

@ Copyright
February 2, 2005

Cosby's Call and Our Response: What the Church and Community Should Do

Robert M. Franklin

Presidential Distinguished Professor of Social Ethics
Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Religion Senior Fellow
Emory University
rmfrank@emory.edu 404-727-0756

I'd like to thank the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Religion for this opportunity to begin this conversation. I am privileged to serve as one of over two dozen senior fellows at the Center. Dr. John Witte and his terrific staff are giving wonderful leadership to this important national resource, and I hope you will acquaint yourself with the work of the Center and its many worthy fellows. I'd like to thank my wife, Dr. Cheryl Franklin, and my many other conversation partners and friends, many in the audience now, who have both challenged and taught me much of what I know about the subject matter at hand. To the extent that my knowledge is limited or my interpretations inadequate, I regard it as a reminder that I need to remain in conversation with these wise people.

In the spirit of a 'state of the union' address, our purpose is to consider a response to Bill Cosby's recent campaign to revive a culture of personal and parental responsibility, especially in poor communities. Cosby is a comedian but he is making people mad. He is a consummate entertainer but is decidedly not attempting to amuse us now. He has indicted some African American adults for accepting a culture of mediocrity, materialism, and moral indifference. He has scolded the churches for failing to regard this crisis as a threat significant enough to radically change business as usual. He has chastised the American middle class and institutions of civil society for not being sufficiently angry to coalesce and change this situation. He acknowledges that government and the market could do more to support fragile families and promote better citizenship, but he places the weight of his analysis on individual and community self determination. In essence, the wonderful statement made by Rabbi Joachim Prinz at the historic March on Washington in 1963 captures Cosby's outlook. In reference to the holocaust, to slavery and other historical outrages, Rabbi Prinz declared, "few were guilty, all are responsible."

FEW ARE GUILTY, ALL ARE RESPONSIBLE

In other words, relatively few parents are guilty of the behavior that Cosby has targeted. Fortunately, a majority of people and families living in poverty make good decisions, rear children, and behave responsibly. All who bemoan multigenerational poverty as a social phenomenon must also bemoan and condemn the policies that make it difficult to escape poverty, including tax policy, housing policies, criminal justice and wage labor policies. If we limit our analysis and indignation to the visible expressions of low or no income, inadequate education, impoverished dreams, and crude or rude behavior, then we risk blaming the victims of failed economic and political policy. Some

of Cosby's harshest critics have articulated this concern. But, ultimately, we must demand and design policies and practices that support people who make an honest effort to live better. Our fellow neighbors deserve the assistance of a society that has a moral commitment to supporting individuals and families in the journey toward self-sufficiency. Few of us designed wretched school systems, made the decisions about locating businesses and jobs in faraway suburbs, or commissioned the housing that no working people can afford. But, all are now responsible for what now passes for the American dream.

HE PAID FOR THIS MICROPHONE

Let's begin by stipulating that Cosby is not the first 'public moralist' to call attention to the underside of urban village culture. Scores of preachers, teachers, scholars and artists have weighed in on these issues before, often more systematically, sometimes more colorfully. But, at a time when a growing number of African Americans are 'un-churched', it may take an unconventional public moralist to reach this generation. And, ironically, allegations of moral failure in a moralist's own personal life can enhance his or her credibility or 'street rep' in communities that are accustomed to imperfect role models and messengers who defy tenets of bourgeois morality.

I would submit that there are four reasons why Cosby stands out, reasons that boil down to, paraphrasing Ronald Reagan, 'he paid for this microphone,' or is it a megaphone?

