

A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste:  
Arthur Fletcher, Spirituality, and the American Underclass

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**Abstract:** Arthur Fletcher (1924-2005) rose from humble origins to advise four United States presidents and head the United Negro College Fund. Yet few in the public knew of his strong spiritual life. After his wife tragically committed suicide in 1960, Fletcher sought ordination and developed the “Victorious Living Creed”—a spiritual belief which he hoped would allow African-Americans to take advantage of the new opportunities available thanks to civil rights legislation and affirmative action programs. By the mid-1970s he had established an organization to promote this program known as the Society for Victorious Living.

**Keywords:** Arthur Fletcher, integrate, affirmative action, Philadelphia Plan, victorious

Arthur Fletcher was born in Phoenix, Arizona in 1924. The son of a Buffalo Soldier, his mother cleaned other peoples’ homes despite her training as a schoolteacher and a nurse, proving an early lesson for young Arthur in American racial culture. After moving around the Southwest for much of Art’s childhood, the family eventually settled in Junction City, Kansas, where Fletcher became the first black all-state football player and graduated from the integrated local high school after organizing a protest against segregated yearbook sections. The year was 1943; he wed his high school sweetheart Mary, a daughter of black high society, and joined the army. Wounded in Europe as a Military Policeman on the “Red Ball Express” supply line under General George Patton, Fletcher returned to Kansas and attended Washburn University in Topeka on the G.I. Bill, where he became involved in early strategy sessions for the Brown vs. Board of Ed. school segregation case. A college

football career resulted in his becoming the first black player for the Baltimore Colts, but his old war injury, while hardly critical, forced his early retirement from the sport.<sup>1</sup>

After campaigning among black voters for liberal Republican gubernatorial candidate Fred Hall in 1954, Fletcher became Kansas Deputy State Highway Commissioner. Now with five children, he and Mary seemed to be living the American dream. There were still important vestiges of segregation in Kansas: the Fletchers were expected to live on the black side of Topeka, and many public facilities—including the elementary schools until 1954—remained segregated. But these restrictions ironically proved liberating for the Fletchers, precisely because of Art's political importance and Mary's pedigree. The Fletchers moved among the top social circles in Topeka's African-American community. The eldest daughter, Phyllis, was the belle of the ball at dances at the segregated YMCA. And rather than force on their children the difficulties encountered by young Linda Brown, the Fletchers sent them to an integrated parochial school, trading on Mary's Catholic faith.<sup>2</sup>

But storm clouds brewed on the horizon. When Governor Hall lost his re-

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<sup>1</sup> Stu Dunbar, "Just As It Seems to Me," *State Journal* (Topeka, Kansas), August n.d., 1948; "Athlete Assumes Y Post," *Tri-City Herald*, April 12, 1965; John Whitaker to Bill Casselman, February 25, 1969 (Records of President Richard M. Nixon, Collection of the Department of Labor, box 5, "Executive, 1" folder, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD); "A Hard-Driving Black Official: Arthur Allen Fletcher," *New York Times*, December 2, 1971; Arthur Fletcher interview, April 9, 2003, by Political Science Department, Washburn University, in possession of the author; Arthur Fletcher biography at *The History Makers*, from an interview conducted May 29, 2003 (<http://www.thehistorymakers.com/biography/biography.asp?bioindex=526&category=lawmakers>, accessed October 16, 2010); "Presidential Adviser Arthur Fletcher, 80, Dies; 'Father of Affirmative Action' Counseled Nixon, Ford, Reagan, G. H. W. Bush," Associated Press, July 13, 2005; and Mark Peterson, "The Kansas Roots of Arthur Allen Fletcher: Football All-Star to the 'Father of Affirmative Action,'" *Kansas History*, Vol. 34, no. 3 (Autumn, 2011), pp. 224-241.

