

What Shall We Teach Our Children About Slavery?

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No issue seems to have become as controversial within the African American community as deciding whether or not to talk to our children about the sad and painful history of our people in this country. How much, if any at all, should we tell them about distant forebears? For the longest time, black people have not wanted to talk about the years we spent in slavery or under the restrictions of Jim Crow laws. It was as if we were too ashamed of that episode, and did not want to think about it, much less talk about it with our children.

This feeling is as old as the birth of the first generation of black people born after slavery in the Reconstruction era. Belinda Hurmece has edited a collection of twenty-one oral histories of people who actually lived through slavery, entitled; "My Folks Don't Want Me to Talk About Slavery". In the Introduction, she reports on the comments of Sarah Debro who had been a slave in North Carolina. Sarah reports that her parents told her never to talk about slavery, because they were ashamed of having lived in that condition. That feeling did not end with Sarah Debro's generation. It has persisted from that time until now. There are many black people who, like the parents of Sarah Debro, believe that "We aren't the ones to blame for slavery. Why talk about it now?"

As we stand at the dawn of another century and a new millennium, it seems useful to visit this question again. What should we teach our children about the history and experiences of their ancestors in this country? The question is made all the more urgent, because this is literally the first generation that has no living memory of and no conscious experience with the kind of racism and blatant discrimination that was once the norm in this country. They were born after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer and Medgar Evers. The Civil Rights Movement, which was the event through which my generation of black Americans has lived, is little more to them than a chapter in a history book.

They never experienced the humiliation of a posted sign that read WHITE and COLORED. They were never required to sit in the back of the bus or the front of a train where the noise and fumes were the worst. In this age of Denzel Washington and Will Smith, they never had the experience of either never seeing a black face on a motion picture screen, or if there was a black character, that person was either a slave, a buffoon or a criminal. This generation of black children has always attended integrated public schools, often with black people serving as the principal of the building. They watched General Colin Powell lead United States military forces in the Persian Gulf War. They are aware that black people across this country hold thousands of political offices at every level of government. A noted black intellectual named Michael Eric Dyson attempted to discuss what he saw as the stereotypes he identified in a character in the recently released film, "Star Wars: The Phantom Menace." Most of the youth of this generation either did

not know what he was talking about, or simply did not care. Perhaps now is the time to leave all of the pain and hardship of our history behind us. Maybe our children are better off if we simply let them enjoy the world in which they now live, and not keep trying to tell them about the world in which previous generations of our people had to live. What should we teach our children about our history in this country?

I believe there is much that can be gained if we take a look at how Israel handled this problem in Deuteronomy 6. They too had once been slaves, and for a longer period of time. For four hundred and thirty years Israel was enslaved by the Pharaohs of Egypt. During those years, the Hebrew slaves built the great cities, statues and monuments of Egypt. And for a certain period of time, when their time of enslavement was drawing to a close, they even had to make bricks without straw. However, in Deuteronomy 6, when the Hebrews set out to provide a history lesson for their children, they do not avoid the episode of slavery. They simply do not stop there. They acknowledge that they had indeed been slaves, but they quickly move on to say that now they are living in a good and abundant land. They had been slaves, but they have come a long way since that time. And in making that observation, the Hebrews were saying a lot about themselves and about God.

I believe that we should teach our history to our children, no matter how painful or shameful it may have been at the time. They may never fully appreciate the benefits and opportunities they now enjoy if they do not also understand that things have not always been as they are now. Last week I participated in the commencement ceremony at Shaker Heights High School, I also signed every one of the diplomas, because I am the president of the local school board. None of that was possible when I finished high school in 1966. I sat there and listened to the senior class president and the student body president address the hundreds of people who had gathered for the ceremony. I remembered as I sat there, that when my mother graduated as the valedictorian of her high school class in Chicago in 1932, no black student was allowed to participate in the ceremony in any way. The world in which my son now lives is almost incomprehensible to my mother, and the world in which my mother once lived is nearly impossible for my son to imagine. However, that is an important story to tell so long as we do not stop with the way things used to be.

Notice in the text in Deuteronomy that the writer not only acknowledges that the Hebrews had been slaves in Egypt. It is also acknowledged that things have changed dramatically. The people now live in their own land, and they are the masters of their own fate. *Slaves* is who they were, not who they are any longer. And we as African Americans need to learn from this, and start taking careful note of the many and marvelous ways in which our lives have drastically and dramatically improved. And even though it is true that not all black people have progressed as far or as fast as some among us, the general improvement in the lives of black people in America simply cannot be ignored. We need to avoid so focusing on the aspects of racism and bigotry that do still remain, that we fail to see the opportunities that are now available, and the achievements that have been made over the last few decades.

As a single example, I wonder how many of our young people who are always searching for role models among the ranks of athletes, rap singers and movie stars, have decided to hang a picture of Kenneth Chenault on the wall of their bedroom or dorm room? I wonder how many black adults even know the name of Kenneth Chenault? We

all know about Kirk Franklin, Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neal, Puff Daddy, and others of that group. But what about Kenneth Chenault? He is the man who has just been named the next Chief Executive Officer of American Express, one of the largest financial service companies in the world. He has been in charge of their credit card business for the last several years. He is the man who oversees the green, gold and platinum cards that we are told, "Don't leave home without it." And he is just one of the many black people who now hold leadership positions not only in public agencies and governmental bodies, but in corporate America as well. We have come a long way.