First, his award winning, long running television program, "The Cosby Show." It revolutionized the way America and the world perceived black families by relativizing the usual focus on black family pathology. Cosby became a consummate marketing expert and advocate for the modern black family of hard working, accomplished mother-father professionals who rear great kids and enjoy affluent lifestyles. Second, Cosby is one of the few visible, multimillionaire black celebrities who has put his money (lots of it) where his mouth is. Before it was in vogue to do, he and Camille were philanthropic leaders making generous gifts to historically black colleges (especially Spelman and Morehouse) and other institutions. Third, he has written books that outline his vision for effective parenting and educational excellence demonstrating his theoretical sophistication in the fields of social psychology, culture, and education. And, finally, tragically, he has stood over the gravesite of his own murdered son and watched years of effort, excellence, and investment laid to final, premature rest, something no parent should ever have to do. He is in a small class of other celebrities who take up campaigns for social change -- Harry Belafonte, Ruby and Ossie Davis, Stevie Wonder. But, he stands apart from them in part, I would argue, because he has gone on the offensive to challenge the internal dynamics of black life rather than the usual focus upon the external foes of institutional racism and social injustice. He has engaged a sensitive and volatile set of issues that most leaders have been content to discuss only privately in barbershops, beauty salons, and cocktail parties.

CRISIS IN THE VILLAGE

Before responding directly to Cosby's social diagnosis, I'd like to both join his analysis and expand it by locating this conversation within a broader institutional and cultural framework. Currently, I am working on book tentatively titled, "Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope to African American Communities." I argue that there are four institutions that have played heroic parts in leading African Americans to freedom. They are the family, church, black colleges, and nonprofit organizations, especially the civil rights organizations. During and after the decades of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, each of these institutions played an extraordinary role in facilitating the journey to citizenship made by Americans of African descent. All are now in a state of crisis. I define crisis not as mere breakdown, chaos or confusion, but as a state of rapid transition requiring careful, strategic decision making and follow-through action.

1. Consider the churches. There are between 50,000 to 60,000 black churches in America. Black churches are asset-rich institutions. They have talented leaders, armies of potential volunteers, a weekly cash flow, available meeting space, track records of service, trust and credibility in most communities, and generally, offer a positive culture of uplift, hope, and empowerment. The oldest of them were founded before America became a republic. Without the presence and work of these churches, the civil rights movement would not have occurred, and America would still resemble apartheid South Africa. Indeed, I often refer to the civil rights movement as a revolution led by preachers, church women and Sunday School children.

I will suggest that the churches face a mission crisis as they are torn between serving the needs of the poorest of the poor and being user-friendly institutions for their upwardly mobile, 'paying customers'. Most mid-sized, large and mega-churches are well suited to assist the mobile middle-class, affluent achievers and 'wannabees', but generally, they do not appeal to people on the economic margins, a tragic irony given the teachings and example of Jesus of Nazareth.

2. Out of more than 3,000 colleges and universities in America, there are only about 115 historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). But, historically, they have educated more than 40% of blacks with undergraduate degrees. In other words, they have borne more than their fair share of educating a middle class that transformed black America within a generation and contributed to the entire nation. But today, they are facing a crisis of relevance and purpose as the best and brightest of black youth are vigorously recruited by the nation's finest majority institutions, and an unsympathetic public wonders aloud whether or not race-specific schools should continue. In order to retain excellent faculty, colleges have to attract excellent students and provide excellent educational facilities to support excellent education. Some of these schools devoted themselves to educating worthy students whose financial means and educational backgrounds reflected challenges. And, some are dropping far behind in the marketplace of higher education. As we in Atlanta know only too painfully, Morris Brown College, has faced difficult times and is struggling heroically now to re-engineer itself.

3. African American civil society includes a vast array of secular not-for-profit organizations and voluntary associations such as fraternities, sororities, community

organizations, lodges, youth serving organizations, athletic clubs, and so on. I'm calling special attention to the plight of the so-called civil rights organizations. Groups like the NAACP and Urban League were established in the first decades of the 20th century and were aimed at helping the former slaves to enjoy the full rights and privileges of American citizens. Despite an unfinished agenda, the moral and legal victory was largely achieved with the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Some argue that those organizations have fulfilled their original mission and should either evolve new missions or go out of business. But, these organizations have pursued a variety of goals under the mantle of their original mission statements. Now, many of them face difficult leadership and financial challenges.

