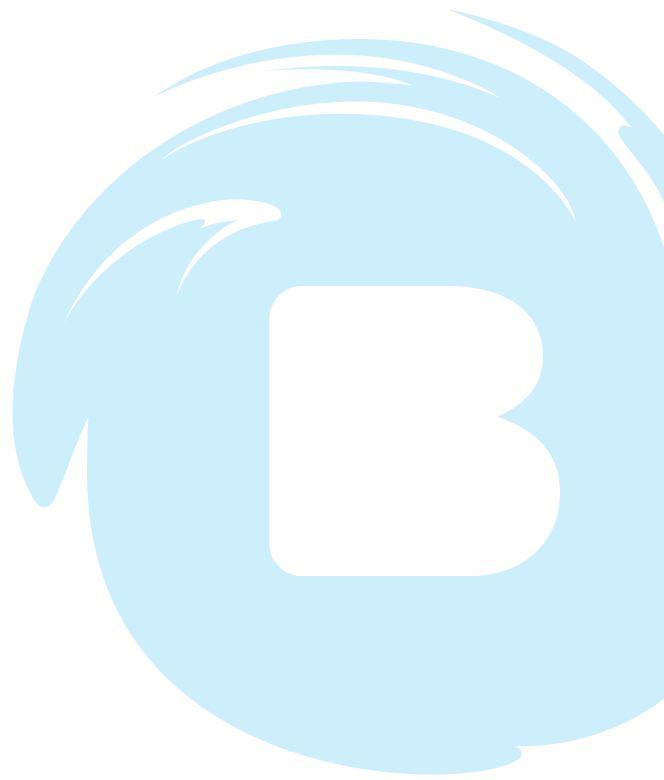


Question Bridge: Black Males **Transcript**



Introductory Sequence

So I have a question for you: what does it mean to you to be a black male?

What is your purpose in life?

How do we reclaim our communities?

At what point do young people stop respecting their elders?

What are you doing to make your world, your community, a better place?

How?

How?

How do we break the cycle?

Why?

Why?

Why do so many of us live in the present tense?

What?

What?



What is the last word that we can remember you by as a black man? For your last day on this earth, what is the word that we can remember you by?

On the last word as a black man that I would like to be remembered by is warrior.

Sincere.

Motivated.

Dedicated.

The proper balance.

Family oriented.

Honesty.

As a student of Bahá'u'lláh.

He seen the light, and changed.

Creative, 'cause if you don't know, man, I'm the creator.

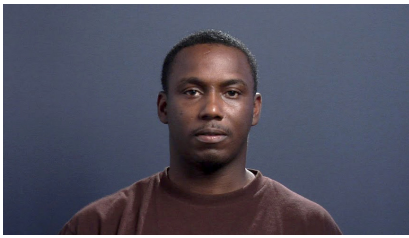
Thoughtful.

Responsibility.

Empowerment.

Danny Simmons, artist.

Father, I think, is the greatest thing a black man can be. Father.



I want to ask you a question, especially to my black men out there. Do feel that you were deprived from your father if your father wasn't in your life? Do you blame your mother because she just wanted a baby and she didn't want a father figure, or didn't have the ability to keep a father? But lastly I want to ask you: did it make you a different man? Do you think your life is different because your father was not in your life? And do you blame your mom, because she didn't want that part of your life? I wonder.

How I feel about my dad, is, I care for him, but I just don't feel it for him. Like, not at all. 'Cause the things he do, and the way he act, and the way he do things...but I do love both of them. I don't blame my mom, I don't blame my dad. People are who they are.

But me and my dad, we just don't connect, like. And that's how it is, and it has made me a different person. I am different, and I want to be better to my kids in the future and those types of things. It has made me a different person. I seen how to be a man quicker, how to do things without a dad. A lot of people don't have dads, so if you do, take that into consideration if you have a good dad.

No, I don't blame my mom, or I don't blame my dad. I think things happen just how they was meant to happen. My dad wasn't a part of my life, but I chose to get better from it, not bitter from it. Right? He taught me how to be a father because he wasn't around. You know what I mean? So now I'm able to give my daughters what I didn't have, as a father. You know what I mean? Now that I think about that question, I could give my kids what I didn't have. And maybe what I didn't have is not what my kids need! You know what I mean? I could give them my love, my understanding, my experience, right? 'Cause maybe that's what they need. You know? So I know I want the best for my kids, right? So if I know they want the best, then they don't have to settle for less than the best, right? So, nah, I don't blame anybody. I don't blame my mother or my dad. My mom did the best she could.

Well, I think that it's not really on your mother. I mean, my dad wasn't around for a long time, but it wasn't because he didn't want to be. It was because he was in jail. It might have been a few times that my mom did push him away and didn't allow him to come through. But at the end of the day, I touched bases with him and made sure our relationship was still tight. You just can't go around blaming other people. Sometimes people make mistakes. Just as long as you touch bases with them and let them know that you still love them, I don't see why it should be a problem.

That's a very good question. I will be the first to admit, I'm 58 years old now [begins to cry] and I still have father issues. My father was not in my life. I can't say I blame my mother for that. You know, my mother's white, my father's black. I have vague recollections of him—my father's from Haiti. I don't know if he's dead or alive. I mean my recollections of him, specifically, are very vague. There were other men around me, and sometimes as I was growing up, my mother had other friends, people she had relationships with. It's ironic that you mention the father thing, because as a grown man, at the age of 30, I sort of latched on to this elder, who actually became a father to me.

And that's a good thing. And I consider myself very blessed about that. And also, I benefited from the fathers that my friends had, you know, strong brothers that I looked up to. And I would say I benefited from that. I'm an only child. I didn't have any siblings that I knew about, but I certainly don't blame my mother. She did what she could. But do I think that I would have been a different person if perhaps my father would have been in my life from day one all the way until...? Undoubtedly, in some ways. But I think because of the father figures that I sort of chose, I made some good choices. So I'm good.



I have a question: how do you know when you become a man?

Wow, that's a deep question for such a young person!
How do you know when you become a man? Well, basically, responsibility. You're able to take on, assume responsibility.

Hold fast to your commitments to yourself first, your family, and the community in which you live in. If you can do those things, then you're on the way to manhood.

The question of when you become a man...you're born a man. When you become of age may be a more relevant question, but some of us become of age many, many, many times throughout the course of our lives. I thought I was a man at 21, ready to write memoirs of all my experience. I don't know how many times that I thought I knew the answer to everything, and so I'm here again, thinking that I know it all...but you'll know.

Young man, there are a couple of different factors that make you a man. Once you have to be financially stable, that's one. You definitely got to have your own place, your own roof over your head. You have to go to college, and that goes for all the young men out there. I mean, that's one step you've got to take to lead to financial stability. You have to be taking care of yourself. And buy your mamma a house, then you become a man!

I think sometimes I still try to answer that question, whether I've become a man. I grew up in a single-family home without a father, but I'm the youngest of seven, and I have six older brothers who taught me about being a man. And part of that is trying to be responsible to my family, and to my loved ones, and being a responsible citizen. But I think each of us need to find our own way to that path of what it means to be a man.

Young brother, I knew I became a man when I had to take on certain responsibilities and obligations to family, community, and otherwise.

Oh, that's a fine question there. I think that one of the mistakes that we often make is thinking that the first time that we're intimate with a woman, then now we're a man. In traditional societies, in order for boys to go into manhood, they had to go through certain rituals, which included them being prepared to fit whatever role they had in that society. If they were hunters, they learned how to hunt. If they were farmers, they learned how to farm. If they were fishermen, they learned how to fish. And when they were through with everything that prepared them to be a responsible member of that particular community, or that particular town or village or tribe or whatever, they were given visible symbols of that completion. A scar on the face or a type of clothing, a type of jewelry or something that they wore that a woman could look at them and say, "Well, this person is now a man."

