BLACK AMERICA 2010: THE STATE WE’RE IN

BY KEVIN CHAPPELL

WITH COMMENTARY FROM:
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SOMEONE ONCE SAID THAT THE ONLY THING HE HAD TO DO WAS STAY BLACK AND DIE.

EBONY respectfully disagrees with that statement, as do seven of our most celebrated visionaries, each of whom has penned an essay explaining why staying Black—yet doing more—is the exact thing we should be doing. It’s up to us to make things better. Will we strive for ultimate excellence? Or will we settle for our current state?

Part of the solution is understanding the issue. The other part is doing something. To that end, EBONY has found 35 ways in which you can help the community and, by extension, yourself.

Another part of the solution is spiritual. Can we grow up enough to peel away the false characterizations, the ego, the baggage, the hurts and really listen to one another? Will we listen to each other?

Some of the solution is mental. Can we step out of our comfort zone and impact our community? Can we become politically active or at least learn the issues? Will we fight for a larger cause?

A portion of the solution is physical. Can we stop settling for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease and conditions we write off as “running in the family”? When will we stop embracing disease as an unavoidable part of life?

The rest is socioeconomic. Can we fight against the notion that we are a racial monolith and that we all do and say the same thing? Can we recognize the spending power that we have? Do we recognize that we are the ones driving pop culture and not the other way around?

We’ve turned the other cheek for far too long. For the sake of our ancestors—and our progeny—we must stop deflecting and learn how to pick the right fights to save our future. Rule number one? Don’t ever start something unless you know you’re going to win. Rule number two? Always win. Ready? Let’s go.
What Men Think and What Real Men Know
BY JEFF JOHNSON

WHEN I LOOK AT OUR COMMUNITIES, I DON'T THINK IT'S ALL DOOM AND GLOOM. We're seeing more African-American men earn more money. We're seeing African-American men continue to break through some of the glass and platinum ceilings in corporate America and politics. Just a few years ago, I would have never thought that we'd be looking at an African-American male president in 2010. So that alone speaks to where we are.

But we do also have to deal with a couple of realities. One is the through-the-roof incarceration rate of Black men. We're almost looking at one-in-every-three Black men in some way, shape or form being connected to the criminal justice system. African-American male graduation rates are at an all-time low. As such, there are some definite crisis areas that we must be honest about in education, in opportunity, in access to higher education and resources.

If we had to use one phrase to describe where the Black male is, it would be "in transition." But the real question is, transitioning into what? I think if we were going to be proactive and productive about the discussion of the state of Black men, the real question is not about today's Black man, but what do we want him to look like in 2020? What do we need to do now to be where we want to be then?

For starters, we've got to find a miracle way to talk about relationships between Black men and women. Why do I start there? Because the reason why we are seeing the number of single-mother households, the reason why we're seeing a number of young people who don't even have relationships with their fathers—let alone know who their fathers are—is because we have not effectively dealt with the relationship between Black men and women.

How are we helping Black men deal with the process of making good choices in relationships? And then, how are we dealing with what manhood is? Because if we continue in our communities to allow manhood to be defined by sexual prowess and machismo, then we're going to have more single mothers and jailed men.

We need to do a better job of providing examples of real men. Real men aren't punks. But they're also not willing to give up their whole lives over something foolish. Real men are willing to defend themselves, but they're not willing to fight somebody who's got nothing to lose. Real men understand that, at the end of the day, what will define them most is what they leave to the next generation, not what they accumulate for themselves.

The sense of urgency has to be there. We can be negligent and see graduation rates of Black boys drop to single digits. We can be negligent and see the divorce rate of African-American couples rise above 60 and 70 percent. We can be negligent and say, "Look, Negroes just ain't going to take care of they kids."

Or we can be diligent and begin to change our own discourse. We can say, "Wait a minute, this is not inherently who we are." I think that what we decide to do determines whether the picture is bright or whether it's gloomy. But we don't have the luxury of being spectators.

Jeff Johnson is a commentator on the nationally syndicated Tom Joyner Morning Show.

**on men:**
"Mix a conviction with a man and something happens!"

—Adam Clayton Powell

**what you can DO**

1. Enroll your male child in a rite-of-passage program that exposes him to etiquette, chivalry, power, math, reading, sex education, the arts and athleticism. Try the Boy Scouts.