<sup>2</sup> "A Hard-Driving Black Official," December 2, 1971; Paul and Sylvia Fletcher interview, December 28, 2010, by and in possession of the author; Paul Fletcher interview, April 2, 2011, by and in possession of the author; and Sylvia Fletcher, e-mail message to the author, April 6, 2011.

election bid, Fletcher couldn't find work. He and his young family moved to Berkeley, California, where tragedy struck: his unhappy wife, being treated as an outpatient with psychotropic drugs, killed herself by jumping off the Bay Bridge. With his older children drifting away, Fletcher rebuilt his life, becoming a special-needs schoolteacher and running (unsuccessfully) for state assembly. In 1965 he remarried and moved to Pasco, Washington, to direct a War on Poverty program, and in 1966 he founded a black self-help cooperative organization there.<sup>3</sup>

That organization's success won Fletcher a seat on the Pasco City Council in 1967 and brought him to the attention of moderate Republican Governor Daniel Evans, who introduced him to Richard Nixon. The former vice president, who was considering a second bid for the White House, was seeking a policy position that could mesh the achievements of the Civil Rights Era with the corporatist ideology of the Republican Party. In 1968, with the nomination in hand, Nixon asked Fletcher to speak at the Republican National Convention. Upon returning to Washington State, Fletcher declared his candidacy for lieutenant governor, and won the Republican primary in every county, a particularly remarkable feat considering that less than two per cent of the electorate was black. When Fletcher narrowly lost the general election, Nixon nominated him Assistant Secretary of Labor for Employment Standards, with responsibility for the Office of Federal Contract Compliance. In June

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<sup>3</sup> "Mental Patient Leaps to Death," *Oakland Tribune*, October 3, 1960; "Y Picks Director for Pasco Project," *Tri-City Herald*, April 9, 1965; "East Pasco Coop Launches Service Station Business," *Tri-City Herald*, n.d. (September) 1966; "Pasco Cooperative Seeks Church Grant," *Tri-City Herald*, September 20, 1967; Homer E. Socolofsky, *Kansas Governors* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1990), 200-203; Arthur Fletcher interview, April 9, 2003; Paul Fletcher interview, September 25, 2010, by and in possession of the author; Paul and Sylvia Fletcher interview, December 28, 2010; and JoinCalifornia.Com (1962 election history, <http://www.joincalifornia.com/election/1962-11-06>, accessed March 16, 2011).

1969, Fletcher ordered implementation of the Philadelphia Plan, the first federal affirmative action policy.<sup>4</sup>

The Philadelphia Plan came under attack from Americans across the political spectrum, inside and outside of government. While the United States Senate was considering a vote to make it illegal, Fletcher advised the Nixon administration on how to proceed, and the Plan was upheld. But when hardhats rioted to protest anti-war demonstrations and the president abandoned public support of the Plan as a sop to his new friends in construction, Fletcher grew disenchanted with the president's overall civil rights policy. After a brief stint on the United Nations delegation, Fletcher resigned from the government. He became Executive Director of the United Negro College Fund, where some credit him with coining the phrase "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." He later advised Presidents Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush, and ran for president himself in 1996 to protest the direction the Republican Party had taken on civil rights. He died in 2005.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur A. Fletcher Candidate Statement, *Tri-City Herald*, September 17, 1967; "Fletcher Appointed to Urban Council," *Tri-City Herald*, November 1, 1967; "Campbell-Stinson Race Undecided; Fletcher, Seattleite First Negroes to Win Council Elections in State," *Tri-City Herald*, November 8, 1967; "We'll Field a Great Team: Fletcher Swamps Hydroplane Driver," *Tri-City Herald*, September 18, 1968; "Fletcher Loses; To Leave Pasco," *Tri-City Herald*, November 7, 1968; "Nixon Names WU Grid Great to Labor Post," *Topeka Capital*, March 15, 1969; Nixon to United States Senate, March 14, 1969 (Nixon Records, Department of Labor Collection, box 5 "Executive, 1" folder); "Negro Named to Key Position in Labor Department," *Philadelphia Bulletin*, March 15, 1969; Peter H. Binzen, "U.S. to Revise and Reinstate 'Phila. Plan' on Minority Hiring," *Philadelphia Bulletin*, June 12, 1969; Arthur Fletcher interview, April 9, 2003; Dan Evans interview, October 28, 2010, by and in possession of the author; Sam Reed interview, November 5, 2010, by and in possession of the author; and David Hamilton Golland, *Constructing Affirmative Action: The Struggle for Equal Employment Opportunity* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 125-126.