Young'n, young'n...whoo. I'm still trying to figure that out myself. It's tough, it's really tough. For me, I don't really know when that's going to happen. Right now I'm just trying to take these strides in what society thinks a man is. You know, going to school and getting a job and being able to stand on my own two feet. It's going to be a difficult road, but it's probably going to be well worth it.

There's this clear thing, and I want you to know, for everybody. The boy who knows "how" will always have a job, but the boy who knows "why?" will always be the boss. You learn "why?" in school. You learn "how" by someone telling you. Tell Johnny to go over there and turn that switch. He hit the switch, the light come on. Ask him why did the light come on, then he has no more conversation. You have to teach him why the light came on.



So I teach at a university, and this question comes from that. I come across so many young black people, but especially black males, who seem like they're afraid of being intelligent, like they're afraid of being smart. So here's my question, especially for the young black men: why are you afraid of being smart? Why are you afraid of being intelligent? Are you afraid that people are going to say that you're acting white? Are you afraid that people are going to say that you're gay because you're smart? I don't understand it. We come from a very strong tradition of black males who are not afraid to share their intellectual gifts. I don't get that. Why do people seem so afraid?

I think that's because, well for me, growing up in San Francisco, going to high school out here, and it's really mostly becoming diverse. There's black people in the class, but not that many, and the teachers there mostly call on other students because they think that African Americans don't really know the answer, that we're slackers. Well that gave me low confidence, so I didn't really participate in class a lot of the time.

The reason I think why black people don't want to seem smart is because that they won't be taken seriously by their friends, or other guys, or their environment. And black people—well, let me say black men—don't take school serious, and they think that school isn't really for them. They could do things outside of school. They're better at other things. That's why black people don't seem smart, but we are smart. That's how I see it as a black individual man.

Most people are scared of being smart because they're scared of getting teased, scared of getting talked about. They scared of what people might try to do to them because of their smartness. And they don't want nobody probably trying to be they friend just to get that person to do their homework for them or something or to stop getting bullied or whatever. There's a lot of reasons for people not trying to act smart.

So I can definitely say that, for me, it's not about me being afraid that I seem smart or that I'm going to come off as being gay. Well, one, I am gay, so I'm pretty confident about that. For me, it's about that I'm scared that I won't be able to deliver after gaining this knowledge. That's all I got.



My question would be, is there a person who, through a negative way of living, what I would judge as a negative way of living—poor choices, I would consider them poor choices, maybe leaving school too soon, a choice to engage in illegal activities—is there a person in your life, that through that poor example of living, has influenced you to live your life differently? Is there a person like that in your life?

Yup, I'm that person. When I look in the mirror, man, I see a person, man, that I don't want to be—the person that I used to be. I don't want to be the person that's dishonorable, disloyal, or out of order. Since I don't want to be who I used to be I grab hold to being somebody I want to be. Because change is not free, nothing in the world is free. It even costs for me to change from who I want to be to someone that I want to be. I got to give up the old person to grab on to the new me. I'm that person. I'm my own example. You know, I'm my own example of who I don't want to be.

I have to answer that there wasn't one negative person, but rather a negative personality. And it's that personality that responds, "Oh great, you got into Harvard? I heard they were letting more blacks in there." Or, "Wonderful, you got into med school! I heard they were increasing the quota." It's that attitude that dismisses my long hours of study at night. It's that attitude that dismisses my improvise, adapt, and overcome attitude that the Marine Corps had taught. As a matter of fact, the Marine Corps was right. If you want to succeed, it's the six Ps of life: Proper Prior Planning Prevents Piss Poor Performance. It's not your color, and it's not your lack of the color. It's just trying hard to do what you know you can do.

Actually, I made those mistakes myself. Twenty-six years old, I just enrolled in community college, got 18 credits. Actually, what influences me now is a lot of my peers are living that negative life. I don't have a lot of peers around me that are moving where I am moving—as far as attending school, working towards a career. And it's not because they basically want to do the things they are doing, but I think it's a lot of lack of opportunity. That influence is really motivation. My peers motivate me to move forward in my career and move forward with my academics and all that. So that's how I'd answer that question.

When I was growing up, back in the days, I remember a violent incident that took place when I was about 15 years old. It was a brutal act that was committed on a girl because she was poor. And it was an afterschool fight. I remember these bully girls, you know, they saw this young girl who couldn't get her hair done, and didn't have the latest fashion, and for whatever reason, this female picked a fight with her. And I remember the whole school just was there, surrounding. It was almost like a lynching. And this girl was terrified, and this bully female commenced on beating this female down for no reason other than her being poor. And what was terrible about this incident is that she just wasn't satisfied with beating her down.

She had a dress on, the girl, the victim, had a dress on. And the girl pulled up her dress and somehow she got a broomstick, and she pulled her panties off and she shoved the broom in her vagina. And nobody did anything, and I was young at that time, and I didn't even know what to do. It shocked me. And I said to myself that I would never, ever let that happen ever again in my community. Never will I allow a brutal act to exist in front of me, and I will not intervene. So from that negative experience that transpired over 35 years ago, it motivated me into action, to have a desire to bring about love and unity within my community. And that one incident burns in my mind 'til this very day, and I have committed myself to striving to end the violence and the recklessness that exists within our community.

My father, he influenced me to be a better person. Because when I was up to 14, 15, 16, 17 years old, like a mirror, I was living the same life as him. False IDs, drugs, selling guns—and that's everything he did. And it was him, not hip-hop who showed me how to use the word "bitch." He showed me how to cook up crack. And one day I woke up and said, "I don't want to be this." He died because he...he was a genius. My father was genius, he had a degree. But he chose to live a Lex Luthor life. He seemed like he wanted to use everything for no good. Creating whatever he could create. As long as it was not legal, he wanted to do it. I didn't want that for my son. I didn't want that for my life. I wanted to live past the age of 33.

That's a great question. I grew up with a very good friend of mine, since the fourth grade, who was one of my closest, closest friends amongst a group of other young black boys who had just moved to the suburbs. And life was good, and we had idyllic settings, parks, and great schools. Over time, as we grew older and started hanging out, listening to music, going to parties, my friend was seduced by the darker side of living in the city, and was seduced by the gangland culture of the Midwest in the '80s. Wanted the respect of the homeboys, wanted to live like they lived. And over time, started making choices. Made a couple of very difficult choices. The farther he went down that path, the more of a distinction was drawn between the two ways we were living.

Fast forward a couple of years, maybe a couple of decades. Life starts catching up with that path. Life started accelerating for my own. And I'm comfortable with that. He probably was, too. In fact, we talked about it, and everything was fine when we see each other. But unfortunately, I won't get a chance to see him again. Just this past weekend, two days ago, he was found, five bullets, in his own business. Now, we'll never know what happened, but we do know that it did happen. And you start asking yourself, where were the diverging paths? And maybe there were several, but at the end of the day, they were identifiable.



My name is Duane Attieros from Philadelphia, PA, and I have a question. What's with this "code of the streets"? I don't understand it. How can you get shot, take a bullet from someone else, and say, "I'm not going to say anything"? How can you do a crime for other people and you take the time? You're doing time in prison, and these same people are not coming to visit you or helping you. How can you take the blame for someone else, period, and say, "I'm not gonna talk because of the code of the streets"? Is the streets gonna help you grow and have a family? Is the streets going to help you survive with employment? Is the streets going to help you do all of these other things, or are you going to have to look at things as an individual? So my question once again is, what is the "codes of the street," 'cause it doesn't make sense to me?

If I get shot, and I take a bullet from somebody else, it's not my purpose to go tell on that person, for the simple fact if I done some of that nature, I'm gonna die anyway, because they beliefs. That's a trip, right? 'Cause when you ask that question, my car been shot up. Yes, in fact, I know who did it, but I didn't tell when the police asked me to. For what? To me, I felt, I say, "Hey, the streets gonna take care of that. The streets will take care of that." And that's just how it is for me. Man, that's just being honest.