2. Father figures must teach young men to tie a tie and how to wear a properly fitted suit.

3. Always hold the door for a lady, whether she's 5 or 95 years old.

4. Protect—legally, of course—what's yours.

5. Walk in your own power. Own it.

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Shedding the Stereotypes
BY SOLEDAD O'BRIEN

“AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN CAN’T FIND HUSBANDS!”
“BLACK WOMEN WITH ETHNIC NAMES LESS LIKELY TO BE CALLED FOR JOB INTERVIEWS!”
“AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN HAVE A NET WORTH OF $5!”

These are just a few of the sensational recent headlines on the state of Black women today that make me shake my head in dismay. I’m not saying there is no truth to any of these stories, but they are reminders of how fortunate I am that my job allows me to uncover other truths. Truths that may be getting less attention, but are just as important.

As the special correspondent for CNN’s award-winning documentary series Black in America, I’ve had the opportunity to report on the most pressing issues facing our country: education, health care, the economy, politics, religion. The beauty is that in every story I do, I see examples of strong, amazing, inspiring Black women who are not just coping, but succeeding, in all facets of life.

Women such as Icilma Fergus, M.D., the chief of cardiology at Harlem Hospital Center in New York. Fergus, an Ivy League graduate, could have worked anywhere, but she chose to stay in the inner city where she could focus on Black women because we are more likely than any other group to suffer from heart disease and have fatal heart attacks. Or Malaak Compton-Rock, a big-hearted philanthropist who started a mentoring program and personally took a group of 30 “at-risk” teens to South Africa, where they could learn what it feels like to do charitable work and help others even less fortunate than themselves.

I’ve been humbled to meet such feisty women as Dawn Spencer, a survivor of triple negative breast cancer, an aggressive and largely untreatable form of the disease that disproportionately strikes Black women.

Spencer’s physician, the equally amazing Lisa Newman, M.D., is one of the few African-American surgical oncologists in the country. Newman is herself a breast cancer survivor, but she hasn’t let it stop her from traveling across the country and across the world to Ghana to conduct genetic research that may uncover clues to a cure.

These are the kinds of stories that speak to the true state of Black women in America. The reality is that African-American women make up 60 percent of Black college graduates but still earn less than White men, White women and Black men. And Black women, like all women, battle stereotypes daily while trying to figure out how to balance kids, careers and relationships. But I believe it’s the stories of struggle, of faith, of vision that best paint a picture of who we are. As Black women, I think it’s important for us to realize that there will always be challenges, but we have solutions, too, right here in our own community.

The next episode of O’Brien’s multipart Black in America series, “Almighty Debt,” airs October 21 on CNN.

I don’t think of myself as a poor, deprived ghetto girl who made good. I think of myself as someone who from an early age knew I was responsible for myself and I had to make good.

—Oprah Winfrey

what you can DO

1 Learn to embrace being alone.
You were born alone. You will die alone. Alone is OK.

2 Enroll your female child in a rite-of-passage program that exposes her to etiquette, math, reading, the arts, sports, sex education and positive body reinforcement.

3 Respect the men in your life.

4 Wait four months before having sex.
If he sticks around for four months, he’s probably a keeper.

5 Take care of yourself. Your health is more important than your hair.
NEGATIVITY, FALLACIES AND FINGER-POINTING

BY HILL HARPER

WHEN WE LOOK AT BLACK LOVE, THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO LOOK AT IS HOW WE AS MEN AND WOMEN ARE RELATING TO ONE ANOTHER. Ask yourself this important question: Are we really listening to each other?

There is a great deal of negative sentiment about each gender. Just look at the language we choose to use: “All Black men are (fill in the blank)” and “All Black women are (fill in the blank).” Once you’ve started from a premise of a negative attitude, it’s troubling. And it’s gotten to the point that it’s not clear that Black men and Black women are even friends anymore. That’s a problem. Because at the end of the day, respect and kindness are foundational elements that need to exist for anyone to have healthy, loving relationships.

Face it: Black men and women have similar interests. We have similar desires. It’s very clear when you peel away all the false characterizations, the ego, the baggage and the hurts that fundamentally, men and women all want the same thing—a loving, healthy relationship.