<sup>5</sup> "Senate Votes Against Philadelphia Work Plan; Hands Nixon Setback in Rejecting Move to Put More Negroes in Building Jobs," *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1969; Robert B. Semple, Jr., "Philadelphia Plan: How White House Engineered Major Victory," *New York Times*, December 26, 1969; "U.S. Will Terminate a Contract for Failure to Hire Negroes," *New York Times*, August 20, 1970; Arthur Fletcher interview, February 8, 1971, by Robert Wright (Moorland-Spingarn Library, Howard University, NIDS #3.178.222); Arthur Fletcher Interview, April 9, 2003; Arthur Fletcher biography at *The History Makers*, May 29, 2003; "Presidential Adviser Arthur Fletcher, 80, Dies," July 13, 2005; and Trevor

While in Washington State, Fletcher had furthered his education with correspondence courses. He took courses in the law—not to become a lawyer but in order to deflect attacks by racists against his East Pasco Self-Help Coop—and completed divinity training, ultimately being licensed to preach by the Southern Baptists. Fletcher proved a natural preacher. According to Governor Evans, “he had the audiences rolling in the aisles with laughter and two minutes later they’d have tears in their eyes.”<sup>1</sup> His legal training certainly came in handy during his time at the Labor Department, but it was his divinity training that would guide him for the rest of his life, even as he returned to politics, again and again. Through it, building on his life experience from politics to poverty and back again, he developed the Victorious Living Creed, a set of beliefs which he hoped would integrate for black people their historical spirituality with their everyday lives in an era when the bright future of the civil rights movement seemed to be fading in the face of continuing racism.<sup>2</sup> Comprised of eight tenets, each building on the logic and faith of the last, the Creed stated:

“I believe my living will not be in vain because I am convinced I am made in God’s image and that his power dwells within me.

I believe my living will not be in vain because I am convinced that there is a God and I trust in his love, justice and mercy.

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Griffey, “‘The Blacks Should Not Be Administering the Philadelphia Plan’: Nixon, the Hard Hats, and ‘Voluntary’ Affirmative Action,” in David Goldberg and Trevor Griffey, Eds., *Black Power at Work: Community Control, Affirmative Action, and the Construction Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 142, 152-156.

<sup>1</sup> Dan Evans interview, October 28, 2010

<sup>2</sup> Paul Fletcher interview, April 2, 2011

I believe my living will not be in vain because I am convinced God put me here to be his servant and that I am to be an instrument of his will during my sojourn on earth.

I believe my living will not be in vain because I am convinced God provided me with one or more gifts and talents, and that with my own efforts and his help, plus the aid of education and training, I can develop my gifts and talents into skills, technical or professional abilities and be rendered able to do some of the world's work.

I believe my living will not be in vain because I am convinced that if I try, God will help me find ways to use my skills, technical or professional ability in service to his cause.

I believe my living will not be in vain because I am convinced that in serving God's cause, I will be able to sustain my own life and be of benefit to mankind and humanity in the process.

I believe my living will not be in vain because I am convinced that in serving God's cause and sustaining my own life and being of benefit to mankind and humanity, my deeds, private and public, will become building blocks out of which a victorious life is built.

I believe my living will not be in vain because I am convinced that by following this creed my life's work will be dedicated to God, and my lifestyle will become a light, a guide and example that my family, friends,

acquaintances and others might use in fulfilling their destiny during their sojourn on earth.”<sup>3</sup>

Each tenet of the faith begins with the statement “I believe my living will not be in vain.” This speaks to a deep, driving fear within Fletcher that his life would be without consequence or meaning, that he would not be remembered. It was this fear (among other factors) that drove him to achieve his successes in life and which caused him to pursue the limelight of public service. This fear was rooted in his early childhood and his ancestry.