Well, I think it's because it's the "us against them" mentality. Even though we're killing ourselves, we still look at the police and authorities as the ultimate enemy. Therefore, when something happens within our community, we still feel that we shouldn't turn ourselves over to the true enemy.

I guess I could say about that, they've got a code of don't snitch, no snitching. Keep it real. But if you think about it, man, where do they put the rapists, and the killers, and the thieves, right? They put them in the same neighborhoods as the people who keep it real, that don't snitch. So if you love your family, love your family, man, how could you continue to "keep it real"? 'Cause that's where they're putting the killers, the rapers, and the molesters—right next to the people who keep it real. So yeah, that's crazy.

The code of the street is something I reduce down to its most essential element, and that's the rules of the playground. We had simple rules, like you had to be loyal to your friends, you didn't tell on somebody, and you tried to be fair. They're good for a certain point in life, maybe when you're younger. But as you get older and you start to understand that life is more complex, you realize that you have to have a relationship with the police. You have to have a relationship with all of the actors in your community, so that you can get the best results for your community. Committing to the code of the street would be the same as an adult committing to the idea to run their life by the simple rules of the sand lot.

If you don't plan on being in the 'hood, then I guess you don't have to live by the code of the streets. But the code of the streets is something you definitely want to pay attention to, because if you get to snitching or talking, then, you know what I mean? You're dead. So point blank: If you ain't gonna be around, not planning to be around, then I wouldn't advise you to go by the whole code of the streets. But if you're on the streets all day every day, then you need to obey that, straight up.



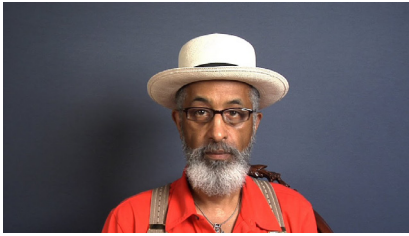
So here's one, black man: who started this [nods head, mouths "what's up, man?"]? What is that? Why do black men do that? And I notice we only kind of do that in America. When I'm up in Canada, working, I don't really see too many Canadian black men doing [that]. What's that about?

It's about acknowledgement, solidarity. Whether it's a head nod or a bow, or a chin up, it's an acknowledgement of another guy, when you see one another.

We're just saying, "What's up?" It's the universal acknowledgement, at least in the United States, of how you say, "What's up?" I'm more concerned about the brothers that DON'T give me the nod. Those are the brothers that I wonder about, the American brothers who look the other way or put their head down when they see me coming. I look at every black man that I walk by. I look him in his eyes, and I'm waiting to give him the nod. That's how I'm living, and that's how we should all live as far as I'm concerned. When they don't give me the nod, that's when I want to know what's up.

Brother, the reason why we do that is because we sure with each other, you feel me? That's my brother over there. I don't have to walk up and touch him to acknowledge him. I can just let him know that I see him, and I'm acknowledging him from a distance. That's why we "what's up?" You feel me? Straight up.

That's an interesting question, because when I was in college, I went to a mostly white university, and when we had orientation it was stressed to us, when you go walk throughout the campus you acknowledge all of the black people because there's not that many of us. So you see a brother walking, you "hey, what's up?" And that has progressed throughout my life. You see a brother, and "hey, how you doing brother; what's up, brother?" And I think what that does is.... I'm not sure who came up with that, but I think what that is, is an acknowledgement that I see you, I understand you, I know what you're going through. You and I have a common bond, and it's unspoken. I don't even have to say anything more than, "What's up brother?" I see you. I think that's what that means. Where it came from, I'm not sure. But I'm kind of glad it's here.



My question to the black man in America, or anywhere, is, what is common to all of us that we can say makes us who we are?

I like that hat. I think what makes us more common is, first of all, we're all black. And I think the second thing that makes us common is we're all black, and the third thing that makes us common is we're all black. Now, in our blackness we have struggles that parallel one another.

There is one thing that African American men all have in common and that is the perception of them by the white community. That perception is that you are not a man, you are less than a man, and at most you are three-fifths of a man, and you are not fully to be respected, and you have no rights that are to be respected in the dominant white society.

You know, this is a tricky question because I don't want to answer this in a way where I'm going to claim some sort of monolithic black man community, and we have something common to us all. For me, speaking personally, I think that the commonality resides in the fact that I come from a very strong and rich tradition that has resisted racism in this country and has celebrated life. That's my commonality with other black men. However, there are many, many, many things that make us different, and I think those things should be celebrated. They shouldn't be disparaged and they should be acknowledged. So our commonality is in our history, but I think our beauty as black people is also in our diversity.

Unfortunately, what's most common is probably our miseducation and misconception of who we are.

I could never assume that just because we look the same that in fact I would have more in common with you than not. That is really, on the personal level, I think it's really a misconception that if you have a group of black men in a room that they will have more commonalities than differences.

What is common that makes us who we are, that's universal, is our strength. Our inner strength. It doesn't seem like that sometimes, but it is. For centuries, the black man has been

used to being beat down. But he keeps rising, keeps coming back strong. It's like a superhero in a comic book.

That's a really, really interesting question. I mean, that's a profound question. And I think, because we are not monolithic, that the thing that we have in common—and I'm not being facetious when I say this—the thing that we have in common is that we are male, and we are black.

Black Israelites, what the fuck.

Why do African Americans always have to fight when they go out to public places?

What is it that's going through your mind when you open the car window and you've just finished your McDonald's—or your whatever you've gotten—and you toss the bag out the window with no regard for yourself or your community?



So, question: why is it so difficult for black men to go to the doctor on a regular basis to check our physical health or our mental health?

It's a very deep question, no pun intended. Historically there are instances where black men have gone to the doctors and came out with diseases, such as syphilis, in the Tuskegee experiment. Black women have gone into the clinic and came out sterilized throughout history, whether it's in this country or abroad. I think that with the historical and very real aspect of black people going into the doctor and coming out with either an ailment or some sort of procedure done on them without their being aware of it, I think that's a very real reason why black people—and men in particular—avoid the doctor, avoid getting that sort of information.

Going to the doctor is definitely not difficult if you've got the money. So growing up in a household where, you know, medical benefits wasn't even something that we could even compromise. I mean, we had remedies from Grandma because we didn't have the money. Those are the things that we reverted to. So I think it's, you know, health costs. And it's not having that financial stability to go and get yourself checked, even if you're feeling something's wrong. We told Granny, and Granny gave us those down-south remedies. And I'm not saying that's right, or wrong, but that's what we had to deal with because of the financial situation we were in.

Well, you've got two aspects. You've got your physical health and your mental health. And typically, black men go check out their physical health is when they're at such a bad point. They feel so bad, and their health is so lousy, that's when they go. My brother, I told him three years before he had prostate cancer, "When's the last time you had your prostate checked?" He said, "Aw, I don't get that done." I said, "When's the last time you been to the doctor?" "Oh, about four years ago." I said, "Man, you need to go!" I told him I get mine checked all the time, and I said "colonoscopy," and I told him all these things. Three years later, he had an advanced stage of prostate cancer, it had metastasized, and he died.

But I sometimes get angry at him because when I told him what to do, he refused to do it. And to this day, to think about it, it hurts because he could have done something. He could still be here. He could still be with me. What did he do? He wouldn't listen. I should have made him go. And you see, that's one thing about black men. We think we're so strong. We think we're so great, and we don't need anybody, and we're okay, and there's nothing wrong. That's not true. Your mental health, too. I mean, some black men don't even know that they have depression that could lead into suicide. And what do they do? They don't do anything about it. And so, I can't understand why they don't do it.