Here again, locally, we have lived through the painful melodrama of leadership changes at SCLC. In a wonderful moment of irony, SCLC's recent leaders spoke of retooling for a new 21st century struggle but amidst crisis ultimately found it necessary to reach back to one of the founding elders to provide stability. These organizations are facing an identity crisis as they attempt to fight a new struggle with largely outdated weapons. Meanwhile, the community that these organizations were created to serve has voted with its feet and now ignores the financial crisis gripping them.

4. Finally, the black family faces a crisis of commitment.
- In 1890, the percentage of two parent African American households was 80%. One hundred years later, only 39.9 percent of African American children lived in married-couple households.
 - In 1970, 68% of African Americans were married. By 1994, that number had dropped to 48%.
 - The non-marital birthrate in African American communities today is 70%.

Although black families have always grappled with crisis and have displayed virtues of resilience, tenacity, and flexibility too many are now slipping into terrain that is uncharted and horrifying; crack addicted mothers who abandon their infants, children who grow up with no knowledge of, or relationship to, their biological fathers, parents who are incarcerated and depend upon the state or other family members to rear their children.

In my weekly journeys, I hear and see, as you have, scores of talented, attractive women who would like to be married and cannot find suitable and similar potential partners. I refer to this as the 'supply side crisis' of marriageable men. Also, I meet men who are living but not necessarily enjoying the lifestyle of players or playboys with no intention of considering marriage before their 45th birthday. Still other men are vocal about their unhappy single status and desire for a suitable wife. I hear about children who would love to be adopted, and married couples who are not able to bear their own children. I hear the demand of our gay and lesbian neighbors who wish to have their relationships legalized, and of the animosity that these demands engender in the hearts of otherwise loving people of faith. And, I think, with so much energy invested in experiencing personal fulfillment through family attachment, shouldn't we be having a

conversation about the future of relationships, marriage and parenting in our villages? And yet, I see no evidence of the conversation.

The crisis faced by these anchor institutions of our community only exacerbates the social distance and despair that our neighbors who live in poverty experience. If the churches, schools, nonprofit organizations, and extended families of the village were fulfilling their mission, as they did in an earlier period, the growing number of youth who show signs of self-hatred, fatalism, despair, disrespect for elders, and so on might be abated. I'm suggesting that Cosby has vented his frustration over the visible symptoms of a larger, largely hidden cultural and institutional crisis.

In the book, I will argue that despite this dismal diagnosis, it is not hopeless and that we can overcome this crisis. If the potential and power of just these institutions were properly aligned and mobilized, no matter who occupies the White House and no matter what Wall Street is up (or down) to, African Americans could significantly improve the lives of their children. This is the power of the people. This is what we can decide, what we can do while other institutions and resources are sorting out their priorities and, we hope, standing and working in solidarity with us in this heroic human endeavor.

I will say more about the elements of that strategy as I outline the components of a suggested response. But first, a word about a puzzling dynamic that I have noticed in talking about this subject. Cosby has encountered a more intense dose of this.

WHY WE CAN'T SPEAK

In the post-civil rights movement era, there have been mountains of data, books, and information about the plight of young African Americans in poverty. But, it seems to me that few nationally recognized leaders treated this as a reason to dramatically revise their working priorities. One would think that with mounting empirical evidence, film, video, and musical dramatizations, and anecdotes about our "lost generation" of youth or the "endangered species" of young black men, influential leaders would have stopped doing business as usual to understand and halt this madness. Surely, mature, morally serious people would want to explore the potential long-term ramifications of the dramatic changes in black families and communities reported by scholars such as William Julius Wilson, Orlando Patterson, and Cornel West. Indeed, the challenges facing these village youth (and adults) would seem to constitute sufficient reason to convene a series of leadership summits to grapple with this apparent internal decay.

It does make you wonder, why weren't the most influential leaders in the community speaking with urgency and impatience about these issues? Why didn't these themes occupy the body of the annual addresses of major civil rights leaders and denominational presidents and bishops? Why didn't socially conscious disc jockeys blast through radio waves to ask tough questions about where we were headed? Why didn't the pulpits of America thunder with words of love and instruction for prodigal children who had lost their way?