Arthur Fletcher was not born Arthur Fletcher; Fletcher was the name of his adoptive father, the Buffalo soldier. Arthur Fletcher was born out of wedlock, and never knew his birth father. That man may have lived a long or a short life, may have been rich or poor, educated or not; Arthur would never know more about his birth father than he would about his slave ancestors. But even the relatives that he did know seemed to die in obscurity—mainly because of the pervasive American racism that sought to diminish and erase the achievements of African Americans. His mother wanted to teach; instead she cleaned homes, and as far as Art was concerned, the various employers she had over the years never really knew her and wouldn’t remember her; to them she was expendable. This instilled in Art from a very young age a desperate desire to leave some record of his existence. When noted black educator and entrepreneur Mary McLeod Bethune gave a talk at his school while on a 1938 tour of the Midwest, she said to his class, according to Fletcher,

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Fletcher funeral video, June 2005, in possession of the author

“someone in this room will advise presidents.” A terrific motivational technique, she probably said that to every class she addressed, but for young Arthur, that statement represented a path out of obscurity to a life not lived in vain.<sup>4</sup>

The first two tenets, “I am convinced I am made in God’s image and that his power dwells within me,” and “I am convinced that there is a God and I trust in his love, justice and mercy,” make clear Fletcher’s belief that he was made in the image of a loving, just, powerful, and merciful God. At the same time as he was acknowledging his fear, Fletcher was envisioning a method for overcoming it. With the omnipotent power of a god, a man can do anything, but when tempered with a sense of “love, justice and mercy” such a man will use his power for good. Rather than finding motivation in resentment and revenge for the evils perpetrated on his people by the racist society, Fletcher sought to love and treat with mercy his enemies—unreconstructed southerners and other racists—but he never forgot the importance of justice. When he found himself in a position of power within the federal government, he became a tough advocate for the equal employment opportunity that had long been denied his people.<sup>5</sup>

The third tenet, “God put me here to be his servant and...I am to be an instrument of his will during my sojourn on earth” is the most problematic of the Creed. Variations of this tenet have appeared throughout history, often with disastrous results. The main problem with this concept is the self-certainty that

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur Fletcher Interview, April 9, 2003; Peterson, “Kansas Roots of Arthur Allen Fletcher.”

<sup>5</sup> “Address by Assistant Secretary of Labor Arthur Fletcher at Annual Convention of Associated General Contractors,” *Construction Labor Report* 808, March 17, 1971; Nick Kotz, “U.S. Agencies Cited in Failure to Enforce Minority Jobs Plan,” *Washington Post*, March 18, 1971; Arthur Fletcher Interview, April 9, 2003; Golland, *Constructing Affirmative Action*, 159-165.



humans have evinced over the centuries in their personal visions of the will of their gods. Major organized religions like the Catholic Church have imposed their “official” interpretations of “God’s will” on their adherents, keeping personal visions in check. But with the advent of Protestantism, the relationship with the deity no longer required the interpolation of an officiant, ending the Catholic hierarchy’s dominant interpretations but opening up for every believer the possibility of his own. But this tenet is redeemed in that Fletcher’s vision of himself as an “instrument of [God’s] will” is in the context of his vision of God as loving, just, and merciful. Not seeing his god as a vengeful god, Fletcher sought reconciliation—in other words, he would “be an instrument of his will” for love and justice rather than revenge. Antagonists have often seen Fletcher’s affirmative action programs as vengeful, but he didn’t see them that way, and the current author’s recent work has vindicated Fletcher’s position. The Philadelphia Plan dealt with the racial exclusion of qualified blacks from the skilled building trades unions and lucrative employment on major construction projects by requiring that blacks be considered for union membership and employment on an equal basis, and that youths considering careers in the field be accepted into training programs without racial prejudice. The Philadelphia Plan did set racial hiring goals, but always based on the local supply of qualified black workers who had previously been excluded from employment.<sup>6</sup>

The fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh tenets of the creed offer a prescription, based again on Fletcher’s own experience, for developing and building upon one’s natural talents to the betterment of self, family, and society. The fourth tenet reads

