



## TO HONOR MARTIN L. KING, JR., STOP the INTERNAL BLEEDING

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I recently viewed various news specials commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination in Memphis. As I watched the black and white images of those historic, tragic days, I felt pain, remembering the tragedy of the moment in which a bullet killed a 39 year-old Black man with not just a dream, but a vision, a purpose and a mission to correct a nation's misdeeds. I also felt pride watching how the Black men and women of that time worked and walked together in unity, with dignity, to defeat the cancer afflicting the community from without. They spoke respectfully to each other and were united as Americans. Black Americans. The men were chivalrous; the young ladies, demure. The young people dressed appropriately, not to appease the White man, but to represent themselves as men and women in an industrialized society.

I've briefly perused blogs entitled "what has changed since MLK?" Since King, doors to colleges and jobs have opened—

some by law—and many Blacks took advantage of the rights to which they were born to receive, but had previously been denied. Many Blacks went on to become doctors, lawyers, corporate CEOs and entrepreneurs. Many Blacks now live quite comfortable lives, drive fine cars and drink fine wines and champagne and their children are raised to be tomorrow's leaders. For those who worked hard, studied long and persevered, life is good. They've grabbed the brass ring and know that America has a lot to offer those who seek to apply themselves and achieve it.

But some others have fallen on hard times, partly due to circumstances, partly due to choices made. Some (many young Black men, in particular), hope only to play ball or sing rap, rather than become architects or engineers. They seek to acquire "bling" instead of businesses. Many seek to blame slavery for why they can't succeed today. And in the same week of King's commemoration, we learned that high school graduation rates

nationwide are the lowest ever and a Black judge in Atlanta told the Black people in his courtroom that he's sick and tired of seeing so many Black men come before his bench.

In a recent *AJCO* op ed, MLK's former attorney, Clarence Jones, called for the new president to convene a special session of Congress in order to secure a national apology for slavery: "No greater tribute could be paid to King," he wrote. With all due respect to Mr. Jones, I say "Are you kidding me? Is that the problem, that there's been no national apology from Whites?" Please. I disagree.

Even in MLK's heydays, his marches and speeches weren't about seeking apologies for slavery; he was seeking Blacks' equal access to education and jobs, opportunities and equal rights as promised in the Constitution. King was looking to take us forward, not back 400 years. We need to pick our battles; waiting for whites to apologize ain't one of 'em.

Yes, some ills afflicting the Black community are yet based in the injustices

of Whites over the years. But Jones made no mention of how Blacks can honor King by remedying the ills facing the Black community, many now brought on from within. I say the Black community has a bigger problem than the fact that White people haven't apologized.

Don't get me wrong: I highly value apologies. They are required when an injustice has been wrought against another. Apologies are cathartic for the offender and healing for the one offended. So yes, an apology is in order...and (listen up, white people), it only takes one minute [hint, hint]. It would be wonderful to hear White America collectively say "Our ancestors were inhumane and barbaric. They hurt, wronged and wounded your ancestors bound in slavery for almost 300 years. It was wrong and we are sorry. We apologize."

But the problem with expecting an apology from modern-day Whites is many of them feel no personal responsibility for the sins of their fathers 400 years ago and for the injustices Blacks experienced in the 100-plus years post-Emancipation. You see,

most Whites don't get it, they just don't. Still. Rev. Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker—my former pastor and the former chief of staff to Martin Luther King—once said "I don't think any White person can really understand what it is like to be a Negro in America."

But okay; let's say that happens—the White man apologizes. *Then what? Do we all join hands cross-country and sing 'Kum Bah Ya'?* Will Black-on-Black crime decrease...or cease? Are all the ills of the Black community instantly remedied? Do young Black girls and women experience long-overdue social acceptance and hence gain self-esteem? And do absentee Black fathers suddenly return home to help raise the children they made, but abandoned? I think not. An apology—though a nice and needed gesture—is tantamount to putting a Band-Aid on a ruptured aortic aneurysm. Yes, there's internal bleeding in the Black community.

