

## **Tavis Smiley Phone Interview with Betty Lamarr, Interview Date: 2-16-2011**

**Betty Lamarr:** Thanks so much for giving me the opportunity to have this conversation with you this morning. Let's reexamine the concept of "Success vs. Greatness" in light of local Memphis and world current events. What tools can Memphis youth use to overcome the challenges they face today---such as the personal, spiritual, education, community and network challenges?

**Tavis Smiley:** The short answer is, I think it's important to know exactly what it is that you believe. I think the real value of education is teaching one how to think critically for himself or herself. The real value of education is not the rote learning that so many young people are exposed to today, but the real value is ultimately teaching you to think critically for yourself. When you learn how to think critically for yourself, you can come to your own conclusions, your own ideas. You are an original and not a copy of somebody else, and you're not afraid to have your assumptions reexamined by being exposed to other ideas. When you think critically for yourself, you know exactly what it is that *you* believe.

The problem with the world today is that people are blown around like the wind. They don't know exactly what their own core beliefs are, so I'm always talking to young people, and others for that matter, about being sure that you understand what your *core* convictions are. What do *you* believe? Once you're clear about that, it makes navigating life a little bit easier. Again, that doesn't mean that your assumptions can't be reexamined. It doesn't mean that you can't be exposed to new ways of thinking that might help you expand your inventory of ideas, but it does mean that you have to at least start with the notion that these are the convictions that you want to live your life by. So, I try to live my life by a certain set of immutable principles, and those immutable principles are based upon what I have come to believe about the life I want to live and the legacy I want to leave, and I try to encourage others to do the same.

**Betty Lamarr:** Ok, on the world stage, what lessons can we learn from recent youth activism in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, Algeria, and now Libya and Bahrain?

**Tavis Smiley:** I think the short answer to what we can learn, to what we can take away from these explosions, these democratic explosions around the world, really is a lesson we need to take from *them*---but it's a lesson interestingly that *we taught* them, a lesson we taught the world. African Americans have always been the conscience of this country, the United States of America, but in our fight for justice, in our fight for freedom, in our fight for equity and for fairness, and for respect, quite frankly---the world has taken note of that. The world has taken note of the struggle that we, Black folk, were engaged in for civil rights, for human rights, for economic rights. The world has watched our struggle, and they've taken a page from our playbook. So the lesson we need to take from them, really, is a lesson of being reminded that *we taught* the world how to protest, *we taught* the world how to stand up straight, *we taught* the world how to sing these protest songs. "We Shall Overcome" is sung around the world. Dr. King is the greatest American we've ever produced, and people are quoting King all around the world, including Egypt and other places.

So the lesson we take from them is again, is a lesson to remind us that *we taught* the world how to protest, how to demand change, how to fight for justice for all. We taught the world about a love that liberates people, and how to do it all nonviolently. So I hope what we take

from this moment is again a reminder that we know how to do this. And if we are sick and tired of public policy, of injustice, of inequities, of unfairness in our own country, then we need to be reminded that we know how to resolve this. It means people organizing their power in some compelling strength. I'm just fascinated watching this all around the world because I'm reminded again that we taught the world how to do this. But since we've forgotten this, we've gotten lazy, we've gotten complacent. We've gotten adjusted to injustice so that in our own country we need to be reminded that the people have the power, and if we don't like the direction of this government in this country's moving in, then we have to speak up about it. Activism, politics is not a spectator sport. You've got to get off the sidelines and get involved in the game.

**Betty Lamarr:** Absolutely! Ok, how important are social networks, new media and emerging technology to broadcast journalism?

**Tavis Smiley:** Terribly important. I just did a conversation on my public radio show the other day about the power, the importance of social media. The short answer is I've learned for myself, sometimes the hard way, that it's impossible to navigate forward in today's world without understanding, without appreciating and without, on some level, embracing social media. It is the new way. It's no longer so new, but it is the most contemporary way of communicating a message.

I think there's a lot of silliness on the internet. I think there's a lot of mean-spiritedness on the internet. There's too much gossip on the internet. There's too much negativity on the internet. There's too much pornography, child pornography on the internet. There's all kinds of things about the internet that I could complain about, but I have to juxtapose those complaints with the good that can be done vis-à-vis the internet, vis-à-vis social media. So that we have to find a way to navigate ourselves forward in a world where social media is not going away. It's not going to disappear. It's going to become more important, more relevant. And so, for those of us who have slowly come to accept that, you've got to deal with it and find a way to make it work for you.

**Betty Lamarr:** Ok, so how important is a support network, fraternity or sisterhood for individual and community greatness? And in your own life, how much did your support network help fuel your inner strength and determination? And, how did you find the determination you needed to take \$50 and a small suitcase such a long, long way?

**Tavis Smiley:** It's terribly important. None of us walks this journey alone. Our destiny as individuals is inextricably tied to a larger group. Put another way, every one of us is who we are because somebody loved us, so that none of us makes it, none of us succeeds, none of us walks this journey alone. So networks, familial networks, social networks, community networks, what King would call "the beloved community", all these networks are terribly important. In my opinion, I would not be as fortunate without a network of people I have relied on who supported me, who pushed me toward my potential, my possibility.

In regards to the question about going to Indiana University, it's not about money and a suitcase. I think every one of us has the capacity to do more than we think we're capable of, and this requires us to take stock of our situation and make a decision, make a choice---again about the kind of life you want to live and the kind of legacy you want to leave. And I was thinking about these things even when I was a young person. I got exposed to Dr. King, his

work, his writing, his speeches, when I was just twelve or thirteen. To be exposed to him at such a young age, when King had long since been dead. He had long since been dead, but his work brought me to life. I decided at a young age, at about twelve or thirteen, that I wanted to live a certain kind of life and I wanted to leave a certain kind of legacy, and I've been working on that ever since. I'm a cracked vessel. Like everybody else, I've got my failings and my shortcomings, but you know I'm a work in progress. Life's also about making a choice.

