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## **It's Not About American Football: Tony Dungy's Journey of Self-Emancipation from Rejected Black Quarterback to Celebrated African American Coach**

### **No se trata de fútbol americano: la emancipación de Tony Dungy, de marginado *quarterback* negro a célebre entrenador afro-americano**

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#### **Abstract**

The ideals of individual freedom and universal equality contrast with the persistence of oppression and inequality worldwide, making every case study of practical progress toward freedom and equality valuable. The example of Coach Tony Dungy, the first African American to lead a Super Bowl championship team, is an instance of incremental self-emancipation. Dungy's competitive nature shows up in everything he writes and says, but his emphasis on commitment to self-improvement and community-building illustrates the possibilities of individual and collective progress. Dungy's narrative, seen in the context of Jacques Ranciere's theoretical approach, is an instructive example of "intellectual equality." Ranciere insists that we are all intellectual equals, and Dungy's autobiographical writing exemplifies a pragmatic application of this attitude, which also suggests a theoretical and practical approach to the development of community through a process of dedicated self-emancipation.

**Keywords:** Tony Dungy; community; individual; intellectual equality; self-emancipation; third thing.

#### **Resumen**

Los ideales de la libertad individual e igualdad universal contrastan con la persistencia de la opresión y desigualdad mundial, y por lo tanto cada estudio hacia la libertad y la igualdad se hace valioso. El ejemplo del entrenador de fútbol americano Tony Dungy, el primer afroamericano en entrenar un equipo que ganó la Super Bowl, es un ejemplo de auto-emancipación gradual. La naturaleza competitiva de Dungy está presente en todo lo que él escribe y dice, pero el énfasis otorgada a su compromiso con la autosuperación y la creación de comunidad

ilustran las posibilidades del progreso tanto a nivel individual como colectivo. La narrativa de Dungy, vista en el contexto del enfoque teórico de Jacques Ranciere, es un ejemplo didáctico de "igualdad intelectual." Ranciere insiste en que todos poseemos igualdad de intelecto y la escritura autobiográfica de Dungy ejemplifica una aplicación pragmática de esta actitud, la cual sugiere un enfoque teórico y práctico al desarrollo de una comunidad a través de un proceso de auto-emancipación dedicada.

**Palabras clave:** Tony Dungy; Comunidad; Individuo; Igualdad de intelecto; Auto-emancipación; Tercera cosa.

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**Sumario:** 1. Introduction. 2. Dungy and Religion. 3. Dungy and Race. 4. Emancipation. 5. Dungy's "Quiet Strength". 6. Conclusion. 7. Bibliography.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A surprise bestseller by an unassuming man thrust into the American sports spotlight by his team's Super Bowl victory in 2007 is the occasion for a consideration of something "more than football." In fact, Coach Tony Dungy's memoir is explicitly about "the world we can change for the better" (Dungy, 2007: xv). With friend and Harvard Law School graduate Nathan Whittaker's help, Dungy writes early on, "The point of this book is not the Super Bowl. In fact, it's not football" (Dungy, 2007: xiv). More than anything else, this autobiographical document is about incremental self-emancipation in a country associated with both the ideal of personal freedom and with a vexed history of slavery, oppression, persecution, discrimination, prejudice, and ongoing bias. At this writing, 150 years after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the United States continues to confront racial and egalitarian challenges, as evidenced by legal processes from the criminal courts to The Supreme Court, and in popular culture from issues involving name-calling celebrities and athletes to subjects in cinema.

Dungy's memoir helped to reinvigorate the constructive discussion of race and power in professional sport in the United States, and did it by presenting a positive story of an exemplary person and citizen. Using his religious faith as a buffer, Dungy indirectly addresses issues of civil rights and social justice through the medium of American professional football, with dozens of examples from his own life to show the details of sometimes very subtle discrimination. When the Indianapolis Colts won the 2007 Super Bowl, it was not just about football, and it was not even just about the first African American coach to lead a team to a Super Bowl victory:

according to Coach Dungy, it was about religion, family, character, community, and purpose in life. It was also about what Dungy said he could do to “level the playing field for everyone.” And, according to a view of the lingering history of the struggle for civil rights, it was about Selma, the origin of two signature marches in 1965. As a Spelman College professor of Dungy’s daughter said, referring to Dungy’s triumphant appearance on the Super Bowl podium, “This is why we marched...to see your dad standing up there” (Dungy, 2007: 292).

Jacques Ranciere’s celebration of fellow Frenchman Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840) has much to say about Dungy’s approach to life. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Ranciere writes, “What interests us is the exploration of the powers of any man when he judges himself equal to everyone else and judges everyone else equal to him” (Ranciere, 1991: 56). Dungy, the conservative African American sporting figure whose achievements made him an unlikely celebrity, and Ranciere, the radical French philosopher, differ on many things, but they agree that the world can be changed for the better. For the paperback edition of his bestselling “life,” *Quiet Strength*, Dungy added a new chapter, which culminates with this declaration:

Whether you are a friend to a bullied boy in middle school, a ray of light in your neighborhood book club, a supportive coach for a high school team, an available shoulder to someone at a time of loss, or a hand held out to a child looking for a little hope, we can all change the course of our nation and world, one life at a time, for the rest of our lives. (Dungy, 2007: 317).