The African American leadership elite (NAACP, National Urban League, Congress of National Black Churches, black fraternities and sororities) has focused on a wide

variety of challenges related to group advancement through opening opportunity and dismantling the remnants of institutional racism in the public and private sectors. Ironically, they have not launched a sustained focus upon issues pertaining to faith and family. African American and other scholars from across the racial-ethnic spectrum have churned out a small mountain of disturbing and provocative reports on the consequences of falling black marriage rates, skyrocketing out-of-wedlock birth rates, and epidemic proportions of sexually transmitted disease in the black population, almost no major African American public intellectuals, clergy, civil rights leaders, elected officials, entrepreneurs, sports heroes or heroines, or other professional has made this a cause of sustained public awareness.

Columbia University economist Ron Mincy puts it this way, “while President Bush is conducting a public conversation about marriage and fatherhood, the African American community hasn’t yet had the necessary private conversation about these issues that would facilitate a productive joining of the larger conversation.” (Interview, March 13, 2003)

During the past two years, I have been engaged in a series of interviews and conversations that include focus groups with college students and seminarians, officials from the nations leading civil rights organizations, scholars, policy experts, conservative and liberal think-tank advocates, Muslim and Christian clergy, responsible fatherhood advocates, journalists, government leaders, executives in philanthropy, grassroots community leaders, and people who reside outside the United States for comparative perspective. In these discussions and investigations, I have listened to a host of compelling explanations for why the kind of conversation to which I refer has not occurred. Consider the most oft cited reasons:

1. “Racism is still a reality.” Leaders must take care not to dilute the impact of their work by focusing on too many issues. Some leaders are called to focus on fighting structural inequities and discrimination, and happily leave the private realm of family matters to people with appropriate expertise. There has to be a division of leadership labor in public and private matters. We’ve chosen to work on the public square.
2. The obstacles that stand in the way of promoting marriage and nuclear families are too overwhelming. Leaders like successes. This set of issues promises few, if any, of them. Since we can’t reverse the travails of history, let’s settle on being realistic about what we can effectively accomplish in one lifetime. Recall Reinhold Niebuhr’s observation that “nothing worth doing can be accomplished in one lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope.”
3. Vulnerable minorities must take care not to have private conversations in ways that might lend assistance to their political opponents. Talking about this issue amounts to ‘airing dirty laundry’. Even presumably well-intentioned allies who do not understand African American cultural dynamics, such as Daniel Moynihan in his report forty years ago, may inadvertently do harm by focusing the public gaze upon the deficits of black families to the complete lack of attention to African American family and community assets and strengths.

4. The issues are complex and solutions are dependent upon individual choices that, generally, should be respected. There is no law requiring people to marry and little social pressure to conform to traditional expectations. The culture of individualism makes it almost impossible to persuade people to behave better if they don't want to. Individual will trumps good programs and rhetoric every time. So, why work against the grain of the culture? And,
5. No one's perfect. We admit that we may not be fit for this task. Some of us have experienced moral failures. We've had first hand experience with divorce, out-of-wedlock birth, pain, and moral ambiguity. Who are we to lecture people about their personal and private lives? Only God can judge.

Although these rationales were offered as justifications for why they were not attempting to lead the conversation, no one suggested that the conversation should not occur. Although some expressed extreme skepticism about the 'staging' of such a conversation and how productive it might be. A few noted the model of the annual "State of the Black Agenda" panel discussions convened by two popular African American radio personalities Tom Joyner and Tavis Smiley. When such conversations occur and are broadcast by C-SPAN or other mass communication outlets, they do, in fact, generate some ongoing discussion about salient issues and arguments raised during the panel discussions. Still others note that, following the model portrayed in the popular film, "Barbershop" there is ongoing conversation in such local community venues that offer two important virtues missing from most national meetings__ the freedom to be brutally honest and safety from censoring or stigmatizing influences in the community. These concerns raise important questions for my proposal that congregations can and should play a lead role in sponsoring this conversation throughout the African American community.