I don't feel that there's anything wrong with it. Some people need that person to talk to. But, you know, as far as I go I don't need nobody all in my business. You know, I'm already judged on everything that I do, and I feel that going to that therapist will bring up some issues that I don't want to deal with, and I don't want to be judged about. So for me, I just don't go.

You picked the wrong person to ask that to! As a therapist, I can say that 90 percent of the people that have come to me have been African American females. And the other 10 percent would be the males who have come. And usually they come with reservation and hesitation because they believe that when you begin to look inside is really saying that there's a weakness, not realizing that we all have imperfections that can be perfected, not realizing that the therapeutic environment—many of us have no clue what goes on in the therapeutic environment—that we don't take the opportunity to have that experience. So I say that most of us don't do it because of the unfamiliarity with what it really is all about.



The most important question that I have is for a person that has similar experiences as mine. A black man, maybe similar cultural environment, what type of daily practices you may have to, you know, keep your resolve, keep the faith, to maintain mental stability and, you know, to continue to prosper in your environment?

I pray. I pray every day. Right before I go to sleep, when I wake up in the morning, I really pray. I don't mean to get corny with it or anything, but I really do wake up in the morning and thank God that I made it through the night, and at the end of the day I thank God that I made it through the day. It's what my mom told me to do, it's what my dad told me to do. And when I'm looking for strength, those are the two that I turn to as well.

Well, I have maybe one basic answer. I mean, keeping in mind that I grew up in Washington, D.C., in the '40s and the '50s, in the '40s, and then moved to St. Louis in the '50s and the '60s, and lived there in very segregated environments. And one of the things I learned, especially from my mother and father—and I was fortunate that our family was pretty much intact—is that you really need to set goals and keep focused on where you want to go and what you want to do and keep learning. And so, that's what I do every day.

Every day I look as a learning experience and I try to reflect before I go to bed at night, "Okay, what did I learn today that's going to help me go to where I want to go?" And I always have goals and visions that I'm working on. By staying focused on these goals and visions and what I'm learning, it's been a way that's helped me succeed at a lot of things I've done in life. But it's been basically that process.

So my thing is finding an eternal spirit, an eternal self that's speaking to myself, communicating to myself those different things that I know are good for me. It's as simple as an occasional point forward, literally pointing, like, that's the direction you're going. As simple as that. Somebody else could look at me and think I'm pointing to someone, but really I'm just reminding myself, "Okay, this is where you're going, just keep moving, stay focused."

I think there are basically three things that I engage in to maintain a sense of personal peace, groundedness. I'm a spiritual person, grew up in church. That doesn't necessarily translate to being spiritual.

Over the years, I've come to a place where I've realized that's an essential part of my life. So I practice meditation, I practice prayer. I practice quiet time where there's no words coming out of my mouth, and I think it's more important to just sit and listen. And sometimes I hear myself, and sometimes I like to call God. And sometimes I hear nothing, and I just rest in that moment.

Something else I do is physical exercise. It's been proven time and time again scientifically that when we exercise we equip our brains for us to be more receptive to learning. We put ourselves in a better position emotionally when we exercise because we're bringing up good stress and eliminating bad stress.

The third practice is connection. It's important for me to connect with people. It's important for me to maintain those ties because those ties are mirrors for me. They help me understand where I'm at and if the other practices are doing well. Then I can be in the presence of other people and see the reflection of my practice in them. And it's always a good thing because I can look into someone else's eyes, and they'll tell me the truth whether I want to hear it or not about where I am in my other practices. It's helpful.



Well, essentially what I wanted to know from black men who've been married for some time—25, 35 years or so. I wanted to know, I was curious as to how did you know that she was the one for you? How did you know that she was a woman that you wanted to marry and spend the rest of your life with? The reason I'm asking is I've been dating a young woman for about a year or so and I feel that she could be the one for me, but I just don't know what that feels like.

This is an instance in which you really have to trust yourself. For myself, I will say this: when I met my wife, it was at the end of a period in which I'd been dating a lot. In all of the relationships that I had had, at some point I could see the end of the relationship. I could see it coming.

When I met my wife, I could not see the end. When I met the woman who became my wife, I did not know necessarily that we were going to be married. But I knew a) that we were going to have a relationship of major significance, and I also felt—and I can't necessarily describe the feeling—but I just felt inside of myself that I could not see the end of our relationship. So what that said to me was that we could...it was not necessarily...it was not a finite dynamic that was going on between us. It felt infinite. It was something I could not see the end for. And that was how I knew that this woman, the woman who became my wife, was going to be majorly a part of my life.

Well, I guess that I've been with my wife now for 20 years, which doesn't qualify for that 25 or 30 that you're talking about. But when we met, we really liked being with each other, and on our first date we just stayed together for every day after that, almost.

I don't really think that there's an answer to the question, is this the woman that I'm going to spend the rest of my life with? And I say that because there are many times in your life where you'll meet a woman that you are infatuated with, and you'll fall in love, and you'll fall in lust, and you'll think that you want to be with this woman. But you don't really know anybody until you encounter the journey of a relationship. It's a fantasy that you'll find somebody that you'll know is the one who you want to be with the rest of your life, and you don't even know her.

Well, you have the essential ingredient already. You mentioned "you feel like." Your feelings are a great vibration of if it's good or bad. As far as whether or not it could be a long-lasting relationship, that's based on the collaboration between the two of y'all, working with common goals and going in the same direction.

Having experienced marriage for 30 years, the power of passion and the pain of being in a relationship and realizing that she is a reflection of me and where there was problems and chal-

lenges was a reflection of things I needed to deal with. When you come to a long-term relationship, love is a choice. Relationships also are choices, and if you choose to build and maintain a relationship, you can.

In answer to your question: I dated my wife for probably almost three years before we got married. But I knew from the time that I first met her that she was someone who I wanted to spend a lot of time with her. She was soft, she was gentle, she was understanding. I used to write my last name with her first name over and over again on a yellow legal pad. I must have done that a hundred times. I used to find ways to just see her because I just liked being around her. She made me feel good. This was before we ever started going out or anything. It's a feeling that you have, and it's not something that you question. But if you have it, you'll know it.

Well, I've been married twice, and I was married first for 40 years before my wife died of cancer. But I decided that she was the one before I even laid eyes on her. And I decided that because I went to her house and I saw a Bible, and it was underlined. I said to her mother, "Whose Bible is this?" She said, "That's my baby daughter's Bible." And then I turned and looked on the wall and there was a senior life-saving certificate. I said, "Who is this?" She said, "That's my daughter." I said, "The same daughter that has the Bible?" And then there was a basketball letter on the wall. Well, I'd been on the swimming team in college, I was in seminary, and I had never met a woman—black or white—that was athletic and religious. And I didn't know what she looked like then, but I knew from her momma and her daddy that she couldn't be too far-gone! And then when I met her, one of the first times we were together, I made the mistake of saying, "Come on! I'll whip you at a game of horse on the basketball court!" And she said, "Ain't no mere man gonna beat me." And she proceeded to shoot me off the court. And I said, "The Lord sent me to this little country town for something, and you must be it."

Well, she wasn't interested in preachers and didn't want to be bothered with me for a long time, but I had made up my mind. She was from Marian, Alabama, which happened to be the same town that Coretta King was from, and the same country that Juanita Abernathy was from. Well, I didn't know Martin or Ralph then, but Jean and Coretta knew each other, had gone to the same high school. And to me, it was divine providence that sent me there to meet this woman, so I was committed. And she used to say, jokingly I hope, "You told me 'til death do us part. If ever you try to leave, you gonna die."

We were in the country, so we used to go out in the backyard and shoot at tin cans on a tree stump, and she could outshoot me. So I learned to be good quick. Her mother and her father

had a gun collection, and it was a kind of gun-toting family, but they believed in nonviolence.