This down-to-earth, straightforward bit of inspirational rhetoric is almost matched in content (if not style) by Ranciere, when he concludes his essay, “The Emancipated Spectator” (in the book of the same name) with this claim:

To dismiss the fantasies of the word made flesh and the spectator rendered active, to know that words are merely words and spectacles merely spectacles, can help us arrive at a better understanding of how words and images, stories and performances, can change something of the world we live in. (Ranciere, 2011: 23)

Despite questions about the meaning of sport (whether it is a trivial entertainment or a substantial, character- and community-building enterprise), Ranciere’s statement suggests that autobiographical narratives like Dungy’s are worth regarding with qualified hope. In this, the French philosopher is anticipating the moral and civic substance of the coach. In fact, Ranciere’s work suggests that storytelling itself (or “recounting”) is a practice that “verifies” equality (Ranciere, 1991: xxii). Both writers indicate that it is with the individual person that “change” begins, and it is through the concerted efforts of individual persons working together that communities and societies grow healthier. These are not original thoughts, but the ways that these two writers construct their arguments are worth exploring, and they are particularly

interesting in light of Dungy's racial status in the United States and Ranciere's theory of universal intellectual equality and individual agency as propounded in his earlier work, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, based on Jacotot's educational theory. Ranciere's approach indirectly exposes the hypocrisy regarding what most people claim to believe in: the ideal of equality. When we interrogate our attitudes and behaviors, we discover the actuality, which is that we habitually judge the intellectual capacities of people with whom we interact, rarely presuming an equality of intelligence.

We can profitably investigate the nature of Dungy's autobiographical project of personal transparency by applying Ranciere's concepts of "the ignorant schoolmaster," "the emancipated spectator," and theater-as-spectacle (translating this to large sporting events). In the process of writing his memoir, Dungy becomes a spectator of his own spectacular professional career, a retrospective witness to his life-long personal quest for equality through American football. In the end, absent an ambition to do it, Dungy effectively opens the way for African American breakthroughs of many kinds, even perhaps contributing ever so slightly to the national mood that would result in the 2008 election of President Barack Obama. Ranciere, following Jacotot, insists that equality is "not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a *supposition* to maintain in every circumstance" (Ranciere, 1991: 138). This attitude explains the success of public figures like Dungy and Obama in the face of vestigial racism and lingering institutional biases.

## 2. DUNGY AND RELIGION

In the particular case of the interesting literary document that is the Dungy memoir, religious faith (apparently of a Protestant Christian variety) is foregrounded and emphasized throughout, beginning with a celebrity endorsement in the form of a preface by actor Denzel Washington and his wife. Of course, in analyses of this kind, the invocation of a particular religious faith, with all of the possible idiosyncratic aspects involved, can be a source of confusion. There are many kinds of faith, from the extremely formal, organizational types to the intensely personal ones. For my purpose, let us admit that even self-professed intellectual atheists will acknowledge that pledging oneself to the public profile of "intellectual" is itself an act of faith, positing something to believe in when everything else appears doubtful.

Dungy, by most standards, is not an intellectual. He is an athlete (in the American vernacular, a "jock") and a true believer when it comes to religion and what citizens of the U.S. often refer to as "America," with all of the idealist and exceptionalist associations that this implies. But he was also brought up as a true believer in "education," in learning and growing, self-improvement, and the educational side of Christian devotional practice. Even when his son committed suicide, he asked himself, "What can I learn from this?" (Dungy, 2007: 261). In fact, if one approaches faith skeptically, one sees the relation to superstition and the down- or dark side of

religion, where the bliss of serene confidence seems to be based on the ignorance of actuality. For example, another category vital to Dungy is faith in the utility of sport—that it teaches valuable lessons to young people. In a fundamental way, every individual's idiosyncratic belief system is unique because no one can precisely articulate and scientifically verify the exact origin and sequence of their belief system. Therefore, there is no guarantee that what any individual thinks, hopes, and believes is identical to what anyone else privately believes. Dungy's personal tendencies are exemplified in his characteristic use of scripture, for example in his emphasis on the "The Book of Nehemiah" as a kind of manual containing "leadership lessons" (Dungy, 2007: 86). Dungy also presents an almost cartoonish application of the story of David and Goliath, where the violence of the "the sword" is highlighted as a method of encouraging his team to make sure that they "finished the job" with the adversary that had been their nemesis (Dungy, 2007: 282).

Although the following discussion might be seen to underplay the religious content of Dungy's memoir, let us acknowledge that religious faith accompanied by daily devotion and practice helps narrow and control many of the anxiety-inducing choices that fuller and fuller freedom entails, including transitions from childhood to adulthood, minority to authority, powerlessness to power, anonymity to fame, and poverty to wealth. As constraints diminish for any individual—owing to good fortune, hard work, or generous help—other challenges appear and can become constraints themselves. Dungy refers to "adversity" that comes "both from the outside and from within" (Dungy, 2007: 87). The analysis that follows, then, largely ignores religion, while acknowledging Dungy's repeated emphasis on "God" and (mostly in vain) listening for God's voice. In Dungy's case, it is clear that, in addition to his "can-do" attitude and his workaholic tendencies, his religious faith allows him to select out many of his worries and assign them to the control of God, thereby reducing his day-to-day anxieties about life-and-death issues and permitting him to focus on his team—and winning. After all, the sub-title of his memoir puts the accent on the notion of "winning": "The Principles, Practices, and Priorities of a Winning Life." Presumably, in the self-help sense, readers learn how to avoid being "losers." In the chapter entitled "Putting God First," Dungy alludes to the ultimate loss, quoting from "The Gospel According to Mathew," 16:26, "*And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?*" (Dungy, 2007: 51—Dungy's italics).

