support their case. They repeat their argument over and over. Baldwin does the opposite. He is a master of the sublime surprise. Baldwin's long, languid sentences charm you into a familiar world, but as soon as you get comfortable, Baldwin offers a sharply unexpected insight.

In a letter to his nephew on the 100th anniversary of emancipation, Baldwin notes somewhat bitterly that racism is still alive and well in America, and the celebration is happening 100 years too soon. But he also says that one key to ending racism is for black people to learn to accept white people, and "to accept them with love ... (because) they are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand."

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin builds on this thought and writes that black people and white people "deeply need each other," and together, "we may be able ... to achieve our country, and change the history of the world."

Read an Excerpt

['The Fire Next Time'](#)



Eileen Ryan

Eboo Patel is the executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core and the author of *Acts of Faith*. He keeps a list of the things he loves about America, besides James Baldwin; it includes the Grateful Dead, Peet's Coffee and Notre Dame football.

The startling insights in Baldwin's writing helped me see both my own experience, and my country's possibilities, in a different light.

I still have strong opinions, but before I swell up with self-righteous rage, I try to remind myself that writing is about following questions, not pounding home answers. As Baldwin said, "it is part of the business of the writer ... to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source."

During a time in my life when I was reaching for a hammer, Baldwin showed me what it meant to use a pen.

[You Must Read This](#) is produced and edited by Ellen Silva.

More on Eboo Patel

Hear an interview with Patel and read an excerpt from his book *Acts of Faith*:

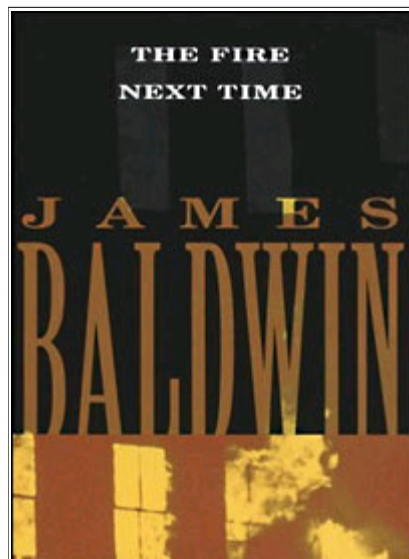
- [Walking the Faith Line with Eboo Patel](#)

Read Patel's essay for 'This I Believe':

- [We Are Each Other's Business](#)

Excerpt: 'The Fire Next Time'

by James Baldwin



My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation

Dear James:

I have begun this letter five times and torn it up five times. I keep seeing your face, which

is also the face of your father and my brother. Like him, you are
————— tough, dark, vulnerable,
moody — with a very definite
tendency to sound truculent because you want no one to think
you are soft. You may be like your grandfather in this, I don't
know, but certainly both you and your father resemble him very
much physically. Well, he is dead, he never saw you, and he had a
terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the
bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said
about him. This is one of the reasons that he became so holy. I
am sure that your father has told you something about all that.
Neither you nor your father exhibit any tendency towards
holiness: you really *are* of another era, part of what happened
when the Negro left the land and came into what the late E.
Franklin Frazier called "the cities of destruction." You can only
be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white
world calls a *nigger*. I tell you this because I love you, and please
don't you ever forget it.

I have known both of you all your lives, have carried your Daddy
in my arms and on my shoulders, kissed and spanked him and
watched him learn to walk. I don't know if you've known
anybody from that far back; if you've loved anybody that long,
first as an infant, then as a child, then as a man, you gain a
strange perspective on time and human pain and effort. Other
people cannot see what I see whenever I look into your father's
face, for behind your father's face as it is today are all those other
faces which were his. Let him laugh and I see a cellar your father
does not remember and a house he does not remember and I
hear in his present laughter his laughter as a child. Let him curse
and I remember him falling down the cellar steps, and howling,
and I remember, with pain, his tears, which my hand or your
grandmother's so easily wiped away. But no one's hand can wipe
away those tears he sheds invisibly today, which one hears in his
laughter and in his speech and in his songs. I know what the
world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived
it. And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of
which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which
neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they
have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives
and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be,
indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical
concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of
mankind has been best at since we have heard of man. (But

remember: *most* of mankind is not *all* of mankind.) But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.

Now, my dear namesake, these innocent and well-meaning people, your countrymen, have caused you to be born under conditions not very far removed from those described for us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago. (I hear the chorus of the innocents screaming, "No! This is not true! How *bitter* you are!" — but I am writing this letter to *you*, to try to tell you something about how to handle them, for most of them do not yet really know that you exist. I *know* the conditions under which you were born, for I was there. Your countrymen were *not* there, and haven't made it yet. Your grandmother was also there, and no one has ever accused her of being bitter. I suggest that the innocents check with her. She isn't hard to find. Your countrymen don't know that *she* exists, either, though she has been working for them all their lives.)

Well, you were born, here you came, something like fifteen years ago; and though your father and mother and grandmother, looking about the streets through which they were carrying you, staring at the walls into which they brought you, had every reason to be heavyhearted, yet they were not. For here you were, Big James, named for me — you were a big baby, I was not — here you were: to be loved. To be loved, baby, hard, at once, and forever, to strengthen you against the loveless world. Remember that: I know how black it looks today, for you. It looked bad that day, too, yes, we were trembling. We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children's children.

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that, for the heart of the matter is here, and the root of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. Wherever you have turned, James, in

your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do (and *how* you could do it) and where you could live and whom you could marry. I know your countrymen do not agree with me about this, and I hear them saying, "You exaggerate." They do not know Harlem, and I do. So do you. Take no one's word for anything, including mine-but trust your experience. Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go. The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear. Please try to be clear, dear James, through the storm which rages about your youthful head today, about the reality which lies behind the words *acceptance* and *integration*. There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.

You, don't be afraid. I said that it was intended that you should perish in the ghetto, perish by never being allowed to go behind the white man's definitions, by never being allowed to spell your proper name. You have, and many of us have, defeated this intention; and, by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe

are losing their grasp of reality. But these men are your brothers-your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become. It will be hard, James, but you come from sturdy, peasant stock, men who picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads, and, in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity. You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said, *The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.*

You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free. God bless you, James, and Godspeed.

Your uncle,

James

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