To be fair, there have been a few noteworthy efforts to convene and converse. I attended one such summit meeting in 1993 at the Baltimore headquarters of the NAACP. **Despite occasional efforts to convene organizational leaders to deliberate about the future of the village, there has not been a sustained and visible effort that might garner broad support from within and outside the community.**

In reviewing the speeches and writings of many of these leaders, it is surprising that more attention has not been given to the need to revive the traditional village values of "faith and family". In fact, *as a group, village leaders have not been sufficiently strategic about coordinating, sequencing, funding, and continually revising their efforts to ensure a better future for our children. Further, in order to restore hope to African American communities these leaders should now convene a community-wide conversation about the future of our children and the practical steps, values, practices, and organizations that are needed to redirect our course..*

My purpose is not to question the sincerity, integrity, or wisdom of any existing leaders, unless that is justified. It would be easy to note the shortcomings in the approaches of other leaders and to scoff at them for not being omniscient. Instead, I'd like to acknowledge and celebrate their service and contributions. Their good and faithful service is responsible for the achievements and progress accomplished to date.

But, I'd like to invite and challenge these and other emerging leaders to consider a different approach to addressing and solving our village problems. **We do not have the luxury of leaders who are not strategic and capable of leading change and producing results.**

A FIELD REPORT ON THE VILLAGE CRISIS

My sense of the disconnect between the rhetoric of major black leaders and the daily existence of large numbers of black youth emerged while convening workshops and focus groups of black clergy and also black youth as a consultant for the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

I'll highlight several of the findings or learnings that have emerged from our conversations. A report on this work may be found at the Casey Foundation website under the topic "Healthy Marriages in Low Income African American Communities".

1. Currently there is a national research project underway tracking the experience of over 3000 low income people in several states. It's called the Fragile Families Study. One of the most surprising findings that emerged from interviews is that 82% of young, unmarried men and women were romantically involved at the time of the child's birth. Even more surprising is when the young people were asked if they thought that their relationships would move towards marriage, the vast majority wanted to get married and were hopeful that that would occur. Some scholars began to refer to this relatively brief period as 'the magic moment' because they found that after one year, 16% of cohabiting couples and 7% of visiting couples actually got married. And, as more time passed, fewer and fewer moved toward marriage. ("Building Strong Families", Mathematica Policy Research, Debra Strong, 2004) So, the question has now emerged, 'if there are young unmarried parents who say they want to get married but ultimately fail to, is there something that the community, the church, and/or the government could do to support them in their own self-stated personal goals? Is it possible for the anchor institutions of the village -- our congregations, colleges, nonprofit organizations and local businesses -- to step up and assist with this message development and dissemination?

2. According to researcher Kathryn Edin, many young parents did not get married because they held such a high view of marriage that they felt that they weren't anywhere near having the material goods they felt necessary for a good marriage. Many indicated that they wanted to first acquire a house, furniture, car, better job, and enough money to afford an "Ebony magazine" wedding before getting married. Many younger people also said that they felt it was preferable to have children first, and only when everything else was in place, should marriage occur. This because to marry foolishly and divorce would desecrate the holy institution of marriage. Professor Edin noted that women and men in low-income neighborhoods had higher views of marriage than their middle class and affluent counterparts. I would add that many of these young people had unrealistic views of what must be in place before marriage, such as the statement heard by Ralph Smith, vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 'I can't marry her, we still disagree about things...' Would it not be appropriate for the anchor institutions in the village to

explore ways in which they could help to reality test and correct unrealistic expectations and alert them to the fact that people who have been married for 30 years still disagree, but they work things out together? And, that the ‘working things out’ process requires specific interpersonal skills such as communication and conflict resolution that can be taught.

3. In focus groups with younger pastors, I heard the statement “our kids don’t know how to go out on a healthy, innocent date that doesn’t involve sex. We need to revive a culture of healthy dating and healthy relationships.” Due to the negative impact of popular culture, rap videos, Madison Avenue fashion culture, and constant, ubiquitous TV images, many of our kids assume that a date has to involve sex. Disseminating information about healthy relationships and dating is one of those easy or ‘low hanging fruit’ issues that I hope every congregation, university, and social group will soon implement for the benefit of our kids. (“Healthy Marriages in Low Income African American Communities: A Conversation with Faith Leaders,” Robert M. Franklin, 2004, www.aecf.org).