### 3. DUNGY AND RACE

In addition to a de-emphasis on Dungy's religion, this discussion might also be accused of downplaying racial issues in American society. After all, the argument might go, Dungy was a comparatively privileged African American whose athletic ability was given preference by the white establishment, just as entertainers are often accorded special status. I acknowledge the legitimacy of the argument but

nevertheless choose, for the purpose of a general approach to what I am calling “incremental emancipation,” to bypass large-scale political issues pertaining to race in favor of a case-by-case approach. Still, racial issues will be an important factor in the discussion, as will the nature of sport and of contemporary masculinity, especially fatherhood. Nevertheless, the primary emphasis is on the self-emancipation of each unique, individual human being, no matter their race or gender, including interpersonal relationships and a relationship to the establishment or the power structure. Although race continues to rise to the top of American political discourse because of a variety of incidents, legal cases, and political issues, this discussion has implications that transcend race. As with individual members of racial minorities, there are obvious parallels among females and homosexuals in their respective quests for complete control of their personal and professional lives. The oscillation between individual emancipation and group emancipation will continue to condition this discussion. Kristin Ross, in her Introduction to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, calls Ranciere’s project “an essay, or perhaps a fable or parable, that enacts an extraordinary philosophical meditation on equality” (Ranciere, 1991: ix). Then, in a footnote that represents the special case of Dungy’s self-emancipation, she adds, “In the United States today [1991]...arguments about equality invariably turn on the subject of race—not surprisingly in the only major industrial nation built on a legacy of domestic slavery” (Ranciere, 1991: ix).

Through books and public appearances, Dungy is well-known for his commitment to his own life’s purpose and for promoting the development of a life purpose in his players, colleagues, and the readers of his books. His life experience as a son, brother, husband, father, athlete, manager of athletes, community leader, African American role model, and spokesperson for various causes and groups is recounted in his memoir in a way that allows us to see the stages of his self-emancipation. Specifically, Dungy’s personal and professional experiences—like any well-documented life experience—allow us to explore the challenges confronted by the individual human being in negotiating the biases inherent in their situation. Dungy’s adult life has been spent in the institution of American professional football, as embodied in The National Football League (NFL) and its member organizations, which are dominated by white male owners, general managers, and coaches—a power structure that replicates that of American society.

#### 4. EMANCIPATION

“Emancipation” as a word in English can be traced back to the notion of purchasing or transferring property. For my purposes, I will not distinguish between emancipation and other stages of personal independence, growth, and development. I want to investigate a spectrum of emancipation that, to oversimplify, can be seen to vary from a zero base of abject, hopeless, lifelong slavery to the universal, if



vague, ideal of complete independence and self-directed thought and action, a concept that has acquired many names, including “self-actualization,” “self-control,” and “agency.” Much if not most of the idealistic thought and purposeful action of leading thinkers and politicians in the past few centuries has been aimed at creating conditions conducive to the individual citizen’s optimal freedom within the framework of a stable community. In addition to locating examples of this set of priorities in philosophy, psychology, political science, religion, and literature, we can find innumerable examples in the life stories of individuals, as documented by themselves and others. Autobiographical writing offers a special set of documents of this kind. For my purposes, with Dungy’s memoir, I am particularly focused on self-conscious stories and statements that relate to the ways in which sport is supposed to contribute to personal growth, relationships, and community. *Quiet Strength* offers abundant anecdotes that purport to illustrate personal development that fosters self-emancipation: the perennial struggle for liberation aimed at maximizing individual freedom.

Suffering is a characteristic of the human condition, but, no matter how bad things are for one individual, that person is usually aware of the existence of many other people who are enduring greater suffering. Aware of the hundreds of millions of human beings living in appalling conditions, we all feel the simple, poignant sense of unfairness that Joyce’s Leopold Bloom expresses at the sight of the “blind stripling”: “Where is the justice being born that way?” (Joyce, 1986: 149). If we look at healthy middle class citizens of functioning societies, such a question may at first appear irrelevant, but the challenge of self-emancipation is still at issue because full freedom is not given with general health and welfare; it must be earned every day. Psychologically and emotionally, an individual can be bound to tyrannies of anxiety, addiction, or sorrow. It goes without saying that even very wealthy people and very famous ones suffer. To liberate ourselves from what are often referred to as our “demons” is the work of many years, and the dedicated work of each day. There is no underestimating the uncertainties and anxieties of unlimited freedom in the face of “normal” challenges, even for human beings who seem particularly fortunate.

Of course, slavery has existed in many places and times, and it persists in various forms today. For our purposes, let us define it as the arrangement that allows one human being to be used by another human being as an object, tool, or machine, without consent. If a person is not a slave—as most of us are not—that person can still be the victim of circumstances that cause suffering and diminish liberty. We speak of victims of natural disasters, persecution, exploitation, discrimination, bias, and prejudice. We might guess that every identifiable racial and ethnic sub-group has experienced some degree of oppression at one time in their history. At this writing, the number of such ill-treated groups remains high, and their localities many. In most functioning democracies, outright persecution and permanent oppression is not as obvious as the lesser evils of discrimination and prejudice. Subtle and not-so-subtle

biases live on, certainly, especially in local cases and individual cases. Nothing I say here is intended to apply to everyone, everywhere; rather, I am interested in representative, individual human beings struggling to free themselves from their own special constraints. Tony Dungy is the particular case.