When we married and went to Georgia and we were attacked by the Ku Klux Klan—we expected to be visited by the Klan—I said, “Look, I don’t mind facing these folk, but you’re going to have to sit up in the window with a gun and draw a bead on the one I’m talking to, and then we can negotiate from a position of strength.” And she said, “What are you talking about?” And I said, “I mean, we’re not going to just sit here and do nothing.” And she said, “I’ll never point a gun at a human being. And if you don’t believe this Christian stuff you’re talking, you need to quit right now.” And I was talking basically about the safety and security of my newborn daughter who was three months old in the crib. But what she did was, she forced me to think of other alternatives, so a little later on, I hooked up with Martin Luther King. And I think that we could not have made it and made the changes if we hadn’t married strong women. There were many a time that I’d have said “Fuck it” and get on out of there, but our wives would not let us wary. They said no, even if it means you get killed, I get killed, our children get killed, we have got to confront this evil called racism and segregation in America. And when you find a woman like that, you will be glad to spend the rest of your life with her.



I love older people. I respect older people. I live for older people, because I come from somebody that's older. So first and foremost I want to say we did do wrong. We did things, we stepped on ourselves. We did a lot of wrong things. For the most part, I don't respect how you look down on us, you treat us a certain type of way. It's all right; we're going to do it for the next 30 years. We gonna show y'all, we gonna do what we gotta do. But my whole thing is, first and foremost—and I should have said this from the beginning, but I'm going to sum it up with this—why didn't y'all leave us the blueprint? Peace.

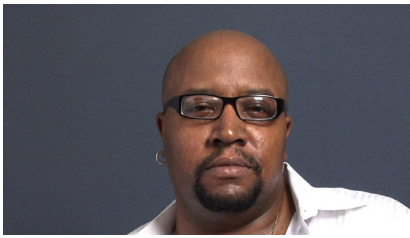
I suppose some of us, myself included, feel like we did leave a blueprint. If you had experienced the euphoria that we felt during the '60s when we would see one another on the corner and it wasn't no such thing that you had to throw up some kind of gang sign. When you saw other black people you went like this [raises fist], they went like that [raises fist], everything was fine. That's not the way it is now. I thought, me as an individual because I can't speak to other people, I thought there would be a continuum. I thought that if I raise my children a certain way things would stay that way. I thought that we were progressing. I underestimated the seriousness of our enemies. I underestimated that so much time and effort would be spent in dismantling those things that brought about self-esteem, those things that brought about self-love, those things that brought about respect for one another. A great deal of time and energy was spent dismantling that by our enemies. And it is our fault that we did not see that for what it was and combat it more thoroughly.

I think that maybe we did leave you a blueprint. And yet, we too were so busy trying to survive that we were not as organized and disciplined as maybe we should have been. But speaking from the platform of Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King never had more than 100 people on his staff, and that was only for one or two movements. He never had more than a half-a-million dollars a year to try to change the world. None of us had a blueprint, but what he taught us to do, and what we learned from Gandhi in India, was that we could find our own way by standing up for the truth.

After the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s proved to be very, very successful, I think blacks felt like we had crossed a threshold and that is was easy going from here on in. But the worst was yet to come. I kind of think that we thought that the waves would continue to roll, and we did drop the ball, only to find out later that other people were making plans and were putting

certain kinds of Negroes in head of organizations and paying them well. And they became the spokespersons for black people, and they became the protectors of the plantation, being paid by white people.

I think that we left you the blueprint; we just didn't tell you where it was. It's there, but we didn't just show it to you or lay it out. You had to look at us and see what we were doing to find out how to go about that blueprint. You see, some things can't be explained to you, some things you've got to look at a person and then you've got to see what it is that they're doing. The blueprint is, you get an education. You don't just be in the middle of the road. You don't try to be with the kids that don't do well, you try to be the best, okay? You do as good as you can, no matter how angry people become when you're really good. You know what, success is not easy. It is not. If it was, everybody would be successful. It takes time, it takes hard work. Everybody is not geared for hard work. Some people want it overnight, and it's not going to happen that way. So what you have to do is, we old people, we've laid the ground work for you. We've already put the blueprint out there. You might not like that blueprint, you might want to alter it in some way, and you can. But if you alter it, and it's not for the better, you will not achieve what us old folks have achieved.



My question to young black America, the young men of black America, would be, why do you have that “take” mentality? That “I want what I want right now. I don’t want to go to school. I don’t want to work. I don’t want to learn. I just want to take what I want, regardless of who it’s going to hurt, who it’s going to bother, whose mom it’s going to send to a funeral home, whose dad it’s going to send to prison.” Why do you have that “take” mentality? That’s my question.

The “take” mentality. A large portion of us, if you’re talking about young America between the ages of 16 and 24, all fall in that—well 16, maybe 16—18 to 24 fall in the crack generation. So you have a generation of young men who are have-nots. You live as a have-not for long enough, you notice that no one’s giving, or no one’s giving a shit about you, so you start to take. The generation right before us dropped the ball. From my grandparents to my parents there was a separation. They didn’t understand what my parents were going through, so the disconnect came ‘cause they couldn’t talk the same lingo that he spoke. Same with my parents and the generation right after them, then on to us. That disconnect makes it so that we are not teaching each other, and we’re teaching ourselves. And we can only teach what we’ve been taught, and that’s that no one will give you anything, so you take.

I think we have a take.... I think I have a “take” mentality because everything that I ever worked for and what my ancestors worked for was taken from them. So it’s what I’m taught—to take. I’m taught to have that “take” mentality. If nobody’s going to give it to me, I’m going to take it. Or if I work for it, somebody else is going to take it. So it’s a learned behavior. It can be unlearned.

As we progress with our technology and the way that technology has come today we are an instant gratification world. Everyone has instant access. It used to be a time that kids would go out and play. Whether it’s the fact that it’s too dangerous in the neighborhoods, or whether it’s the fact that parents are too tired because they work so much—kids spend so much time in front of the tube, in front of the TV, watching BET, MTV or whatever else, the Grand Theft Auto, the video games. Those have given kids the opportunity to say, “I want this now,” because it’s in front of their face every day. It’s in front of their face every day, and it’s up to the families to say, “Get away from the tube,” and show you some hard work. I remember when I was coming up, how my grandfather would take me out to do hard labor for a bag of McDonald’s. And it’s not really the same thing anymore. It starts with the families. The families can teach the kids that it’s not about the instant gratification, you know, that quick money is not great. Okay, to answer your question, it’s not all black males that have that sense of what you’re talk-

ing about, that mentality or frame of mind. But on the other hand, on a firsthand basis, I have seen such things happen as to oppose. You've got a young male, growing up in the projects, that doesn't have a father in his home, and all he's got around him is total chaos. The last thing he has is the one where he come from, out his momma womb, and the sense of direction that she's giving him is totally, totally, totally wrong. She tells him he better go to school, but she don't have no high school diploma. She don't have anything to tell him about school, or the importance of staying in school and setting goals, and just because you don't got no father figure to be all that you can be. He doesn't have that. He's already got one strike against him: he's in a black neighborhood. No matter how old he is, the authorities riding around still going to harass him. He's in school, he's going to school with rags on, he's being jived on. There's no sense of rest. His mom has every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the house. These brothers might be coming in the house, giving a totally bad, bad sense of direction to him. So when he goes out and he's trying, all he's getting is failure and no one to uplift him, no one to hold him. His mom, or no one else around who's judging him, can't even just tell him all you've got to do is pray about the situation, he ain't even getting that much.

