

Saving the Dream  
It's time to wake up!

This week marks the 25th anniversary of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. federal holiday. While I personally applaud those who have organized events to commemorate this significant occasion, I am equally compelled to question whether the true legacy of the movement has been tarnished. More specifically, given the bleak social and economic conditions facing a large portion of the African-American community, has “the dream” for which so many fought and died, turned into a nightmare?

Without question, Dr. King’s leadership had a tremendous impact on public policy. His efforts and ability to motivate and persuade others to persist, under incredibly challenging conditions, pushed forward the long held ideal that Blacks in America could be granted equal opportunity and access and subsequently earn respect as full human beings. However, today’s image of the African American culture seems drastically removed from that of the past. Unfortunately, somewhere along the long journey from the actual movement to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Blacks today seem to have become content with the status quo and, as such, have become careless and even cavalier about how we are perceived. What happened to our collective sense of sense of pride and dignity? What happened to our sense of self respect?

Interestingly, these questions and comments are not intended to be the typical indictment of the poor and undereducated. It is clear that this spirit of apathy nagging sense of self-centeredness seems to be prevalent across socioeconomic boundaries.

According to the latest U.S. Census, 48.9 percent of the prison population is comprised of African American inmates and these numbers are steadily increasing, with younger and younger individuals committing crimes. Many are quick to blame these ills on contemporary music, a

broken education system, hip hop artists, and even professional athletes. As well, more people of color are not receiving their high school diploma which increases the likelihood of a life filled with turmoil and economic hardships. Although controversial, the toxic and vulgar lyrics of many of today's artists have also played a key role in eroding both the internal and external image of who we are. Imagine the impact if every time a young girl turned on the radio she heard the lyrics "you are my sister and worthy of respect" or if young African-American men were exposed to equally empowering ideas and concepts? Instead, from a very young age, people of all age groups are subjected to a steady series of messages suggesting doom, gloom, sex acts, cheating, and even death, to name a few. Seldom are the lyrics fresh and inspiring so how, beyond the one day of the year when we pause briefly to reflect on Dr. King's ideals, can we expect to be consistently focused and uplifted? Not surprisingly, this epidemic of negativity does not stop here. Professional athletes and even politicians, with numerous scandals and corruption, also add to the negative images of African Americans.

At the risk of being completely misunderstood, I realize that the story is not all doom and gloom; many African-Americans are making great strides and progressing. However, as a collective we have become comfortable and complacent and are therefore inadvertently giving Dr. King a slap in the face. That so many of us are willing to ignore these issues and/or have gotten to a point at which we believe that our people are predestined to either sink or swim is disturbing. While we can argue that we are facing more limitations due to poverty and the decline of the educational system, the truth of the matter is that those living during segregation faced much more hardships than we do currently. The truth of the matter is that they had their struggles and faced them and we too have issues that need to be addressed.

Others may say that the impact of music on our culture has given people a selfish mindset. It can also be argued that some of our black leaders would rather elect to tuck away in the “ivory tower” rather than establish ways and means of getting others there as well or by establishing movements in order to move forward our society. It sometimes seems as if we have a tank full of gas yet are oblivious to where we are supposed to be going or how to get there. With so many opportunities available to us today, why is it that all of the statistics suggest that we are going in reverse? Why is it that we seem to be falling short and either ignoring the problem or blaming others? Unfortunately, I have to say that the state of our black leadership has contributed to this great legacy of Dr. King being tarnished.

There are also many professors of color that will write books on social movements but they refuse to move two blocks from their campus. We no longer have the vanguard of black civil right organizations that usually take hold of the base and grass roots of our culture. Instead our leaders are more interested in politics and have the “get money” mindset. This lack of leadership coupled with the negative perception we are enforcing on ourselves is pushing us deeper within this nightmare that was once a dream. In order to get back to this dream we need to engage in positive activity and get back to the basics of assisting people that are desperate and vulnerable. Indeed I do feel that we have tarnished this great legacy some of it is based off of our perceptions, and others are based off of the lack of black leadership in our communities. However, it can be reestablished, but we have to work together and stop senseless crimes, and pushing forward negative ideologies for the sake of a dollar. Moreover, by showing the world that we can be a unified culture, create strong communities, and not accept “good enough” as a cultural universal standard of success. We have to push forward and *“As we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.”*