Given the association of emancipation with transferring and purchasing, my view is that we must all purchase our own freedoms in some way every day, and we must be vigilant to avoid selling ourselves (and sacrificing our freedoms) in any way that we are not aware of, as well as in the more obvious ways. Emancipation is often associated with something someone with power executes in order to free someone without power, or, as in the case of the British Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, to permit citizens to do things that they had previously been prohibited from doing. The American case of President Abraham Lincoln's political move to issue The Emancipation Proclamation (1 January 1863) is such an example. However, people can have a hand in emancipating themselves, for example minors who wish to do business on their own and achieve their independence from parents and guardians by filing petitions with the appropriate jurisdiction. More generally, we have come to accept a kind of cognitive responsibility of the sort articulated by Eleanor Roosevelt in her well-known, bumper-sticker-worthy phrase, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

Inferiority, then, is another way of approaching the subject, and perceived intellectual inferiority is the root of much inequality and even oppression. Ranciere, echoing Jacotot, argues that intellectual inequality stems from "stultification": "There is stultification whenever one intelligence is subordinated to another" (Ranciere, 1991: 13). Opposed to stultification is emancipation, which relies on the encouraging assistance of another person without the oppression and inequality of condescension associated with what Ranciere-Jacotot find odious in "explication," or the pedant's tendency to condescend to the student. Ranciere defines emancipation this way: "We will call the known and maintained difference of the two relations—the act of an intelligence obeying only itself while the will obeys another will—*emancipation*" (Ranciere, 1991: 13). This is the path of Dungy's career, learning as a player from coaches and as an assistant coach from head coaches, but refusing to subordinate his own intelligence to another's, and without indulging in elaborate explication (nor tolerating it from others). Dungy's father's claim—"We taught ourselves how to fly"—suggested that men considered inferior or "ignorant" could help one another achieve equality in the air (Dungy, 2007: 16). No explication was involved—only the claim that there was an inherent ability to learn, a capacity equal to that of anyone else. By working together, "The Tuskegee Airmen"—the common name for the project that provided airplanes for the African Americans—asserted their equality, intellectual and otherwise (Dungy, 2007: 15).

In a section entitled "The Community of Equals," we see the full extent of Ranciere's poetic notion that individuals unite to create community:

To unite mankind, there is no better link than this identical intelligence in everyone. It is this that is the just measure of similarity, igniting that gentle penchant of the heart that leads us to help each other and love each other. It is this that gives someone the means for measuring the extent of the services that he can hope for from his fellow-man and of devising ways of showing him his appreciation. (Ranciere, 1991: 71)

Like Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Ranciere emphasizes individual, idiosyncratic pleasures and pains. Rorty observes, “All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives” (Rorty, 1989: 73). Ranciere, immediately after the passage about uniting mankind, which evokes a notion similar to Rorty’s “solidarity,” writes,

The principal service that man can expect from man depends on that faculty of intercommunicating their pleasure and pain, hopes and fears, in order to be moved reciprocally....” (Ranciere, 1991: 72)

At this point, Ranciere reverts to Jacotot himself, who had written,

If men didn’t have the faculty, an equal faculty, they would soon become strangers to each other; they would scatter at random throughout the globe and societies would be dissolved....The exercise of that power is at once the sweetest of our pleasures and the most demanding of our needs. (Qtd. in Ranciere, 1991: 72).

Jacotot’s almost-forgotten work insists on the primacy of human relationship. Familiar as we now are with the self-help industry, we are aware that human relationships, in order to succeed by contemporary standards, demand commitment, creativity, and the reciprocity we call “give-and-take.” Even more difficult than are intimate one-on-one relationships are the relationships among many individuals that are required for a healthy community to develop and thrive. Underpinning all such idealistic enterprises are the fundamental notions of freedom and equality—of not being coerced into participating in relationships or groups, and of being seen as the equal of the other individuals involved.

The world-famous founding document that led to the creation of The United States of America speaks of a “self-evident” concept articulated in the words “all men are created equal.” This claim of self-evidence is related to the work of Jacotot, whose “intellectual adventures” Ranciere champions. In the context of “The Declaration of Independence,” however, the complications, ironies, and outright hypocrisies inherent in this bold statement are also self-evident, relating to issues of race and gender that are by now so well-publicized that do not require reciting. Alternatively, Ranciere’s recuperation of Jacotot’s notion of “the ignorant schoolmaster,” based on the radical notion that every person is the equal of every other in terms of “intelligence,” offers a fresher and more fruitful exploration. Kristin Ross concludes her introductory essay with this forceful claim: “*The Ignorant Schoolmaster* forces us to confront what any

number of nihilistic, neo-liberal philosophies would have us avoid: the founding term of our political modernity, *equality*" (Ranciere, 1991: xxiii).

The Jacotot-Ranciere position that presumes equality of intelligence highlights what each of us, without interrogating it, naturally assumes: that there are obvious and undeniable differences in intelligence. Despite the well-publicized work of Howard Gardner on "multiple intelligences," which points to the capacity "to solve problems or fashion products" that are "valued in at least one community or culture" (Gardner, 2006: 29), individual intelligence is frequently and crudely judged, measured, and criticized, both formally and informally. In fact, most of us semi-consciously enjoy feeling superior to certain others; perhaps, astonishingly, we also enjoy feeling the superiority of certain *other* others, whom we prefer to, as the saying goes, "look up to." We make casual and uncomplimentary appraisals of one another's intellects as a matter of course as a part of "small-talk" that, like it or not, most of us indulge in without any apparent shame. Given our habits, it is a challenge for most of us to imagine the possibility that everyone we see today is, in Ranciere's terms, our intellectual equal; you are mine, and I am yours. As Ranciere puts it,

Intellectual emancipation is the verification of the equality of intelligence. This does not signify the equal value of all manifestations of intelligence, but the self-intelligence separated by a gulf. The human animal learns everything in the same way as it initially learnt its mother tongue.... (Ranciere, 2011: 10)

Reading Dungy's memoir in light of the Jacotot-Ranciere claim allows us to understand his life experience in new terms. An African American athlete and coach, now famous for his achievement in American professional football's ultimate event, The Super Bowl, Dungy has now had occasion to study his own life. The Super Bowl is the pre-eminent event in North American sport, though not as widely-viewed worldwide as The Olympic Games, The FIFA World Cup, or The Cricket World Cup. Dungy's status in the U.S. is now assured, and his celebrity is untarnished by scandal. When he looks at his own life, what he sees is the struggle to be equal, but more: he sees the ceaseless work he put into being a free person—work that can never be permanently accomplished.