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<sup>6</sup> Golland, *Constructing Affirmative Action*

“I am convinced God provided me with one or more gifts and talents, and that with my own efforts and his help, plus the aid of education and training, I can develop my gifts and talents into skills, technical or professional abilities and be rendered able to do some of the world’s work.” Here Fletcher is referring to his athletic and political abilities. In high school he lettered in football, basketball, and track, and became the first black member of the all-state football squad. He played football at Washburn University and then turned pro, playing the 1951 summer exhibition season with the Los Angeles Rams, integrating the Baltimore Colts in the 1951 regular season, and spending the 1952 season with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the Canadian Football League. His old war injury didn’t bother him, but he attributed to it his ultimate failure to fulfill his dream of a full pro football career. On the left side of his stomach, the pink scar was evident every time he visited the locker room. His coaches were concerned. “They said...‘if you get hit and can’t perform and we’ve got our pass offense molded around you we’re out of the season.’ So I never really did get into the starting lineup,” Fletcher later related.<sup>7</sup>

Almost without skipping a beat, Fletcher fell back on the other talent he had developed in college. Washburn’s location in Kansas’ capital city, Topeka, provided Fletcher with early political opportunities. Through a connection to Elijah Scott, attorney for the plaintiffs in the Brown case, Fletcher secured a position as doorman and page at the state capitol, and he also worked full-time as a waiter at the Jayhawk Hotel, a popular hangout for state politicians. It was there that Fletcher first met Fred

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<sup>7</sup> Dunbar, “Just As It Seems to Me,” August n.d., 1948; “Athlete Assumes Y Post,” *Tri-City Herald*, April 12, 1965; Whitaker to Casselman, February 25, 1969; “Hard-Driving Black Official,” December 2, 1971; and Arthur Fletcher Interview, April 9, 2003.

Hall, then the Ford County Attorney. When he returned to Kansas after his football career, Hall was lieutenant governor with an eye on the statehouse. Fletcher campaigned hard for Hall, ultimately bringing him the state's significant black vote in the southeastern and northeastern regions of the state. As with football, Fletcher attributed his political success not simply to his natural talents but to his training. He believed that everyone had talents which could be developed through rigorous training, and saw this as a critical element in the formula for a successful life.<sup>8</sup>

The creed's fifth tenet, "if I try, God will help me find ways to use my skills, technical or professional ability in service to his cause," posits that talent and training are insufficient without great effort. In California, after Mary's suicide, Fletcher had already seen how far he could go based on talent and training alone. Now faced with the disintegration of his family, his life and faith were shaken to the core. Daughter Phyllis, who had started shoplifting, hitchhiked to Chicago on her eighteenth birthday; Art, Jr., Fletcher's oldest son, lost a full scholarship to art school after being caught with a cigarette; and younger brothers Paul and Philip both went to juvenile hall for delinquency, Philip increasingly turning to drugs. There were months when Fletcher couldn't make the rent, and hid from the landlord in Berkeley's ghetto. It took some time, but he eventually realized that if he put some serious effort into it, he could get his life back on track. His talent and training helped him get his foot back in the door—a fellow Washburn alumnus asked him to chair the local school bond initiative—but it was his effort campaigning for that and in his subsequent assembly race which made possible the job offer to lead the

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<sup>8</sup> Whitaker to Casselman, February 25, 1969; "Hard-Driving Black Official," December 2, 1971; Arthur Fletcher Interview, April 9, 2003; and Peterson, "Kansas Roots of Arthur Allen Fletcher."