The Surgeon General of the United States is a black man named David Satcher, who went to medical school right here in Cleveland, and attended this church during his student years. The president of the American League, one half of the teams comprising Major League Baseball, is a black man named Leonard Coleman from Montclair, New Jersey who I knew when I served a church in that town. Robert Johnson has turned the Black Entertainment Network into a powerhouse in the Cable TV industry. Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates, Orlando Patterson and William Julius Wilson have created an African American Studies department at Harvard University is unparalleled anywhere in the world. None of this should be construed as my suggestion that all of our problems have passed away. However, we will find the courage and energy to consider the struggles that still lie ahead of us when we take note of the accomplishments and achievements that have been made as a result of the struggles of the past. Like the Hebrews, we were slaves, but...!

However, it is important that we tell our children more than what we have been able to achieve in our lifetime, dramatic though those achievements have been. Part of what we must also tell our children is that we expect them to do much more with their lives than we could ever have accomplished in ours. We must challenge them not just to focus in on the opportunities that presently exist, but to set their sights on the doors that are not yet open, and knock them down or swing them open. Just as the generation ahead of mine expected us to go farther than they did, we must do the same with each successive generation. When Joshua led the people of Israel into the Promised Land, how could they ever imagine the power and splendor that would emerge under the reign of David and Solomon? When Jefferson, Franklin and Washington began shaping a new nation in 1776, how could they ever imagine the economic and technological might of the country today? If successive generations had not improved upon and exceeded the achievements and aspirations of their forebears, they would have been considered low-achievers at best, failure at worst. We dare not set a lower standard for ourselves.

Every black adult needs to challenge and encourage some black youngster to be a success in some area endeavor. We cannot allow them to become comfortable with the tired old excuses of what white people will not let them do. White people did not let Mary McLeod Bethune begin a college in Daytona Beach, Florida at the turn of the 20th century. She just did it! White people did not let Daniel Hale Williams perform the first successful open-heart surgery at Provident Hospital in Chicago in 1895, he just did it. All that white people did for Jackie Robinson in 1947 was give him the chance to play baseball in the Major League. Everything that he achieved both on the field and off is what he did on his own. White people did not let Paul Robeson become among the greatest athletes, singers, actors and social activists in American history. He just did all of those things in one lifetime. We must become increasingly impatient with excuses, and

increasingly demanding of achievement and results. That is what our parents demanded of us, and that is what we must demand of our children. This is certainly a part of what we must tell them.

What is equally important is that we adults be willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to allow our children to take advantage of the opportunities that now exist for them. We all know that traveling outside of the country is a great way to grow and mature as a human being. I never left this country until I went on my honeymoon at the age of twenty-six, and even then it was only to the Caribbean. One generation later, my son had the opportunity to travel to Europe with his high school marching band when he was fourteen, and to Central Asia with a national wrestling team when he was seventeen. It required some sacrifice on his parents' part to get him on both of those trips. However, that was nothing compared to what my mother sacrificed to provide me with opportunities when I was growing up, including putting me through college at great expense to her own needs and wants. But that is what was done for so many of us who are now adults, and that is what we should be ready and willing to do for our children today.

The final thing that parents must teach their children is the truth about how we made it from the dark days of slavery until now. That is another major point being made in Deuteronomy 6. God tells Israel to remember that it was not their efforts, but God's grace and power that brought them out of their slavery in Egypt. We must tell the same story. It was not by any efforts of our own, but by the grace of God that we have come this far. Why was slavery not able to destroy our spirits, if not our bodies? Why was Jim Crow unable to break our determination to achieve full and equal citizenship? Why were evil men like Bull Connor in Birmingham, Jim Clark in Selma, Ross Barnett in Mississippi and Lester Maddox in Georgia unable to ultimately deprive us of our hopes and dreams? While we should never underestimate the work and courage of our leaders like Dr. King and Malcolm X and others, we dare not overlook the fact that as the song says, "We've come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord."

This point was made in a powerful way in a recent story in the Plain Dealer last week. A national study was done to determine what sources of support were most mentioned by elderly black women who lived most of their lives in poverty. When the findings were reported, the local religion editor called me to see if the report seemed consistent with my experience. He was actually quite surprised by what was reported. The majority of the women answered that they were able to endure the hardships of their lives because of their deep and abiding faith in God. Over and over again, these women stated that they could bear their burdens, endure their hardships and face their problems, because they knew they were not alone. They firmly believed that their faith would see them through it all.

What that report did not conclude, is that one generation after another of our people has reached the same conclusion. That is the message in the great song, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." One verse says:

God of our weary years,
 God of our silent tears,
 Thou who has brought us thus far along the way...

In Deuteronomy 6, it was made clear to Israel that they should not boast about what they had done for themselves. Instead, they should acknowledge that God had delivered them with “great signs and wonders.” So it is with us today. God has delivered us with great signs and wonders. When the Montgomery Bus Boycott was able to get over 90% of all black people to avoid the buses for 381 days in the face of threats and intimidation, that was a great sign and wonder. When young black students found the courage to withstand centuries of segregation and dared to integrate schools, lunch counters and bus terminals; there were great signs and wonders. As Jesse Jackson says so graphically, “Hands that once picked cotton now pick presidents and members of Congress.” That is a great sign and wonder.

This is what we must teach our children. First, that we were slaves. Second, that we are slaves no longer. We as a people have come a long way since we labored in bondage. Third, we have every right to expect our children to aspire to things that were unimaginable in our generation. And we ought to be willing to sacrifice to help them reach their goals. And most important of all, we should never lose sight of the fact that we have not managed to accomplish any of this on our own. “We have come this far by faith.”

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