## 5. DUNGY'S "QUIET STRENGTH"

In the ordinary, apparently non-intellectual segments of society, we can find fascinating examples of the rhetorical principles that our intellectual work seeks to understand and practice. According to Jacotot's approach, so-called ordinary people are the intellectual equals of so-called extraordinary people. Jacotot's lesson is exemplified in the writing of both Ranciere and Dungy, two very different kinds of people whose only common ground—in addition to humanity—is a professional work ethic that has resulted in extraordinary accomplishment and plentiful

publication. Despite their work, the persistent and prejudicial division into inferiority and superiority is one that will not soon disappear. However, as individuals, we have the choice to seek and claim superiority or to promote the presumption of equality.

To understand just how dramatic and revolutionary the presumption of equality is, let us go back a very few years. Imagine someone widely considered to be intellectually inferior in a leadership position. In particular, consider the circumstance of a young man deemed inferior being given the opportunity to be the on-field leader (the quarterback) of a prominent college football team of mostly Caucasian athletes in the 1970s. More extreme still, ask what kind of professional franchise owner or coach would consider the radical idea of employing a “black quarterback.” Like every kind of history, the actual American college and NFL history is much more complicated, with multiple anomalies and anachronisms; however, for all practical purposes, there was an unspoken, unwritten ban on African Americans in positions of leadership. Further, if the franchise owner hires “an African-American” to coach his team, this pillar of the community is in effect granting the inferior person a key leadership role in that community. Until recently, for the team owners (and for most fans), it was unthinkable. After Dungy, it has become more common, but white coaches still predominate in the NFL.

The ban on African Americans as leaders in sport is something that contemporary American sports fans tend to think of as historical. We take it for granted that the notion of black coaches’ and quarterbacks’ inferiority, inadequacy, and impracticality is obsolete. However, we cannot understand the significance of Dungy’s struggle if we don’t acknowledge that, a little more than forty years ago, he was the exception. Even though Dungy had been a successful college quarterback, he would get no opportunity to pursue that position in professional football. The social, political, and business norms all deemed persons of color incapable of leadership at the professional level. They weren’t “smart” enough; they were intellectually inferior.

From his then-predictable rejection as a “black quarterback” in the NFL in 1977 and his subsequent failure to make it in a new position, to his ultimate triumph as an “African American coach” twenty years later, Dungy’s story echoes the struggles of pioneers like Major League Baseball’s first African American, Jackie Robinson, who began the desegregation of that major sport as early as 1947. Interestingly, the candid content of Dungy’s mostly transparent memoir is complicated by the need to be open about living apart from his family, to confess his inability to understand his son’s suicide, and to admit the statistics about the appalling post-NFL lives of many former football players, who suffer permanent injuries such as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), divorce, bankruptcy, addiction, crime, and suicide at higher rates than the rest of the population. Starting with his father’s membership in The Tuskegee Airmen—and the remarkable claim, “We taught ourselves how to fly”—Dungy and his co-writer Nathan Whitaker construct a story of incremental emancipation through openness, intending to de-mystify the spectacle of American

professional football while privileging the ideals of purpose, character, family, community, equality, and faith. Dungy's character and values, according to the memoir, were not only shaped by his educator parents, but also by an incident in high school that led to his temporary boycott of the football team on the grounds of perceived racial discrimination. The narrative also addresses concepts of success and failure, winning and losing, and meaning and purpose in life.

Dungy's memoir, ambitiously sub-titled "The Principles, Practices, & Priorities of a Winning Life," is candid but often self-contradictory, almost by definition. An explicitly Christian approach to a violent sport with numerous pragmatic compromises between kindness and toughness necessarily makes for some perplexing moments, highlighted by Dungy's coaching emphasis on "whatever it takes" to win (Dungy, 2007: 116). In documenting his life and enunciating his principles, Dungy recounts the highlights and low points of his journey to the Super Bowl with a mixture of idealism and opportunism. He uses the Bible as a practical guidebook throughout, including emphasis on an Old Testament book not often employed in traditional Protestant teaching:

I learned three key truths from Nehemiah. First, Nehemiah's opportunity came in God's time, not his own. Second, Nehemiah diligently prepared his mind and his heart so he would be ready when God's time arrived. Third, Nehemiah needed to be prepared to take on the problems, doubt, and adversity that would come his way both from the outside and from within. (Dungy, 2007: 87)

Dungy is always trying to be prepared, in his profession and in his life. His attention to detail and consistency of purpose in the "ordinary things" echoes Ranciere's assessment of Jacotot's approach: "...it is the lack of will that causes intelligence to make mistakes. The mind's original sin is not haste, but distraction, absence" (Ranciere, 1991: 55). Furthermore, "The individual cannot lie to himself; he can only forget himself" (Ranciere, 1991: 57). Dungy's greatest challenges would come from absence and, perhaps, forgetting what it was like when he was a teenager.