4. Fourth, the single most common reason for relationship dissolution among poor married people was domestic violence. We all expected that it would be infidelity or criminal behavior. But those followed some distance behind the presence of violence in the relationship. There are a lot of ugly relationships out there where innocent people are being brutalized but to which set of culturally sensitive institutions can victims turn for help? Unfortunately, most clergy are not trained to effectively handle domestic violence and they wisely refer people to secular agencies. But, some clergy who feel that they must ‘know all and be all’ to everyone advise women to return to life-threatening relationships in the name of love and faith. This is a cause for village-wide action. Here again we have a largely unnoticed and inadequately discussed topic in our communities to which our anchor institutions could bring new energy if properly prepared to do so.

THE CALL

Now, the heart of the matter. What did Cosby call for? You’ve all heard some or all of his message along the way since May 2004. Let me try to do justice to his evolving and expanding message with this summary.

In the presence of an elite and racially mixed audience gathered to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision, Cosby expressed disappointment with segments of that one-third of the African American population that lives in poverty, many in extreme, multi-generational poverty. By the way, in the film, “Million Dollar Baby,” there’s a chilling portrait of white poverty that most Americans fail to acknowledge but will have to confront while viewing the movie. Cosby has suggested that while civil rights organizations and other public and private institutions have been working to alleviate poverty during the post-civil rights movement period, many poor people have “not kept their part of the bargain”. He acknowledges a social contract wherein the haves should work on behalf of helping the have-nots to have

more. But, the have-nots have to put forth a decent effort to take advantage of available paths out of extreme poverty. For a variety of reasons, this is no longer happening.

He then goes on to enumerate a variety of symptoms of the psychology of poverty. Let me isolate a couple with which I think we should grapple:

1. Many people living in poverty make ill-considered consumer decisions like spending limited resources on expensive gym-shoes instead of “Hooked on Phonics” while the child is failing Basic English courses in school. Of course, you don’t have to be poor to make bad decisions but that’s not Cosby’s focus.

2. Many parents living in poverty show great concern about the welfare of a child once he or she has been arrested and/or incarcerated, but seemed to neglect opportunities earlier on to teach character lessons that might have prevented criminal behavior.

3. Cosby has expressed misgivings about the decision of many black people, not just those living in poverty, to adopt legitimate African names and African-sounding names and to use Ebonics outside the village in the larger public square (workplace, school, etc.). This, he argues, is likely to be a cultural liability in the job market.

He is confident that this situation is remediable and that every member of the community must now take drastic action to reverse these negative cultural trends.

EVERY CALL DESERVES A RESPONSE

In black church culture, communication happens in an antiphonal rhythm, that is, it happens as ‘call and response.’ When the preacher issues a call, the people respond. At the very least, people say, ‘Amen’ if they endorse the message and want to urge others to validate it. It is odd for listeners to endorse the message but say and do nothing in response to it. Amen is a variant of the Hebrew word for ‘truth’. It is one thing to affirm the truth, but another to act upon it.

That is the purpose of my modest effort to formulate a strategy and an action plan through which we can go beyond verbal or intellectual agreement with the Cosby ‘wake up call’ to institutionalizing a response to it. Indeed, I think that each of the village anchor institutions could reverse part of its crisis by mobilizing a response to these pressing community problems. In other words, there is an important role for the religious organizations, educational institutions, civil rights organizations and families in revitalizing communities in crisis. Well, we’ve heard the sermon, we’ve heard his call. It’s now time for a response, and I hope, a strategic response. We have both an obligation and an opportunity to respond in a more robust and coordinated way. And, this is what I think we should do.

FIRST STEPS

Here, in direct response to Cosby’s call, I’d like to suggest that we agree to start with two very concrete, high priority action items. There are many, many issues and goals that one could imagine, and there are many worthy organizations out there already working in these areas.