So what do you expect for him to do, huh, growing up like this? Where do you expect for him to go from that point? It's not like he's older and he's trying to be taught. He's young, and his mom is telling him to stay away from drugs. But she's up late nights, thinking when he's asleep he can't hear her having a good time with her friends, getting high and drinking. Telling him not to steal, but here it is, she's going out in the neighborhood and boosting clothes, but she thinks he don't know about it just 'cause she ain't at the house. Telling him not to do it, but you turn around and do it. You are the one that had him. All this around him, all this chaos, there ain't no one to tell him what's right from wrong. He knows it, but in a sense, he's gonna go get it because survival is something. That's what the young live with: survive by any means necessary. But it's easy to talk about, but nobody's putting forth effort to make something happen about it, to change it. Touch your kid. Think about what they're going through instead of judging them. Yeah.



All right, my question is, I try to live good, but I'm surrounded by bad. I want to know what it is I could do to be better and live peaceful, surrounded by all evil. How can I do that?

I think you have to stand up to evil. If you're not willing to stand up and be yourself in the face of death, you're never going to find out who you really are.

A way to stay out of trouble—and there's so much around you—is to find more activities to get into, possibly a job. You feel me? Be your own man. Don't hang in groups. Just follow yourself, man. Listen to your own self. Be a leader, not a follower.

In my experience, whenever I tried to live good surrounded by evil, I had to keep putting good inside of me. I had to keep dealing with everything that I knew was good. I had to stay positive. I had to stay prayed up. I had to stay with my faith, because if you have something strong to hold on to at any time, any faith, I guarantee that evil will pass you by.

First of all, you've gotta stop journalizing and saying "all evil," because I'm quite sure that not everything's evil out there. You just have to learn to distinguish between what crowds you want to hang around with and which ones you don't. And the ones you see that have got the same interests as you do, blend or flop towards that particular crowd or something. But to say "all evil"? There's no such thing as "all evil," I'm quite sure.

Brother, I know it's hard out there. When I was younger, you know, I was surrounded by a lot of negativity, too. I decided to take the road less traveled. I separated myself from a lot of negativity, dropped a lot of my negative ways, took myself out of the community. You know, I got away from the concrete. I went out to the ocean. I went to the library, went to museums. There's a way, brother. I know it's hard out there—the difficulties are everywhere. What I had to do, I had to change it. We were taught that proper education corrects errors, so with brothers that were negative on the street corner, I tried to encourage them. I took a negative and made it a positive. So a lot of those things I didn't like around me. I used my love for my people to kind of change things, and I did, and I was very fortunate.

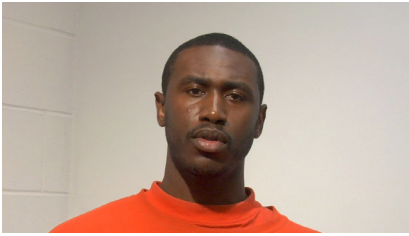
Anthony, you can live peacefully in this life if you have faith in God. Being surrounded by evil does not take away your faith and your peace, because we are a part of the evil. We ourselves are part of the evil, so we can't get rid of it. But by faith in God and a God who loves us, and a God who has provided redemption for us in His son, we can have His peace with us. And He promised to give us that peace in the worst of circumstances and in the midst of even death and in the face of death. God's peace can be in your heart while turmoil is raging all around outside.

The odds are that it's probably more lived good in the world on a day-to-day basis than lived bad, but the perception in the world is dominated by the bad.

I understand, young man, that you want to find peace, at such a troubling time with wars going on in other countries, even wars going on in your neighborhood. One way to find that peace is by making yourself peace. It's by having inner peace within yourself first and then spreading that joy of peace amongst everyone around you. You have to be a trendsetter, you have to be a leader. You have to be a motivator. Like I'm trying to motivate you to spread peace, to be peace, you have to motivate your brothers and sisters. And I'll be there to help you. If you motivate others, it will become contagious, and no matter if you're in another country, another state, that contagiousness will spread to where I'm at, and it'll motivate me even more, and we'll be working together. Peace.

You know, being a black male is interesting. On one end, we're threatening, but on the other hand there's wild fascination with who we are and what we represent. I mean, if you ask any group—white men or white women in particular—I think if they would be honest they would really tell you that, yes, there is this sometimes morbid fascination with the black male. Let me give you a case in point. So I'm in a bar, having a drink. It was after work one day. I'm minding my own business, just kind of sitting there, watching the time go by, and this guy comes up to me and approaches me, just shooting the shit more or less. So he says, once he gets comfortable with me—or so he thinks—is it true what they say about black men? And I said okay, I don't like to make assumptions, so I said, "What is it that you're talking about?" And he said, "Well, you know, the whole endowment thing. Is that true?" And it's not really my style to get mad or to get angry, but there were three points that really got to me with this question: Number one, the arrogance that he thought that he could ask me that question. Number two, the humor that this man, that he obviously feels so insecure that he needs to ask me about my

supposed “physical prowess.” The third question is just the objectification of it. The whole thing of, okay, at any point in time, you’re still going to look at me for entertainment or as some competition in the bedroom. And so in response to him I just said, “Well, you know, that’s a good question. I guess you’ll just have to find a dumb person to answer it for you.”



**I believe in PTSS—Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome.
When you look yourself in the eyes, in the mirror, would
you consider yourself a field nigger or a house nigger?**

Well, contextually I would say I'm a field hand—I don't say the full word because I think it's denigrating and disrespectful for me to repeat something else that someone used to describe me. In Malcolm's terms, I would be in the field. I would be the one who was wishing that the house would burn down or that a breeze comes along and hurries the fire along. But I would consider myself a field Negro.

Well, funny you should say that, brother, because I don't believe in Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome. I believe that black people suffer from Perpetual Traumatic Slave Syndrome. That being the case, sir, I'm a field Negro.

Well, I look myself in the eye, I gotta consider myself a nigger, period, because of what I've been dealing with, the ignorance of what I've been doing to myself. Field or house is not an issue for me. The fact that I've been doing the work of an ignorant nigger is the issue with me, and change is what I promote.

I feel like I'm probably a house nigger on some levels. I'll never forget: My grandmother told me when I was in high school—she's dead now, she's passed—when I was in all the newspapers and stuff, she always told me that I would do well because white people love me. That came out of her mouth, and I was around black people. I grew up around black people, and I wasn't trying to be anything I wasn't.

That's an interesting question. To put myself in either category would be quite different. I can identify with each at some point in my life. I'm a hybrid right now—the go between, the one that's the ambassador back and forth from the field to the house and working to keep the connection between the two, not isolating that one is better than the other but realizing that we have a common issue that we're dealing with, not just that I'm in the house or you're in the field, being in the house is better than being in the field, but instead that we're both in a predicament.

Wow, a lot of nigger questions for the rapper! I don't know if I believe in Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome in the same sense that you do. If that means that there are a group of bad habits such as eating fatback and foods that are too fatty or other bad habits such as self-doubt and unwillingness to be self-reliant, or other bad habits such as an inordinate distrust of power and education and systems that control us, yeah, I believe that we incorporated a lot of things that are unhealthy to us. Is it some spooky syndrome that we need to go to a psychiatrist to be healed for a few sessions? Nah. I don't know. I think it's something that hard work and perseverance could overcome. When I look at myself in the mirror, I don't see a house or field nigger. I see a nigger trying to survive. And based on that, whether I'm in the house or the field, my objective is to kill the master, burn down the house, and get to freedom.

It continues to be the question that we associate our history, our origin, our present being with the slave period. It is part of the indoctrination we received. But if I answer that question within the context, I'm definitely a field nigger who knows the house. [Laughs]

I hear so much, so many of you using the racial slurs, and you know what word I'm talking about.



My brothers, my brothers, and so the question is, why do we keep using “the N word”? What, new? What is it, nookie? What “N word”?

I think it's bullshit that black people can't say nigger. I love saying nigger, and I think it's fantastic. First of all, it's one of the most beautiful words you can use in the English language because it can express so much—much like the word fuck.

It's very serious. We have to stop using it.