Higher Horizons program in Washington State. Likewise it was his hard work in Pasco that led to his successful city council bid and recognition by Governor Dan Evans. Then, his strenuous efforts on the campaign trail in 1968 led to his appointment to the Labor Department by President Nixon.<sup>9</sup>

The creed's sixth and seventh tenets, "in serving God's cause, I will be able to sustain my own life and be of benefit to mankind and humanity in the process," and in doing so "my deeds, private and public, will become building blocks out of which a victorious life is built," build on the developing momentum of the creed. "God's cause," for Fletcher, was to use his talents and skills, developed by training and made potent by effort, to serve the betterment of mankind. Here we see the transformation wrought by the tragedy of his wife's death in stark relief. Fletcher's first foray into politics, back in Kansas, had been devoted to his own financial enrichment; the benefits to his family and his community were mere happy byproducts. "Once fate convinced me that politics was not about social justice," he later said of those years, "I started trying to figure out a way to make some money." He opened a used-car business by getting the Fort Riley and Forbes Air Force Base Credit Unions to pre-approve member soldiers and airmen, and based on those lines of credit bought dozens of cars wholesale at auction in Kansas City to sell to the servicemen at a profit. Then he looked into the files of his father's old segregated American Legion chapter in Junction City and found the contact information for an entertainment agent in New York City. He contracted with the National Guard

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<sup>9</sup> "Mental Patient Leaps to Death," October 3, 1960; Arthur Fletcher Interview, April 9, 2003; Paul Fletcher interviews, July 30, 2010 (by and in possession of the author), September 25, 2010, and April 2, 2011; Paul and Sylvia Fletcher interview, December 28, 2010; and Sylvia Fletcher, email message to author, April 6, 2011.

commandants in armories in Kansas and the four states bordering Kansas—in other words, states with an interest in Kansas’s highways—to arrange to use the armory auditoriums. Fletcher would sell enough advance tickets to pay the booking agent and the performer, the generals would keep the parking concessions, and Fletcher would clean up selling higher-priced tickets at the door. Before long this Kansas deputy highway commissioner was presenting Ray Charles and other such artists to mostly-black audiences throughout the region. But in 1961, with his career in ruins and his family falling apart, Fletcher resolved to use his political skills for the betterment of his fellow man, and became a civil rights community organizer as a prelude to his state assembly race. For the remainder of his long political life, Fletcher never forgot what it was like to be a single parent in that Berkeley ghetto. “I came out of there,” he said, “with an understanding of what it’s like to be poor in a sea of wealth.” He always made a good living after that, despite the occasional setback, but his goals were never again rooted in the desire for personal wealth: he sought to benefit his community.<sup>10</sup>

Which brings us to the eighth and final tenet of the creed, “by following this creed my life’s work will be dedicated to God, and my lifestyle will become a light, a guide and example that my family, friends, acquaintances and others might use in fulfilling their destiny during their sojourn on earth.” Here Fletcher returns to and confronts his deepest fear, evident throughout the Creed, that his life will have been in vain. In 1995 he turned against Kansas Senator Robert Dole, then the front-runner for the 1996 Republican presidential nomination, when Dole disowned the

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<sup>10</sup> Arthur Fletcher interview, April 9, 2003; Peterson, “The Kansas Roots of Arthur Allen Fletcher,” 22-23.

party's connection to affirmative action—a connection embodied by Fletcher. In the Kansas of his youth, Republicans were still very much the party of Lincoln, and Democrats were closely aligned with the unreconstructed Democrats of the South; but as the years passed and the parties realigned on civil rights, Fletcher remained a Republican out of a deeply-held belief in personal accountability and the benefits of free enterprise. Fletcher had long been a supporter of Dole's, from the senator's early career in Kansas politics to his vice presidential run in 1976, when Fletcher was an advisor in the Ford White House. But as the "father of affirmative action," Fletcher saw Dole's rhetorical attacks on his programs as an attack on the ability of "family, friends, acquaintances and others"—in other words, the African American community—to fulfill "their destiny during their sojourn on earth." Dole's attack on affirmative action was an attack on one of the most important "building blocks" (seventh tenet) by which Fletcher had made it possible for others to realize their dreams. Affirmative Action, Fletcher maintained, was a civil rights policy that was no government handout: unlike Aid to Families with Dependent Children, which Fletcher saw as destructive of the black family and prone to generate government dependence, affirmative action required that its beneficiaries work. It opened the door, but the students and employees who benefited from it would be responsible for themselves once they went through. To attack affirmative action was to attempt to close that door, and by the 1990s, when a significant proportion of the African American community had made it through but so many—crushed by the continuing night of institutional racism—had yet to enter, the importance of keeping that door