1. Given America's swollen prison population, every year over 640,000 prisoners are released into the community more than 200,000 ten years ago. In the next seven years, we should reduce by 50% the number of young black men and women who are incarcerated and who are arrested and sentenced for violent crime. Cosby asks parents who weep in the courtroom over a son convicted for murder, 'where were you when Jamal was 5 or 12 years old?' We must stand with those overwhelmed mothers and fathers who don't know how to equip their kids for a productive life. The men who are tonight sitting in prison are not available to become husbands, and are not available to rear their kids. Churches, colleges, and nonprofit organizations should develop a coordinated action plan to ensure that every prisoner scheduled for release will be received into the community with lots of supports. Let's make those brothers marriageable or at the very least responsible for their kids. I wouldn't mind writing a check to support institutions that have high impact programs for the re-entry of former inmates. What might happen if at your next church or community meeting, you introduced a resolution to make this a priority?

2. In order to revive a culture of healthy relationships and reduce the vulnerability of our kids, let us consider dramatically raising the annual marriage rate in our community. Not marriage at any cost but healthy marriages. Nearly all the literature tells us that people who are married live longer, are healthier, have more financial assets, take fewer life compromising risks, enjoy more frequent and better sex, have fewer serious illnesses, and experience less depression. And, kids who are reared by their own biological parents tend to do better than those reared in all the other alternative arrangements. They tend to complete more years of schooling, drop out less, have less juvenile criminal behavior, have better physical health, delay first pregnancies, and so on. Even if only some of this is true, wouldn't it be exciting to see the entire village working together on reviving a culture of healthy relationships? Not all of us will marry or want to marry. But, that should be a reasonable option for nearly every adult in the community. Starting in elementary school, let us ensure that every child understands the skills for good interpersonal relationships. Many people have deep psychological wounds that prevent them from having healthy relationships. Let's identify them early and do what we can to correct and heal them. All of us need help with how to negotiate the new world of egalitarian gender relationships in a respectful way. If your church, mosque, nonprofit organization or school doesn't have a curriculum for healthy relationships and what to do when things go bad, you have work to do starting now.

As for his concerns about Afrocentric naming, culture, and Ebonics, I am less worried than he is, and would take issue with his analysis. As long as parents select names that have meaning and teach kids those meanings, America can grow to accommodate and respect African culture just as it has learned to do with Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Latin cultures. Senator Barack Obama proves that America can change and grow. As for Ebonics, there's an appropriate time and place for everything...enough said. So, I'd like to set aside his generational anxiety about new names and language.

In order to jump start this work, first, I think we need to begin a village-wide conversation about the future of the village and especially the bedrock institution of the family. Not just in the black community, but in all of our villages. The data tell us that marriage, family, and child well-being are in trouble across all American communities. Responsible leaders of our communities should convene town hall meetings to address questions such as, What do we expect from every father and mother in the community? What can we guarantee to all of the children in our communities? What things do people who are considering divorce need to think about? Where can people who are being abused in relationships turn for help? What should each congregation in this zip code be doing to provide safe space in the after school hours? How can the faculty and students of our colleges be used to help revitalize educational excellence in tough communities? How can we intensify our efforts to educate young people about the life-threatening risks of unprotected sex? How can we protect traditional families while respecting the aspirations and rights of our homosexual neighbors? These and similar issues must be on the agenda.

We don't need these village conversations to become talk fests, rather we need information, data, and stories about what other communities are doing to help their kids and preserve their families. That means we'll need university scholars and not-for-profit leaders with expertise in these fields to help resource the conversations. As for venue, they could be convened in our houses of worship, barbershops, restaurants, maybe even symbolically important places like the King Center and the campus of Morris Brown College.

Second, we need curricula and training materials that can help community leaders to educate everyone about the nature of healthy relationships, improving study habits, nonviolent conflict resolution, eating healthier diets, and so on. The good news is that print and audio-visual resources on all of these topics already exist and could be used now if there was a demand for them. The appropriateness of those resources for our communities could be evaluated at the town hall meetings.