You can't give white people magic power over us with a word. You know, if we stop saying a word because white people use it poorly, that's an absurdity, and it also gives them much more power than if we used the word freely and just enjoyed ourselves with it.

What is my opinion about it, “the N word”? I think I got to use it. I do.

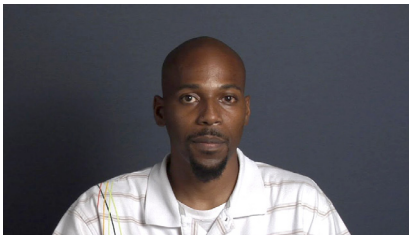
Could you imagine yourself going to church and hearing the pastor using that language on the pulpit? Could you imagine Martin Luther King making an address using that word constantly?

I heard Martin Luther King using that—and in fact I have him on tape using that word, but everyone understood him. He was saying, if we do this to challenge segregation boundaries in town, then these white people will be saying, “What's wrong with these niggers? What's got into these niggers?” Well, everybody understood that. But he wasn't calling people niggers. He was saying that's what they would be saying about these niggers, and that's what they were saying: “these niggers is crazy.”

Being caught up with the history of the word, being caught up in whether or not you can use it, or thinking that it's not polite, or people might use it who hear you use it, it's all fucking bullshit, and it's a waste of your time. We have much bigger issues.

Why don't you stop?

I'll talk to my son, he's eight, and I'm going to ask him not to use it. Maybe we'll stop with the next generation. I'll get back to you on that one...NIGGER!



As a black man in America, do you feel free? I guess it's true that the 14th Amendment gave us legal freedom, but as a black man in America, do you really feel free? When you're dealing with the economic restraints, and also the mental restraints that are placed upon you.

Do I feel free? That's a pretty deep question. I do now. I haven't always felt that way. I think that once you let go—once I let go—of some of the ideas that someone else was doing something to me or someone else had control over my life I realized that I influence what goes on, and I have the power to effect whatever change I want. And I started making decisions based on my personal beliefs instead of what a group would say or what my parents thought or what my friends thought. Then yeah, I feel free.

I find it interesting as I get older how many people allow their internal monologue to dictate their path towards negative results. So people often talk about what they can't do because they're black, or because they're poor, or because they don't come from the right family, or because they don't live in the right place. The older I get, the more I can attribute it to the freedom that starts here [touches temple]. No one's going to give me freedom, even if the world is saying something different. Particularly for those of us that live in America, because if we travel the world we see that we have a lot more blessings and opportunities than most people, particularly people in developing countries. So I think we really have no excuse but to own a sense of freedom, own a sense of possibility, to own our future. And it's not easy, but we can only live one moment at a time. So I think it's also important to be free from thinking too much about the past or thinking too much about the future. But thinking in this moment as you sit here and you watch this, as you listen, as you think about your dreams, what are you doing in the moment to actualize? And I think if you do that consistently, then you'll be able to experience great freedom.

The question is do I feel free? Creatively, I feel free. I think that there are many, many barriers that I've faced that people of other races haven't faced. And if that defines freedom, whether something's put in front of you that impedes you getting somewhere, if that's a restriction of freedom, then maybe so. I think that one of the things that has happened, because of that restriction, is I've found more creative ways to achieve my goals. So I feel like there's been a lot of restrictions, but I don't feel like I'm not free.

In terms of myself and my personal being and the way that I operate in the world, I feel free. I feel like I've achieved a sense of personal freedom. But in terms of my relations with other people, in terms of my relation with white people, in terms of my relation with other black people, do I feel free? No, because I constantly feel like there are things that are expected of me, things that are thought about me. I feel as if constantly, especially since I'm an educated black man, that I am perceived as a threat constantly. So when you're asking that question you have to get at the difference between a personal state of freedom and actually being free in the society, and I don't think that we're free in the society. But the funny thing is, I don't think that anyone is. I really wonder sometimes if anyone really can be free. I mean, is freedom really something that we can achieve?



So this question is for all the black gay men that are out there, and I'm not talking about the ones on the DL, or the ones that don't identify, but the ones that are open and honest about their sexuality. How do you really feel about yourself? Are you frightened about living openly in this country? What do you do in order to survive as a full human being?

I love myself, you know, me being a gay black man. One of my tactics is cutting people off. Some people, a lot of people who have discriminated against me were people that I know and I love, like my own dad. And it's horrible that I have to cut him off, but in order to survive and in order to not feel that pressure and not feel that angst, that oppression, I have to cut certain people off.

I live openly as a black gay man, but it took some time for me to get to that place because for many years I was invested in what other people thought about me. But when I decided to love myself more than what other people thought about me, then all the pieces fell into place and now I feel free. So my mantra about life is, "I just want everybody to be free."

In terms of being open about my sexuality, and in terms of surviving, I guess what I do to survive is I just eat, drink, like everybody else, in a physical way. I think that being myself and being as open as possible has probably helped me and helped my career. But I'd say personal, romantic relationships is the most difficult thing, and...I don't know...I haven't figured out how to maintain one that's been completely healthy. So that, I don't know. But in terms of career and the other stuff I just think just being open and keeping things moving has helped me be successful.

I find it difficult even as someone who others, even in some instances, may view as having been successful educationally and professionally, oftentimes to pursue all that I really desired to do without some feeling of concern about potential retribution or some concern about my aims or my goals being misinterpreted by others. And so, it's a constant struggle to be able to do this. It's something that requires thinking about on a daily basis, sometimes thinking and reconsidering one's approach. But perhaps more importantly, it indeed, as you suggest, requires that one be very honest about who he is, and that is something that I seek to do on a daily basis. I really seek to be honest and open about who I am.

I'm not frightened, living in this country. I feel confidence in myself. I'm who I wanna be. I don't listen to other people's remarks or how they judge me or anything. I'm me, and I'm living life.

I came out, or came out to a lot of people, when I was, I guess, in my teen years or twenties. And there's all different ways of coming out. You come out as same-gender loving, you come out as loving across racial lines, you can come out as loving within racial lines, and loving across party lines. You know, it's interesting coming out. Like, I'm involved with another man of color, an African American man. Right now, we've been together for 14 years, and he's a Republican. And I find, I mean, talk about cross-cultural combinations! And those ideals, like, being involved with someone who has those ideals but supports people who I think, "Oh, my God, that person should be the enemy!" is a challenge, and I don't really talk that much about it. That's a right-this-minute coming out. Does it feel liberating? [Shrugs his shoulders]

Hi there, my name is Girard Mouton III.

Jesse Williams.

Brian Winsor.

My name is Cecil Willis.

Joel Brown.

My name is Michael Goins.

My name is Charles Hollins. Everybody knows me as Hec, or they call me Hector.

My name is Jermaine. I'm from North Philadelphia.

My name is Christopher Myers.

Kalup Linzy.

Sean Leake.

My name is James Quincy.

My name is Melvin Joseph. I go by Bobby.

Robert "Cool Black" Horton.

Michael Liburd.

My name is Jeff Simms.

My name is Michael Shannon. I spent 21 years as a police officer in New York City.

My name is Kenny Kent.

Robert Procter.

My name is Mickyel Bethune.

Christopher Ball.

My name is Ethan Richards.

My name is Chandler Parker.

Johnathan Pullard, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Dean of Students.

My name is Musa Hixson.

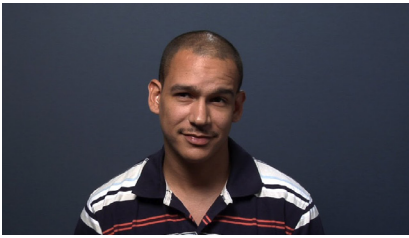
My name is Dwayne H. Adams, Sr.

Kenneth Vernell Varner, Jr.

Isaiah McCormick.