open seemed self-evident.<sup>11</sup>

In 1974, fresh from his experience directing the United Negro College Fund, Fletcher had established The Society for Victorious Living (SVL), incorporated as a non-profit in the District of Columbia. The “chief objective of the society,” Fletcher wrote in 1976, “is that of raising monies to establish a...scholarship and financial aid fund.” Fletcher had been impressed by the work of UNCF, and created the SVL as a corollary: “irrespective of sex, race, color, national origin, or religion,” Fletcher wrote, students would “achieve a higher level of God-consciousness and...develop their inborn potentials into...professional abilities so they can care for themselves and help God manage the universe.” But the SVL sputtered as a serious fundraising program. For one thing, Fletcher had other interests that successfully competed for his time. He founded Arthur Fletcher Associates, a consulting firm for minority contractors, and eventually became a federal contractor himself. At the same time, the language he used in SVL literature was poorly chosen for fundraising. “God-consciousness” and “help God manage the universe” were not phrases that typically appealed to major educational donors; and Fletcher’s professional life was strictly secular and non-sectarian, a position that did not appeal to the rising evangelical Christian groups who tended to favor donations to their own charities. Fletcher was basically stuck in the middle: he believed deeply in the role of faith in education but he believed just as much in equal opportunity, and so he could never allow himself to favor one religious sect over another. The goal was equal education of the

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<sup>11</sup> Kevin Merida, “The Firm Founder of Affirmative Action: Arthur Fletcher Isn’t Going to Take a Challenge to his Legacy Lying Down,” *Washington Post*, June 13, 1995; David S. Broder, “Rights Commissioner Arthur Fletcher Joins GOP Presidential Field,” *Washington Post*, July 8, 1995.

nation's youth: Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim, the practice of religion mattered far less than the basic faith in the importance of a supreme being as a provider of human potential.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, it was becoming dreadfully apparent that the gains of the civil rights movement (and Fletcher's own role as an early government proponent of affirmative action) were not translating into real equality between the races. True, public facilities had integrated and blacks were voting throughout the nation, but white flight from the cities had stalled integration in housing, education, and even employment as the manufacturing sector disappeared and good jobs moved to the suburbs where inner-city blacks found it difficult to commute, let alone compete. Even the building construction trades, the industry that Fletcher had tackled with the Philadelphia Plan in 1969, had managed to remain segregated: the skilled unions had integrated but had given control over hiring to job-site foremen, who gave overwhelmingly more days of work to their fellow whites.<sup>13</sup>

With the advent of the Reagan administration, Fletcher—like many civil rights figures—became dismayed by the growth of the black underclass. As recession followed recession and last-hired blacks found themselves first-fired, black unemployment hovered between 200% and 300% of white unemployment. Majority-black neighborhoods in cities throughout the nation—even the beautiful public housing projects in which such earlier hope had been held—became rife with

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur Fletcher, "Victorious Living: An Idea Whose Time Has Come," n.d. 1976 (Records of President Gerald R. Ford, Arthur Fletcher Files, Box 3, "Society for Victorious Living" folder, Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI)

<sup>13</sup> Timothy J. Minchin and John A. Salmond, *After the Dream: Black and White Southerners since 1965* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011); Golland, *Constructing Affirmative Action*, 165-169.



welfare dependence, drug abuse, crime, and gang activity. Fletcher had been there; he knew how hard it was to raise children in such an environment, especially as a single parent. As the prisons began to fill with more and more black youths, he worried that the underclass was becoming a permanent reality.<sup>14</sup>