In his memoir, Dungy goes to great lengths to remember himself—and to be truthful. He relates both typical and unique stories of growing up and facing the adult world, from the lack of enfranchisement all children and young people experience, to the struggles to overcome various forms of prejudice and discrimination—overt and covert, explicit and subtle—and finally to the tyranny of sorrow (after his son's suicide) and the shame of public perception of his possibly hypocritical positions and behaviors. By becoming the co-author of his autobiographical narrative, and having to confront facts and anecdotes dredged up by his collaborator, Dungy found himself in the role of spectator of his own life, not always with happy results. Ranciere, speaking of theatre in "The Emancipated Spectator," makes an observation that can apply to professional sport and even autobiographical writing:

For in all these performances what is involved is linking what one knows with what one does not know; being at once a performer deploying her skills and a spectator observing what these skills might produce in a new context among other spectators. Like researchers, artists construct the stages where the manifestation and effect of their skills are exhibited, rendered uncertain in the terms of the new idiom that conveys a new intellectual adventure. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own story. (Ranciere, 2011: 22)

In making his own story, Dungy is forthcoming about the awkwardness and near-shame of being an exemplar of family values and, specifically, fatherhood: “*How ironic, I thought. Here I am, a spokesman for the All Pro Dad program, helping others to be better parents, and my child took his own life*” (Dungy, 2007: 259; italicized in the original).

Despite the contradictions, *Quiet Strength* is a document that illuminates and illustrates, charts the progress and the possible paths to openness and access for American citizens, while suggesting a future that embraces difference and all the original ideals of the American experiment. The fascinating thing about Dungy the coach and autobiographer is the way he negotiates tradition and reform in the context of sport—and in the age of CTE and the recent emergence of the openly gay professional athletes. *Quiet Strength* embodies all the hopefulness and complexity of situating the American ideals of individuality, community, and equality in the context of American football. “An emancipated community,” Ranciere writes, “is a community of narrators and translators” (Ranciere, 2011: 22). Dungy’s book, though appearing to focus on football and his own life, narrates and translates the big picture of contemporary race issues in the United States while also detailing the mostly-hidden personal sacrifices in the struggle for fully open and equal membership in American society.

If emancipation is about removing constraints, then the question in any individual’s case is, “What constraints are involved?” For minors, the constraint might be the legal definition of a full-fledged citizen. In the extreme case of a slave, it is a totalitarian condition that controls everything about one’s day-to-day behavior. As a minor and a member of a racial minority, Dungy’s youth was not stereotypical for the time. He enjoyed a middle-class existence in a college town, growing up with two parents who were educators, one with a Ph.D. and a college faculty position and the other teaching in the public schools. That kind of upbringing isn’t unusual, except that, in Dungy’s case, based on the expectations and prejudices of the time, he was seen as atypical because of his race, his intact family, and his almost complete freedom from segregated experience. Dungy was both different from African-American adolescents and different from his socio-economic peers. (The fact that his mother was Canadian may also add an element of cultural difference.) Despite

the comparative advantages he had, Dungy embodies Ranciere's interpretation of Jacotot's principles. "Liberty is not guaranteed by any preestablished harmony," Ranciere writes. "It is taken, it is won, it is lost, solely by each person's effort" (Ranciere, 1991: 62).

As a child and a young adult, Dungy had many advantages, and the freedom to develop his character, personality, and skills. He describes his adolescent self as a "gym rat," a term associated with kids who love basketball. Oddly, basketball was his first love, so when an incident of perceived injustice affected his high school football career—a white player was given a co-captain position when a black player may have deserved it—he was quick to sacrifice football in favor of basketball. He stood on principle, and he would not budge for many months. It took the urging of a sympathetic adult (an African American administrator in Dungy's school) to encourage him to return to the football team, a development that was crucial to his future success. The willingness to give up football shows how completely committed Dungy was to the concept of fairness as a young adult. The story of his father's World War II experience as a "Tuskegee Airman" was instrumental in helping the young Dungy understand the process of self-emancipation. The now widely-known facts of the case, highlighted by a recent American film, *Red Tails*, involve the conceptualization of teaching oneself in collaboration with "ignorant" others. The clear implication is that, when there are barriers to your goals, you can find ways through, around, or over them.

The key to self-emancipation is, paradoxically, that one can't do it all by oneself. Supportive and collaborative relationships are essential. Often, learning from a position of intellectual equality is a matter of very practical triangulation, what Ranciere calls the "third thing" (Ranciere, 2011: 14). That "third thing" can be a person, an artifact (like a coach's "game film"), a document, or even a story (like the story about Dungy's father and his fellow Tuskegee Airmen, teaching themselves how to fly). In Dungy's case, as a middle-class young person, he also had role models and advisors, supportive and accomplished parents, and what he calls "God-given ability." However, only through the advice, support, and active promotion of others does Dungy's athletic career survive. When he commits himself to American professional football as a career path, he is fortunate to be given an opportunity with the best team in the NFL, The Pittsburgh Steelers, where older players take him under their protection, spiritually as much as anything. The high-paid professional athlete, typically a very young man, encounters well-publicized temptations, and Dungy credits mentors for his success in avoiding them. His experiences as a player are short-lived, but, largely because of his commitment to purposeful study of the strategy and tactics of the game, he quickly finds himself hired as the youngest member of a coaching staff in the NFL.

In his account of his professional career, Dungy mostly downplays the racism he faced, but he finally addresses it near the end of the book. He read racist letters



“when I was the defensive coordinator of the Vikings and still opened my own mail” (Dungy, 2007: 296). Later, when he had a large staff of assistants, whatever similar hate missives that continued to be sent his way were “intercepted before they hit my desk” (Dungy, 2007: 296). By minimizing his discussion of racial issues, Dungy uses his memoir to put the emphasis on aspects of life that are under the individual’s personal control, as opposed to larger issues and forces in the culture that are the persistent subject of controversy, litigation, and even violence.

