

Looking back to move forward by Kelvin De'Marcus Allen

The early years of my life in Durham, North Carolina, have shaped who I am today and I consider myself fortunate to have seen people of color who made great successes of themselves. Being poor and black don't make you a failure; it is believing that if you are poor and black you are destined to become a failure.

Despite my relative handicap for being both poor and black, I was acutely aware that my success or failure would be completely up to me. I have my mother to thank for this. Her love and guidance, even to this day, stand as a testament, in my view, as Christians often proclaim that "God will never leave you alone." I, like many poor black children from my era, witnessed the rapid change in the racial politics that took place during the 1960s. Although my first three years of public education were in segregated schools, looking back, I am not so sure those years were such bad years at all. Hindsight is 20/20, and although black people have made huge strides, there was something special about being around people who look like you, educating and encouraging you.

Today, with nearly 800,000 black males behind bars, our communities have become urban wastelands where gang violence, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancies have become the order of the day. The situation is not much better for black women either — according to Census 2000, African-American girls make up 29.4 percent of the population of girls under age 18, but are over-represented among those in the criminal and juvenile justice system. I often wonder to myself, "Where do we go from here?" One such crisis: Our communities are still reeling from the influx of crack cocaine into our communities in the 1980s. Another is in corporate America's slowness to move toward the kind of workplace inclusiveness that we see in entertainment and sports.

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As a result of this, young blacks in disproportionate numbers have lost hope in ever being a part of the “American Dream.” They feel crippled by this legacy, and often point to the hypocrisy of our judicial system as evidence that despite the gains made during the civil rights movement, much has not changed.

Regrettably, their assumptions about our society are correct. According to recent studies conducted by The Sentencing Project, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that promotes a decreased reliance on incarceration and an increased use of more effective and humane alternatives, two out of three black males between the ages of 19 and 27 are currently in the criminal justice system, either on probation, incarcerated or on parole. There’s no denying that the use of crack cocaine in our communities is rampant. The Sentencing Project reports stiff sentences for the median crack cocaine dealer, who is in most cases black. Possessing just 52 grams of the substance is enough to trigger a 10-year mandatory sentence. The median street level dealer of powder cocaine is very often white, and possession of 340 grams of the drug is not enough to even trigger a 5-year sentence.

The disparity in the convictions and sentencing of blacks and whites is nothing new, but is telling of the present state of affairs in our criminal justice system and is further evidence that legislation alone cannot heal the social injustice that plagues our nation. The healing must take place on a much higher level. So despite the gains of the civil rights movement, our nation continues to grapple with such basic issues as civility and justice. I believe there’s a lot of healing that needs to take place, but the healing can only begin when we to examine and talk truthfully about the past.

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I often point to an interview I conducted a few years ago as an example of just how dire the situation has become for young black people. The purpose of the independently produced documentaries, one of which I produced, and the other by a local non-profit organization, was to drum up support from corporate citizens.

Our mission was to encourage them to support established community organizations in their efforts to develop and institute programs geared to disadvantaged young people. We also hoped that we could inspire our young black participants, whom we interviewed, to set goals and pursue their dreams. The hopelessness expressed by one 17-year-old male participant, was shocking, but for me summed up the reality in which many young blacks find themselves in today. When I asked him if he was concerned about the violence and gang activity in his neighborhood, he looked into my eyes, and without missing a beat replied, "I ain't afraid to die, ain't nothing to live for anyway." Speechless, and not knowing what to say next, I looked down at my notes and back at him, his eyes fixed on me as if to say, "What else you got?" I've never forgotten this young man's negative view of the world, and I've often reflected on my own humble beginnings, and asked myself the question of why I never lost hope.

What is it about the American Dream that I find to hold onto, that the young man I mentioned before does not? How is it that I could be born into poverty-stricken environment, in a home headed by a single parent, with no significant male involved in my life to model myself after, endure racism, prejudice and discrimination, and yet, still succeed? What force or forces have been the inspirations behind my successes as an actor, restaurateur, writer, magazine publisher, television producer, husband, father, and

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homeowner? How is it that a little poor black boy from North Carolina has come to be respected by his peers, and recognized by his fellow professionals?

Perhaps noted photojournalist, filmmaker and writer, Gordon Parks has the answer. During an interview with him in 1991, I asked Mr. Parks what inspired a pre-civil rights era farm boy from Kansas to dream beyond the farming community of his youth and the overt racism he had to face. Mr. Parks thought for a moment, stroked his bushy moustache, and with a twinkle in his eyes replied, "I moved to Minnesota when I was 14 years old and there was a lot of times I didn't think I would make it, but I was determined that I was." That same year, during a press conference, I posed a similar question to Emmy award-winning stage and screen actors Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee.

Sitting erect and speaking eloquently as is his trademark, Mr. Davis felt more inclined to offer a quip "to young people: the only good advice is a good example." His wife, on the other hand, excited and acting as if this were the question she had been waiting for, preferred to point to then up-and-coming filmmaker Spike Lee. She said, "My role model is Spike Lee; I love the fact that he took his nickels and dimes and credit cards -- my son even lent him some money. He just went out and did something, with the help of a lot of people and a lot of struggle."

Determination, an example, struggle — those are some of the answers. Like my young subject, my reality as a child was also cold and harsh, I too, had been faced with choosing between remaining hopeful that life had something better to offer, or giving up and in to my environment. But unlike him, I was taught to be determined, taught to look for an example and taught that I would have to struggle. So, I knew from the beginning that the American Dream or whatever you choose to call it is not handed to you merely

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because you claim citizenship here. No, the American Dream doesn't come that easy. You must actively move forward, faithfully and fearlessly, always recognizing along the way, that the reality that you see is only one of two realities. The other being the one that you don't see, the one that you can only imagine and form mental pictures of. That reality must be the reality that you give the most attention to, because once you are able to fix in your mind what you truly desire for yourself, then and only then will you improve your present condition. Sadly, many people are never learn this lesson, and regrettably neither do they learn they must be determined, find an example, and yes, struggle to make their dreams come true.

My other answer — and perhaps most valuable source of motivation? Learning to trust that I have special talents to put to good use while I'm here to experience life and all its wonders. Although getting through college and my brief career as an actor in North Carolina and Los Angeles did not bring me the fame and fortune I initially hoped for, it opened other doors for me and helped me grow past the emotional baggage of my youth. Acting taught me to listen to and trust my inner voice. I used my experiences both good and bad to add depth to the characters that I portrayed, simultaneously resolving painful issues and a multitude of questions from my childhood. I am sure not even those closest to me knew how important my involvement in theater became to me. From my experiences as an actor, I have come to realize the importance of recognizing and communicating with your creative self. It really doesn't matter what talents you possess, what matters most is that you use and develop those talents to the best of your ability. It is only by developing and utilizing your own unique talents that you can ever hope to be truly happy.