Fletcher resolved to do something about this growing problem. He felt that many blacks had basically been brainwashed into a sense of inferiority by racist education, housing, and employment practices and that this was reinforced by the drug-addled, gang-rife ghetto culture. He too had been raised on the “wrong side of the tracks,” and he insisted that if the new generation could learn from his experience they might be motivated to try to break the cycle of poverty. He wanted the youth to understand that the old Jim Crow barriers were gone, and that with determination and self-esteem they might be able to escape the ghetto and the yawning maw of prison. A mind, for Fletcher, was indeed a terrible thing to waste, and he re-imagined the SVL as an inner-city school with a curriculum based on the teachings of self-help authors Napoleon Hill and Clement Stone combined with the self-esteem tenets of the Victorious Living Creed. After his stint as chairman of the United States Commission on Civil Rights under President George H.W. Bush, he started looking at properties in the District of Columbia, but he continued to have

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<sup>14</sup> Arthur Fletcher interview, April 9, 2003; Minchin and Salmond, *After the Dream*, 6-7, 54-57, 74, 95-96, 140-46, 156-59, 187-98, 204-5, 232, 291-96; and Paul Fletcher interview, April 2, 2011. For more on the creation of a seemingly-permanent black underclass, see, for instance, Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (NY: Basic Books, 1986, 1996), pp. 283-87; Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (NY: Vintage Books, 1992), 223-306; and Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 137-202.

problems raising enough money to fulfill that dream.<sup>15</sup>

In the last decade of his life, Fletcher thought he had found a way to finally fund construction of the SVL. After his abortive bid for the presidency, Fletcher became involved with Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan in an attempt to identify and restore the monies of the Native American Trust Fund. A century earlier the federal government had divided Indian lands among the specific members of the tribes, and had been collecting rent on their behalf ever since. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these funds totaled trillions of dollars. Following a lawsuit filed on behalf of the tribes in 1996 for “what has been called the largest and longest lasting financial scandal in the history of the U.S. government,” the feds attempted to catalogue and restore as much of those monies as possible, and Fletcher signed on to the project in exchange for a three per cent commission. At his death in 2005, Fletcher was still working on the project but still had not earned nearly enough money to fund the SVL. (Had he been able to stay on the project just a few more years, however, this story might have ended quite differently: in 2010, Congress approved a settlement with the Indians totaling 3.4 billion dollars; three per cent would have earned Fletcher more than \$100 million—more than enough to establish the Society for Victorious Living.)<sup>16</sup>

Arthur Fletcher saw life as a constant struggle to avoid obscurity, and as such

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<sup>15</sup> Arthur Fletcher interview, April 9, 2003; Paul Fletcher interview, April 2, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> “Native American Trust Fund: Massive Mismanagement,” Friends Committee on National Legislation (<http://fcn.org/issues/nativeam/cobell/>, accessed April 29, 2011); Paul Courson, “U.S. offers to pay Native Americans \$1.4 billion for lost funds,” CNN U.S., December 8, 2009 ([http://articles.cnn.com/2009-12-08/us/indian.land\\_1\\_individual-indian-money-elouise-cobell-native-americans?s=PM:US](http://articles.cnn.com/2009-12-08/us/indian.land_1_individual-indian-money-elouise-cobell-native-americans?s=PM:US), accessed April 29, 2011); Miriam Raftery, “House Approves Settlement in Native American Trust Fund Case,” East County Magazine, December 2010 (<http://www.eastcountymagazine.org/node/4949>, accessed April 29, 2011); and Paul Fletcher interview, April 2, 2011. The quotation is from Raftery.

he devoted his to public service, advising two governors and four presidents, and playing a role in such events as Brown vs. Board of Ed., the launch of the “A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste” ad campaign, and the return of mismanaged Indian funds. But his vision of life and devotion to his fellow man was rooted in a deep religious faith as much as a desire to leave a mark on history. This faith, largely latent until the death of his first wife, became the driving force behind his greatest successes and no small comfort during periods of failure. His was a non-fundamentalist Protestant faith, based on a personal relationship with a supreme being and a personal interpretation of religious dogma, eventually encapsulated as the Victorious Living Creed, which coupled his strong belief in personal responsibility with his integrationist, egalitarian ethos. Sadly, his dream of employing the Creed as a tool to achieve equal opportunity in the United States by digging the underclass out of ignorance, poverty, prison, and despair never came to fruition, but his life story remains an example of the benefits of self-esteem, talent, training, determination, effort, and faith.

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