Life is so much about making choices. That's the thing about life. It really boils down to that. Every one of us has a life to live and a legacy to leave, and all of that is determined by the kind of choices that you make along the way. So, I decided that when I was a young person I wanted to go to college. I wanted to get an education. I knew that my life would begin or end with the quality of my education. Malcolm X once said, "Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today." I knew that quote as a child. I believed that quote. I knew that education was my passport to the future, and I was determined that nothing was going to stop me, no lack of financial aid, no lack of a dormitory to stay in, no lack of books, no lack period. Nothing was going to stop me from getting an education, and when you're that serious about anything in life---whether it's education or pick any other issue---when you get that serious about your future, I believe the universe will line up behind you. The universe will line up to support you into getting across that finish line, and so I'm just glad it worked out.

**Betty Lamarr:** Ok. Well, in conclusion, when all is said and done, what do you feel is your single most significant contribution? And of course, you went into just then. What do you want to leave us as your legacy?

**Tavis Smiley:** Good question! I hope that my most significant contribution has yet to be made. I've been very fortunate. As you know, in 2011 we're celebrating our 20<sup>th</sup> year in the broadcast business. The reason why we're coming to Memphis, is part of a seven city tour in conjunction with PBS and NPR stations for "This Morning with Tavis Smiley" and "This Evening with Tavis Smiley" events. It's a seven city tour to celebrate the years I've been blessed in the broadcasting business, what I've learned along the way, having a book coming out. My book talks about the 20 biggest mistakes I ever made in the broadcasting industry, and what I've learned about those mistakes. The book is called Fail Up, and I believe my life is a series of failures but I've been blessed to fail my way up to the top. And I believe every one of us can fail up. If we learn the lessons from the mistakes or the failures that we have made. If we learn the life lessons, apply them to our lives, take them apart, deconstruct them, get what we're supposed to get, then we can fail our way up---if we learn the right lessons. So, that for me, I'm still making mistakes here and there. I'm still learning. I'm still getting better---I hope!

I would like to think that my greatest contributions are ahead. I've been very fortunate throughout the years to have achieved a lot. I've received all kinds of honors and honorary degrees, been celebrated around the world in a variety of places. I mean I feel very fortunate, very blessed at what God has done with me over these 20 years in broadcast business that we're celebrating this year. But again, if I thought my best stuff had already been accomplished, if I thought my best days were behind me, it'd be hard to get out of bed every morning because what's the point in getting up if you've already done the best you can do? So, I don't believe I've done my best. I do believe that every day I'm getting better, so I hope

my greatest contributions are still to come.

And I hope, in answer to your question, that my legacy will be one of trying to make the world safe for the legacy of Dr. King. I regard Dr. King as the greatest American we have ever produced, and I know there's a strange connection with King in Memphis. I can't go to Memphis without going to the (Civil Rights)Museum, going to The Lorraine. It's an annual ritual for me. Whenever I come to Memphis, I have to go to pay my respects. Again, I believe that Dr. King is the greatest American we've ever produced, and I think my role, my small part is to make the world safe for his legacy. And I really believe that the future of this democracy is directly linked to how seriously we are going to take the legacy that is the meaning of King's life, and that is following: Justice for all, service to others, and a love that liberates people. Again, justice for all, service to others, and a love that liberates *everyday* people.

And that's what I hope I do through radio, television, print, the internet, public appearances, my book company, my production company, my foundation, all the enterprises that we own and operate. It's all really about trying to make sure there's justice for everybody. We're using these platforms to try to serve people by asking questions, raising issues, profiling people. By way of our own media platform, we're trying to serve others, trying to raise issues of justice, fairness and equality for everybody---and ultimately, trying to love people. I believe that love simply means that everybody is worthy just because. Not because of what your last name is, not because of who you know, where you live, how much money you make, where you went to school, who your connections are. I believe that every one of us is worthy just because. Everybody is somebody's child. Everybody's somebody's kid. We're all God's children, and I believe that makes us come out whole. It makes all of us worthy just because every one of our lives have equal value. Every life is precious. When we get to a place in this country when we start to believe that, that means we're going to start treating people that way. That means everybody has health care, everybody has a job, everybody has employment, everybody can live in a safe environment. Now, nobody wants to live next to an environmental toxic dump. We don't believe it, that this is going to be a country where everybody is worthy just because they ought to be treated that way by private and public institutions. That's what our work is all about. I'll continue doing it, and I thank you for this chance to talk to you about it.

**Betty Lamarr:** Thank you very much, and congratulations on your 20 year anniversary. And I just want to say you've always been an inspiration for me, Mr. Smiley. I, myself, have been on public access here in Memphis since 1988. And just following you.

**Tavis Smiley:** Oh, yes.

**Betty Lamarr:** We need that motivation, somebody that we can follow so we can say, "I'll never give up. I'll never give up no matter how difficult because I believe in *me*, and I want to thank you for being that motivation for me. I look forward to seeing you here in the great city of Memphis on Saturday, March 5<sup>th</sup>.

**Tavis Smiley:** You are very kind, and I look forward to seeing you and returning to the great city of Memphis. God bless you.

**Betty Lamarr:** God bless you, and again thank you very much for your time, Mr. Smiley.