At every stage, Dungy confronts his own personal challenges by methodically defining them, deliberating about them (sometimes in collaboration with advisors), and identifying the resources that allow him to endure or even triumph. As he accumulates power within a given team structure, and ultimately in the NFL, Dungy increasingly acts to free himself and others from what he views as the unfair or even corrupt practices inherent in the professional system that is characterized by franchise owners who buy, sell, and trade players. Dungy’s anecdotes cumulatively indicate that emancipation is ultimately individual and incremental, and for every liberating, intoxicating triumph there is an inevitable, sobering discovery: another constraint emerges in clear sight. The most challenging constraint is always an internal barrier of some kind, an idiosyncratic character issue that is so trivial and seemingly inconsequential to anyone else as to seem laughable. We all have these foibles, but most of us employ a less rigorous, systematic course of self-improvement. For Dungy, his carefully-constructed narrative documents a systematic use of the universe of American football to provide him with new challenges that he views as opportunities to improve. In his view, by participating in a game each week, whether winning or losing, he is immediately liberated from the past and offered the chance to proceed into the future by means of the next game. When one season ends, he can look forward to the next. For Dungy, the ultimate test is seeking present and future meaning by honoring a distinct set of purposes and priorities. He seeks to develop himself through his coaching, his family, and his community. He strives to build a rock-solid foundation for his life that transcends his professional career in football. He is looking for the ultimate significance, and he uses the telling of his own life story to find it.

Ross, in the “Translator’s Introduction” to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, notes that Ranciere criticizes the educational theories of Bourdieu, Althusser, and Milner for what he claims they have “in common: a lesson in inequality” (Ranciere, 1991: xix). Subsequently, she notes, “Storytelling then, in and of itself, or *recounting*—one of the two basic operations of intelligence according to Jacotot—emerges as one of the concrete acts or practices that verifies equality.” Parenthetically, quoting Jacotot again, she adds that equality “is neither given nor claimed, it is practiced, it is *verified*” (Ranciere, 1991: xxii, italics in original).

Ultimately, a free person’s greatest challenge is how to negotiate life’s most difficult crises, whether they are physical injuries or illnesses, mental or emotional

problems, the death of loved ones, or a large-scale disaster. In the end, it is probably the tyranny of sorrow that constitutes the greatest oppression a free person faces. Dungy's account of his eldest son's unexplained suicide is such an example. The father's version of the story is fascinating, sometimes odd, and terribly poignant. The phrase "the demons he may have faced" is one of the few clues we are given about the cause of his son's death (Dungy, 2007: 250). He writes, "We didn't understand why Jamie had taken his life" (Dungy, 2007: 257). From the beginning of this extraordinary portion of the narrative, Dungy's explicit personal and rhetorical purposes in delivering his son's eulogy at the funeral (and then writing about it in the book) are clear and strong: "We were determined to make Jamie's funeral a celebration of his life—a 'homegoing,' we called it" (Dungy, 2007: 249). Dungy spoke for "about twenty minutes at the conclusion of the service," beginning with the words, "It's great to be here today" (Dungy, 2007: 250). Here, Dungy affirms the importance of presence, in every sense, and it is, cruelly, just at this point where he is most exposed in relation to his elder son: Dungy wasn't always present for him, regardless of the father's oft-stated public commitment to family and his equally strong and well-publicized statements about priorities, in the memoir and in numerous speeches and television interviews. Without blaming any parent for a child's suicide, we can still acknowledge the trauma Dungy as a father faced: he was not able to be present when his son may have needed him. Here we have the crux of every weakness in strongly stated principles; we cannot always guarantee success. A "winning life" is not without enormous losses, whether they be the deaths of loved ones, the loss of a job (or even a career), or lesser temporary setbacks.

In fact, much of what any person must overcome in order to become as emancipated as possible is internal. This is what Ranciere calls "learning to overcome oneself," specifically "the pride that disguises itself as humility as an excuse for...incapacity" (Ranciere, 1991: 42). President Barack Obama addressed a related issue that specifically pertains to racial politics in the U.S., when he spoke at The Lincoln Memorial on the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Obama decried attitudes and behaviors that amounted to acting "as if we have no agency in our own liberation" (Obama 2013: parag. 26). In fact, one's consciously adopted attitude toward life experience continues to be shown by cognitive psychology and medical research to be the foremost predictor of recovery and sustainable health. Dungy's own attitude is part athletic determination and part religious conviction. He invokes Psalm 34, which he quotes as follows in the book, with initial capitals: "I Will Bless the Lord at All Times" (Dungy, 2007: 250). He characterizes the "challenge" facing everyone in attendance as one of finding the joy that God provides "in the midst of a sad occasion" (Dungy, 2007: 250). This is an extraordinary public statement, spoken in the event and echoed in the book. Referring to the root character of a person, the foundational identity of a human, Dungy ends by asserting that "it's who you are inside" (Dungy, 2007: 255).

Who Dungy himself was can be seen in his “next decision” after the funeral. The owner of the team told him “to feel free to take the rest of the season off” (Dungy, 2007: 257) Dungy, characteristically, wanted to be at work, believing that this is what he should be doing, but he admits, “Jamie’s death will never make sense to me” (Dungy, 2007: 260). However, real gratitude, authentic humility, and a generous orientation toward helping others do seem to free him from sorrow and from the agonizing whys (Dungy, 2007: 261). He explains that he “needed to figure out what good was supposed to come of this, even if it was still painful” (Dungy, 2007: 262)

One might well ask if this is the liberating spirit of self-emancipation or the refrain of the oppressed, overcome by circumstances too terrible to imagine. When are we bravely accepting of defeats in life, and when are we giving up or giving in? In fact, once we get beyond physical constraint and fundamental physiological needs, there is a psychological paradox when it comes to external forces, owing to the fact that many forms of perceived oppression are at least somewhat self-assigned. Dungy’s version of best practices is clear: “Pressing on to help others is all I can do. It is all any of us can do” (Dungy, 2007: 263). Subsequent to winning the Super Bowl the year after his son’s suicide, the humble Dungy records that he “thought of other African American coaches who might have done this had they gotten the chance” (Dungy, 2007: 296). In the final paragraph of the chapter added for the paperback edition, Dungy expands his message of emancipation by invoking God and stating that “we are all role models” (Dungy, 2007: 317).