Third, money will be needed to ensure that community leaders are trained to lead village conversations and that follow up resources are available. Here is a role for local businesses and private philanthropy. Financial resources will be necessary to train personnel, provide materials, monitor effectiveness of the conversations, and to record and evaluate the progress of the effort. This need not be an expensive project, but it could yield benefits that far exceed its modest financial requirements.

Although I don't presume to prescribe what every local village should do after the conversations occur, I think there are some basic, essential items such as the prisoner re-entry and healthy relationships initiatives on which we should all be working.

Fourth, I would suggest that we set forth a period of time, perhaps seven or ten years, by which to challenge ourselves to make significant, measurable change in the selected areas of focus.

No matter how busy we are, everyone here could spend two hours per month attending a town meeting in which you would hear cutting edge information about how to improve your relationships, enhance the lives of our children, and prevent negative forces such as disease or cultural messages that compromise the legacy of strong families.

Fifth, a new style of leadership is necessary for the rebirth of the village. In the past, charismatic individuals have built institutions and flourished or fallen on their own. I believe that we now need 'charismatic servant-leaders' who are willing to engage in shared decision making and are willing to collaborate with others in implementing important community programs. Here, the emphasis is not on forms of charisma that distinguish a leader from every one else. Rather, this is charisma that harnesses the ego and is best expressed through collaboration. As the African proverb declares 'if you want to travel fast, walk alone; if you want to travel far, walk with others.' We need fewer charismatic leaders who travel ahead of the crowd, and more servant leaders who work with the crowd.

Sixth, the community must hold leaders and institutions accountable to the established short term goals. When organizations refuse to collaborate with others and refuse to place the needs of children front and center, we should respectfully criticize them and threaten to withhold our support. But, when they do strive to do the right thing, we should be generous in our praise and financial generosity. Their compensation should be pegged to their success in collaborative partnerships.

Seventh, although much of the work of reviving African American villages must be undertaken by African Americans, our ultimate success will depend on the cooperation, support, and good will of the larger community. Leaders such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Benjamin Mays and Martin L. King, Jr. understood this well. With the help of our friends, we can travel far and fast.

Who will convene this conversation? How would this start? I would submit that we take a page from the past. In the village, it is the community of elders who have the moral authority to invite everyone to gather and deliberate. One could imagine leaders like Andy Young, Marian Wright Edelman, John Hope Franklin, Oprah Winfrey, Rev. Gardner Taylor, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, even Bill Clinton among others constituting a convening council to challenge each and every organization to get on the same page. But, the elders can't do it alone. In fact, they have decreasing influence among the hip-hop generation. So, we'll have to identify and unleash the creativity of new, emerging leaders. Note how Sean P. Diddy Coombs and other rap

artists emerged during the national election to mobilize young voters. Clearly, local pastors, national and local DJs, actors and actresses, and others who enjoy influence and admiration could ensure that this work is being done in local communities.

Naturally, our work would be recorded and reported upward and outward to those who can monitor, catalogue, and help coordinate local best practices issuing periodic reports on the state of the village.

I hope that you will find this proposal worthy of more than a casual, ‘Amen, brother.’ In order to reduce the vulnerability of children, to improve life in the village, and strengthen our democracy we should do all we can to ensure that every person achieves her or his fullest potential and contributes to the common good.

I am disturbed by Cosby’s call but I am hopeful about the response we can make together. And, I am hopeful that even complicated and difficult problems can be unraveled and slowly transformed. There’s that story of the prodigal son who left his home, a place of comfort and security and while chasing a dream, found himself in a strange and painful place. But, something deep within would not let him go. Something within, told him that he was sick and needed to get well. Something drove him back to his family, back to his village, back to his sanity. Perhaps it was the echo of the community’s love that he heard. And when he returned, the healthy father welcomed the sick son back to life. And the entire village rejoiced.

Cosby has called; it’s our turn to respond.

Remember the words of Rabbi Hillel: “The world is equally balanced between good and evil, our next act will tip the scale.”