The question is, are we going to partner and get there?

If we don’t start communicating with each other, then it’s very clear that women will continue to communicate with women about love issues, and men will continue to communicate with men about the same. The problem with that is, women are passing on a great deal of misinformation among themselves, and men are doing the same. And so information that’s just untrue is being reinforced.

There are many men who will say, “Basically, I’ve got to get to a certain level and then I’ll be ready to settle down.” That is misinformation that men have been passing along to other men in our community. If you look at the data, you may never get there on your own. The data shows that you’re more likely to be successful, you’re more likely to have wealth, in a partnership. The First Family is a great example of that.

On the flip side, among the misinformation spread is the belief that a woman can’t have a successful relationship with a man if she earns more than he does. The truth is, money is just one aspect of the relationship. And once again, the Obamas are an example of how that misinformation is simply not true. For the first 10 to 12 years of the marriage, Michelle Obama was the primary breadwinner of her family.

What will keep Black love alive and flourishing is doing the work and realizing that there is a bigger benefit in partnering than not. It’s really much more about friendship. We get the friendship back by communicating—by really communicating—openly and honestly. In other words, we pare down. We stop sending the representatives, we stop listening to what we should want or should desire, we stop looking in the mirror and lying to ourselves.

It’s about stripping down walls and getting rid of the baggage. That’s the work we have to do, and that comes through real communication.


ON RELATIONSHIPS:

“Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does.

Love is a battle, love is war; love is a growing up.”

—James Baldwin
Cultivate Healthy Obsessions
BY PATRICIA L. TURNER, M.D., F.A.C.S.

IF THE SCALES OF JUSTICE DEPICTED THE CURRENT STATE OF HEALTH CARE AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICANS, ONE SIDE WOULD SURELY BE WEIGHTED BY THE OBESITY EPIDEMIC AND ITS HOST OF ASSOCIATED ILLNESSES, THE OTHER BY THE PREVALENCE OF HIV. I am particularly dismayed that the majority of those infected in AIDS-afflicted urban communities are Black. Similarly, the association between obesity and African-Americans is concerning. Four out of five of our women are overweight or obese, and the statistics linking obesity and our children are daunting. Heart disease and stroke that end in death occur at nearly double the rate experienced in other populations. Overall cancer survival rates are worse. Such disparities exist for a range of diseases, both chronic and acute, and interventions, both medical and surgical.

We can support our collective well-being by embracing information technology and expanding already successful culturally and community oriented public health solutions. Initiatives such as Healthy People 2020 (started in 1979 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) and REACH U.S. provide comprehensive and collaborative knowledge and service to health practitioners and individuals alike. Clinical and basic science research is also critically important. Unparalleled evidence-based analysis is now possible using information captured in the laboratory or from practice registries and clinical databases. Making this wealth of knowledge beneficial and accessible to all (through online databases and consumer health literacy) is also essential.

But rather than be dispirited by that which assails us physically, we can cultivate a healthy obsession with all that will make us well. This begins with taking personal responsibility for making the healthiest choices and adopting life-sustaining habits. It is important to recognize that it isn’t necessary to make every healthy choice or none at all. Incremental improvements—taking the steps instead of the elevator when going three floors or less; changing from whole to 1 percent milk; minimizing soda and sugary or fat-laden snacks—are all helpful first steps to healthier living. Some changes, however, involve crucial life-and-death decisions and must be embraced full-on. Safe sexual practices, including consistent condom use with nonmonogamous partners and triumphing over tobacco addiction, are life-changing choices with profound and immediate benefits.

From demanding health system reform and broadened access that includes clinical trials and preventive care to the personal health decisions we make every day, what we do individually and collectively can help us to greatly diminish inequities and achieve justice—or at least parity—in health care.

Patricia Turner, M.D., F.A.C.S., is the medical director of the Surgical Acute Care Unit at the University of Maryland Medical Center.

on health:
"My family is not here with me today, at least not in person, because of preventable diseases. While I can’t change my family’s past, I can be a voice in the movement to improve our nation’s health care and our nation’s health for the future."
Shedding the Shield
BY BILL COSBY

VICTIM, VICTIM, VICTIM. Most African-Americans are industrious and take advantage of available opportunities. But a small percentage continue to hold up the shield of victimhood. There is not enjoyment, but a sort of comfort, in being a victim.