The daily practice that Dungy describes and recommends is tantamount to a do-it-yourself (DIY) method of self-improvement that, one is tempted to say, only an aggressive coach could believe in. The simplicity of the approach is both elegant and sophomoric; the promised effectiveness begs the question of a fully intellectual inquiry into meaning and purpose in life. But the utility is undeniable. By adopting the circular argument for “quiet strength,” one can be freed of the noisy weakness that we associate with all forms of contemporary life not completely limited by lack of food, shelter, and medical resources.

As Ranciere points out, Plato’s advice about doing only that which you are meant to do (what Ranciere refers to as a “commandment” not to think) is radically limiting (Ranciere, 1991: 34). Dungy did not stop at being undrafted, or at being relegated to the lesser position of defensive back (from which he was also soon rejected); he became an assistant coach, a head coach, a bestselling author, a television commentator, and a public figure.

## 6. CONCLUSION

It is obvious that not every human being is as determined, resourceful, and fortunate as Dungy. In a section headed, “A Will Served by an Intelligence,” contrasting Jacotot’s theory with Cartesian notions, Ranciere declares that Jacotot’s

work leads to the possibility of “a new thinking subject who is aware of himself through the action he exerts on himself as on other bodies” (Ranciere, 1991: 54). This certainly fits the Dungy approach: purposeful, goal-oriented, and collaborative. It is central to Jacotot-Ranciere as well. Jacotot (who knew no Flemish) offered his Flemish students (who knew no French) a bilingual edition of Fenelon’s *Telemaque* to allow them to teach French to each other (Ranciere, 1991: 2). Dungy offers his own life (the book) as a third thing, just as Jacotot employs Fenelon and Ranciere uses Jacotot. It is not the master we learn from; we learn from the third thing in the presence of others. Looking at others’ lives is like looking at “game film” (video is wonderful for ignorant school-mastering); looking at just about anything purposefully will do because “everything is in everything” (Ranciere, 1991: 41). We must look with equal others, and purposefully, with the intent of liberating both the self and the other, every single one of us, the entire human community.

There is no master to teach us, no explication that will help, no true self to find, only incremental learning, greater and greater awareness, commitment to purpose, and loyalty to the greatest principle we have: that we are all, somehow, equal, and that we will be better individuals and create healthier communities when we behave as equal intelligences equally working toward our own emancipation. As Ranciere puts it, “There is nothing to understand” (Ranciere, 1991: 23). We do not require condescending masters to tell us about ourselves; we only require liberty, will, and attention. Even the Socratic method is seen to be corrupt, relying as it does on the ignorance and even inferiority of the interlocutor. As Ranciere has it, we should interrogate “in order to be instructed, not to instruct” (Ranciere, 1991: 29).

By claiming equality of intelligence, I emancipate myself and I assert and support your own self-emancipation. It is indeed a lifelong DIY project, but support helps—and non-coercive coaching. Ultimately, we author our own lives (even if we never write a “life” of ourselves), and we help each other co-author our collective lives. What we must avoid is the pedagogical tendency—the tendency that employs a concept directly relating to the perpetuation of the ideal of slavery—to want to explicate for others. We must refuse to have ourselves explained by others, and we must desist from standing over others and talking down to them—lording it over them. We must find the middle ground between the narcissistic pleasure of pedagogical explication and the self-loathing inclination to seek masters of any kind, schoolmaster or otherwise. Coaching and co-authorship are useful models, as long as we act cooperatively with equal intelligence and reciprocal respect.

One final third thing must be re-emphasized here: purpose. Ranciere describes Jacotot’s approach this way: “The method of equality was above all a method of the will” (Ranciere, 1991: 12). The ultimate emancipatory meta-purpose is a commitment to leading one’s own life—to being one’s own leader. The example of Dungy and the teachings of Jacotot suggest that to be the agent, the controlling force, and the final arbiter of one’s intentions and behaviors is to take fundamental responsibility

for one's place in "the world." The world is, above all, that "third thing" we all share. Thus our fundamental purpose must be making the most of our lives in this world, by getting and giving help, by having everything possible in common with others of equal intelligence—which is everyone. It is an impossible quest but a universal human yearning worth trying to fulfill, and whatever old constraints we have yet to conquer, and whatever new ones await us, the process is always the same: we are equal to it, and we are as good as anyone else in terms of our intellectual resources. We can learn what we need from third things, and get and give the help that is required, to incrementally emancipate ourselves from our external limitations. We can strengthen our belief in equality by surrendering what Ranciere calls "the belief in inequality" (Ranciere, 2007: 40). Ranciere, interpreting Jacotot, writes that "know yourself" means "come back to yourself to know what you know to be unmistakably in you"—and it means "follow *your* path," using "the principle of veracity," which is "at the heart of the emancipation experience" (Ranciere, 1991: 57). We learn from Dungy and from Ranciere that we must see our own lives as something to be created, learned, advanced, and shared equally with others. All of this is possible when each of us insists on being our own master and leading our own life, by giving and taking among others whose human intelligence is, by its very nature, precisely the equal of ours.

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