

Discussion Questions for
W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

1. Of Our Spiritual Strivings**

What are the “spiritual strivings” of the title?

What is the “Negro Problem”? How is it a test of American principles?

According to DuBois, what does it mean to experience “two-ness”? Have you experienced anything similar? Could one say that Christians are called to a kind of “two-ness” in relation to the world?

2. Of the Dawn of Freedom

At the beginning and the end of this essay, DuBois claims “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” What does he mean? How did the history of the period of the Freedman’s Bureau shape “the problem”? Do you agree with Dubois’ assessment of the 20th century? How about the twenty-first century?

3. Of Booker T. Washington and Others

DuBois criticizes Washington for downplaying the importance of the vote for Black people. Is this concern relevant today?

4. Of the Meaning of Progress

DuBois partly celebrates and partly laments the “progress” he describes. What is gained and what is lost?

5. Of the Wings of Atalanta

DuBois worries that the dream of material prosperity could become the touchstone of all success, replacing truth, beauty, and goodness with wealth as the great ideal. What might he say about this today?

What role does the university play in articulating and defending ideals? Is this role necessarily elitist?

6. Of the Training of Black Men

DuBois claims that “the present social separation and acute race-sensitiveness must eventually yield to the influences of culture, as the South [and the nation] grows civilized.” Do you agree? If so, where are we in this process?

7. Of the Black Belt

This essay is a kind of case study that seems less relevant to western Massachusetts than other essays.

8. Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece

This essay describes an economic, cultural, and racialized system that discourages sexual morality and economic uplift. Are there ways that our current systems work against our stated values?

9. Of the Sons of Master and Man

DuBois opens this chapter on race relations in America with a brief meditation on colonialism: “the characteristic of our age is the contact of European civilization with the world’s undeveloped peoples.... War, murder, slavery, extermination, and debauchery,—this has again and again been the result of carrying civilization and the blessed gospel to the isles of the sea and the heathen without the law.” That sets up his analysis of the color line in the United States as it applies to physical proximity, economic relations, political relations, and intellectual contact. Does he offer any signs of hope? To the degree his analysis remains relevant, are there signs of hope today?

10. Of the Faith of the Fathers

DuBois describes the emergence and evolution of the Black Church, including what he calls its characteristic manifestations: the preacher, the music, and the frenzy. He concludes by expressing the hope for a new religious ideal of Liberty, Justice, and Right. Is that the ideal of Churches—Black or White—today? Should it be?

11. Of the Passing of the First-Born

In this most personal essay, DuBois describes the death of his first child as an “escape” since the child never had to experience the “Veil.” Throughout the book, DuBois speaks often of this Veil. What does he mean by it?

12. Of Alexander Crummell**

This essay is DuBois’ homage to one of ours—Alexander Crummell, an Episcopal priest ordained in the Diocese of Massachusetts (before Western Massachusetts separated) and commemorated in our calendar on September 10. Unfortunately the Episcopal Church did not know how to use Crummell’s gifts very effectively during his lifetime. DuBois describes Crummell’s struggle against Hate, Despair, Doubt, and Humiliation. What lessons can we as a Church learn from Crummell’s story?

13. Of the Coming of John

This tragic story is about the cost that young Black men pay when they seek education and justice. What light does it shed on contemporary events?

14. The Sorrow Songs**

DuBois calls the “sorrow songs” “the articulate message of the slave to the world.” What is the message of these songs?