Let me be clear: From institutional racism and all of the racist stuff that is allowed to happen to lower-economic, middle-economic and whatever-economic Black people, there are definitely people who are victims of the system. OK, you’re a victim—and a legitimate victim. Now, what do you do to fight back? When will you decide—for the sake of saving the Black family—to put the damn shield down and fight back?

In many ways, some Black families are at rock bottom. The problem is that those two words—rock bottom—are so individualized. It’s like a tuxedo. If you walk into a tailor shop, and you say, “I need a tuxedo,” from that point on, the tailor should work with what you see yourself wearing.

Right now, we’re taking whatever the tailor gives us. We’re taking it when more Black children are being raised out of wedlock instead of in two-parent Black families. We’re taking it when we are asked to compromise ourselves, disrespect our proud history and shortchange the future of our children. We’re taking it when we have Black females graduating from college at twice the rate of Black males, while the entertainment world shows Black women being used as sex toys by uneducated Black men. We take it when the lesson that we are teaching Black women is that it is OK to allow anything to be done to them, and said about them, just to be loved.

And too few of us do anything about it. I’ll give you a quote from my grandfather, who never graduated from anything, read the Bible and moved his lips. He told me, “When you compromise yourself, you have to practice not looking embarrassed.”

The numbers are embarrassing: Black males have high school dropout rates of more than 50 percent in some cities. Young Black men are twice as likely to be unemployed as White, Hispanic and Asian men. Although Black people make up just 12 percent of the general population, they make up nearly 44 percent of the prison population. At any given time, as many as 25 percent of all young Black men are in prison or jail, on probation, or on parole.

We can do more to protect the Black male. You can’t do that by holding the shield up and saying, “Well, they put the drugs in our neighborhoods. What are we supposed to do?” While you make excuses, Black families are being destroyed. If you hold up the shield, acting like you can’t turn this thing around, the Black family will lose.

So the question I pose is simple: Where is your rock bottom? Because sometimes, it’s only when you reach rock bottom that you are ready to listen, to take decisive action—and to tell the tailor exactly how you want to look.

THE CURRENT STATE OF OUR BLACK YOUTH IS DEFINED BY BOTH CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES. The generation of young people who are in their teens, 20s and early 30s today are the largest, most diverse generation we have ever seen. They are a bigger group than the Baby Boomers, and their potential is tremendous. Yet they are not a monolith. Their grasp on technology and appropriation of these new means of communication give them the tools that allow them to out-organize and out-mobilize the likes of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his generation.

We have some of the most educated and wealthiest Black youth in our history; but at the same time, we also have some of the least educated. The unemployment rate for Black youth is at a record high in this economic crisis.

Within this dichotomy lies the unique challenge Black youth face in 2010 and 2011. Access to opportunity has been replaced with the means to access opportunity. The incredible progress the country has made toward racial justice and equality during the past 50 years is undeniable. The civil and human rights struggle of the 21st century has now moved from equality to existence. In other words, how do we give everyone the right to exist in a livable world and livable communities?

How we deal with that issue will determine the fate of an entire generation. The stakes are high. The time is short.

Let me give you an example: On September 23, a provision in the health care bill went into effect that allows a young person to stay on his or her parent’s health care plan until he or she is 26 years old. In New York state, it is 29 years old. These types of changes create opportunity and freedom for our young people to pursue careers that they want instead of settling for jobs they do not want because of a benefits package. On the other hand, this provision does not help a young person whose parents do not have health care coverage at all.

While these types of disparities of opportunity used to exist between the White and the Black communities, we are now experiencing these disparities within our community—between the haves and the have-nots.

So for me, perhaps the most troubling concern is that while we have the first Black president, we also have young Black people who are completely outside of the political process that can keep disparities in check.

What many Black youth fail to realize is that they have the power to change things. Young people today can push forth transformation that is equally, if not more, game changing than the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Achieving these advances will require us to unite despite the growing education, economic and opportunity disparities in the Black community.

Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr. is the president of Hip Hop Caucus.

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