At present six states have already apologized for slavery, and years ago President Bill Clinton said of slavery "America was wrong." Since those public apologies, are the Black communities in

those states safer, healthier and wealthier than in other communities where apologies have yet to be offered? Is there more racial harmony and an increased percentage of Black two-parent households? And have Black attendance and high school graduation rates risen?

How best to honor King? I submit the following excerpts: "Put down the rap music and pick up a book. We don't need our Black men occupying more places in prison than in colleges. We don't need our young Black girls having babies and raising them alone. We don't need our young children unsupervised and roaming the streets all hours of night. Blacks who are successful, educated and drug-free, speak up. Show yourselves. White people must realize they cannot continue to be insensitive to—and disregard—others in society. Black people must realize we have work to do within the community, within ourselves. Parents, churches, corporations, everyone needs to get busy. We've got laws to change and attitudes to adjust." No, those aren't the words of Bill Cosby or Shelby Steele; those were my

words in a 1992 *USA Today* column. They didn't get much play; I'm not a celebrity.

I admit I am a strong proponent of personal responsibility, self-discipline and self-determination, and I make no apologies for that. It has served me well over my years. If anyone had a reason to fail at life, it was me. I grew up poor in New York City. I was a latch-key kid at age 6. I had no grandparents—never knew one of them. I had an absentee father and a single mother who, in my early years was attentive and strict, but in my later years, became wickedly jealous of her own daughter's success. I have no siblings. Drugs were in my community, but never in my clutch; I've never even smoked a joint. Sadly, I have no husband...yet (and pickings are now slim, it seems), and unfortunately, I have no children. And there's more. Yes, I've got a story to tell. It hasn't always been easy, but I chose to stay focused to make decisions so I'd not only survive, but thrive against all odds. Rising above your circumstances? I'm a witness it can be done.

Jones also wrote that King would have disappointment and

sadness concerning the racial animus in the presidential campaign and disappointment that America is still afflicted with "debilitating amnesia" about racism. I believe King would be most saddened and highly disappointed by the debilitating, inexcusable Black-on-Black crime; the dismantling of the Black family; the absence of fathers in the home and the squandering of educational opportunities available to today's youth. I feel he would've met with Isiah Thomas for saying it's okay to call a Black woman a 'bitch'. I feel he'd cringe at the improper dress and the lack of language skills in the younger generation.

Martin Luther King was an articulate man and eloquent orator who quoted Descartes and Socrates. He entered college at age 16. Today, too many youth take the path of least resistance: Speaking ebonics instead of English; fighting to wear baggy, saggy clothes instead of clothes that fit. They put "grillz" in their mouths where only white teeth, and perhaps orthodontics, were meant to be. Young love is replaced by lewd behavior and

today's song lyrics have gone from "My Cherie Amour" to "bitch, ho, slut and whore." Black-on-Black crime has skyrocketed as has the number of children born out of wedlock. I feel *these* things would sadden King, and have dishonored King and The Movement.

There need be a sea change of attitude and conduct to save a community not only in crisis, but in grave condition. The White man's apology alone won't remedy that.

Honor King by emulating him: King loved what America stood for and with education, respect, decency and decorum, he worked to make it meet its stated goals. Where there were wrongs, he, as a young 26 year-old, mobilized a nation.

Yes, Whites can still apologize; it will still be welcomed. Concurrently, they can work to stop passing racism down to their children, much of which is taught in their homes. Whites can address the needs of their own young boys—also angry, committing suicide, flunking school and committing crimes. They can stop losing their girls to anorexia, methamphetamines and booze. Internal bleeding.

A lot has changed in 40 years, but there's still much to do. Waiting for an apology may take forever and still won't heal the racial ills of

our land. The best way we all can honor King is to walk upright as respectable men and women—humans—in a civilized society, minimally affording

each other, in King's words, "ordinary rules of courtesy."

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