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On the eve of Negro History Week in 1938, Carter G. Woodson was lecturing all who would listen about the proper way to celebrate. His stern, sharply-worded message, read now at the start of the 2020 Black History Month, seems like a gift — a study guide — for future generations.

“One of the important things to be done during Negro History Week, beginning on February 6, is to take an inventory of what we have achieved,” Woodson wrote in a newspaper column published in the Norfolk (Virginia) Journal and Guide and other newspapers. “From the past we must learn and with it we must face the future. Not to learn by experience means always to remain a child.”

Woodson, who is credited with creating Negro History Week in 1926 and laying the foundations for its expansion to Black History Month in 1976, demanded that the public emphasize improving education as well as celebrating the role of blacks in history. He also insisted that participants evaluate black progress on a variety of issues, offering several questions to ascertain success.

He asked whether African Americans were better off since emancipation, questioning whether legal restrictions and dire economic conditions under which many were living in 1938 meant they were free. He questioned whether the black church was a better spiritual force than it had been in 1900, wondered whether teachers and students “manifest the same zeal in their work” as previous generations and asked whether black business owners were better entrepreneurs than their predecessors.

Of black writers, he asked whether they had developed a literature that expressed black thought and not just what publishers wanted for commercial purposes.

Unequivocally, in 1937, Woodson proclaimed the black press was “the most significant development of the race during the last generation.” He argued the black news organizations had achieved success by supporting their communities, and their continued commitment should be the standard for measuring their progress.

From the beginning, Woodson, a former West Virginia coal miner and Huntington school principal, spoke often to Black America and others just before the start of Negro History Week. In 1927, writing in the *Journal of Negro History*, he proposed an inclusive history of the world and argued against a separate history for blacks. He wrote:

“We should emphasize not Negro History, but the Negro in history. What we need is not a history of selected races or nations, but the history of the world void of national bias, race hate, and religious prejudice. There should be no indulgence in undue eulogy of the Negro. The case of the Negro is well taken care of when it is shown how he has influenced the development of civilization.”

Woodson was a powerful force in black culture and education during the first half of the 20th century, becoming the “Father of Black History.” His credentials were impressive: He traveled the world, was fluent in Spanish and French, received a doctorate in history at Harvard and taught in the District of Columbia for 10 years. He also founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (now African American Life and History) and led the Black History Movement, to restore black people to their rightful place in history.

Black contributions over time had been denied and/or diminished, and Woodson believed blacks had been headed toward extinction without sufficient education and knowledge of their past. He developed an education program that included Negro History Week to reverse the trend.

Woodson had specific guidelines for teachers and students celebrating black history. In a 1937 Norfolk Journal and Guide newspaper column, he enumerated what schools and colleges should do to recognize some outstanding achievement each day.

Woodson wrote: “On the first day, for example, the assembly period may be given to exercises based on the Negroes in Africa; the second, the Negro in the making of this nation; the third, the Negro in inventions; the fourth, the Negro in fine arts; and the fifth, the Negro in things social and economic.”

Woodson’s ideas are more than a blueprint for observing Negro History Week. They also serve as ideals for 2020 and beyond. Woodson was a perfectionist, and it may be impossible to replicate his program precisely as he prescribed. However, 2020 events with educational components, inspired by Woodson, will serve audiences well. Please visit www.marshall.edu/woodsonlyceum for The Woodson Lyceum’s black history events.

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