My name is Reverend Warren Marshall. I'm the pastor of the North Bend Baptist Church.

My name is Chris Briellard. I'm from San Francisco, California. I like Italian food and big-legged girls.



All right, cool. So this is my question: I've got a lot of brothers in the 'hood listening to rap music, and I want to know what is so cool about selling crack? Could someone tell me that? I mean, why is that so glorified in the music and in the things that we talk about?

Well, as for myself, well, when I came up crack was a quick way for a black man to make a million dollars. I'm 40 years old. In '85 when the crack scene hit, I was 15, 16 years old, watching two parents work dog hard to death, watching the dude next door who was selling crack ride in big cars. To me, I thought that was cool. And once I learned how to sell crack and learned how to acquire my own money and learned how to have things white folks was having and get up when I want to get up, to me, that was cool.

You asked me, why is crack so cool? To me, crack is whack, but to most people my age, where I come from, in my community, might think it's cool because you can make money, you know, you can really just sit on your butt and make some money. You don't really have to do nothing except you have to watch for cops and be paranoid. And then if a person wants to get out it's so much of an addiction a person might give it up for a minute but then you're always going to come back. I believe selling drugs is just as much of an addiction as the person that's using it. You know, you see that money, you get a high.

I don't think it was the crack. I think it might have been the car that crack bought. It might have been the girl that the crack allowed you to have, to take care of, and that was all we knew. Standing on the corner, what kind of entrepreneur situations or opportunities do we have, other than selling crack or heroin? So I don't think crack was cool. We knew it was killing, but at the same time, it put us in a situation where we were ahead of the pack, so a lot of people get that cloudy vision. Hopefully we can keep this dialogue going, help brothers out and understand that you can't step on somebody, man, to make yourself look good.

Ain't nothing cool about being out there, taking life chances, standing on my corner, not knowing what's going to occur in any given minute, trying to get some material possession. Ain't nothing cool out there, man. Man, oppressing my people because I'm hurt, hurt people, hurt people—ain't nothing cool with that. Ain't nothing cool with me selling crack to my momma, taking the Christmas toys away from my little siblings 'cause I'm charging my momma \$100 for a dime on credit. Ain't nothing cool knocking my daddy out because he stole my bundle, my

bundle of crack, that is. Ain't nothing cool with me taking my sister to go prostitute on the track to get some money because what? Because I didn't have that childhood that society supposedly wanted me to have. Ain't nothing cool with selling a pregnant woman crack, man. Ain't nothing cool with that—nothing cool at all. Ain't nothing cool for me to sit here and have to subject myself to such harm because I want a future. I want a better life.

Ain't nothing cool with that at all, because, man, I got an answer for everything I do, for my actions and inactions, and I been a part of bullshit. And I didn't see it on the streets. I was blinded to what, that delusion of grandeur, thinking that I'm greater than life itself? And I wasn't. You feel me? I'm responsible for the hell and hurt that I done caused people, all those broken families out there. I'm responsible for children that's incarcerated right now as we speak. I'm incarcerated for death out there based on me selling crack because I never knew what a person had to do to go and get it. You feel me? I'm responsible for that shit. Ain't nothing cool with that, and at nighttime I sit and I sleep in my cell, man, and I sit there lost in thoughts, man, DAMN! When nightmares start to arrive, like, "Teak, you fucked up again." I fucked up. I didn't know what I was out there doing. But I did, because it was the green, the money. You feel me? And now...? How am I going to feel when someone sells my son some crack? You feel me? How am I going to feel when my wife gets older and somebody sells her crack? Shit, man. It ain't cool.

It ain't cool at all. I mean it. Everybody got to pay for what they've done, and this is a form of me paying for what I done out there to that community, man, because it goes deeper than crack. It goes back to all them little kids who seen me out there and I didn't take time to talk to them or let them know that they are loved. So we're talking about substance issues. It's deeper than that substance. It's a genuine courtesy of just telling someone, "Man, you are loved." I am responsible for a lot of things. Ain't no answer for that, man. I'm just sitting here with the bullshit I created. I just watch my people sit here and cry. Babies, crack babies—that's in the womb, that's unborn, that's undeveloped, missing one ear—I'm responsible for that shit. I'm responsible for everything. I hold myself accountable. Shit. But I been committed suicide a long time ago when I was part of that bullshit. Now I claim my life. I'm a part of something that's greater, and that's the solution.

I want to see a therapist after I leave this thing! [Laughs]



What are you scared of? What do you fear?

Hmm...what am I scared of?

Fear of failure.

Failure.

Failure.

Me not being the person that I'm able to be. A man, taking care of his family.

Not being able to protect those I love if they need me to protect them.

Something happening to my family.

Being put away for a long time and leaving my mom at home by herself, hurting.

Disappointing my father.

Leaving this world without my mother putting a smile on my face.

I'm scared of the dark. Even today, I mean, the moonlight is good, but I will leave a bathroom light on at night.

My brother, I don't think I feel much of anything.

I'm afraid...that I'm not afraid of anything.

I'm not scared of anything.

I used to say I wasn't scared of nothing, but due to the fact that I have been consistently falling down on my face, maybe I'm scared of success.

My biggest fear is a person trying to force their beliefs on me.

Getting shot.

Snakes.

I fear most...you. You look like me, you talk like me, you are me. But at the same time, it's the enemy within, which is the person who can do you in. And because of all the things going on in society and in our community, sometimes I'm just as afraid of you as you are of me.



How come more of us don't surf?

All that water ain't no place for a black man, period, point blank.

Black men don't surf because to us it's just not what black folk do. Black folk mostly play basketball or baseball or something like that. Because in most cities we don't have no water where we can get up and surf, like people in Hawaii.

I don't surf because I don't know how to swim.

Yo dude, I don't surf because I'm scared of drowning. The rest of them? I don't know. I'm not going to surf because I'm too scared of drowning.

I think it's a matter of time, there's no doubt, because we've got young brothers skateboarding right now, taking it to the next level. So surfers beware, because I think, brothers, it's just a matter of time. South Beach, here we come.

Unfortunately, we can't all grow up in California or the coast of Florida. But for those of us like myself, who grew up in the Midwest, we can skate[board]. I rode a Lester, too, could do 360s on the half-pipe, cherry pickers, rock walks, all of that. And I was good.



I'm trying to figure out the parameters of blackness. I know the stuff that I'm supposed to believe, and read, and listen to, and look at if I'm definitely going to be black, like in the heart of blackness. But I keep wondering, suppose, for example, I prefer to listen to classical music or I prefer to travel to places where there are no black people or I like

Picasso maybe even more than I like Romaire Bearden or Jacob Lawrence. Am I still black? Or exactly how do we figure out where these boundaries are, and what we're supposed to be if we want to be a part of this community?

Oh, my God, I am so fucking sick of regulatory blackness! Because this is what your question is all about: what do I have to do in order to prove my blackness? Let me just answer your question like this. I know that I come from a rich tradition that is as diverse as it is deep. I don't have to do particular things in order to prove that I'm more or less black. It's absolutely ridiculous, and I think it makes us schizophrenic. I think it makes us crazy to run around thinking, well, if I don't listen to hip-hop, I'm not black enough. If I go to rock concerts or something, I'm being white. If I do this or do that, I'm not seen as being a full black person in the black community. Fuck that shit! I'm black. I'm proud of that. And I don't have to adhere to all of these cultural norms in order to prove that.

See, I've always believed in dealing with different types of people. I was never stuck in one type of box. Basically the answer for that is, basically you can do whatever you want to do. Just always remember that everything comes from black, you know what I mean? So you can deal with whoever you want to deal with. I like white people. I've got a few white friends. There's not... nothing wrong with that. It's your choice to do what you want to do. But always remember, try to rub off, try to take what you want to take from certain people, do what you need to do with it, and create whatever you want to create, brother.

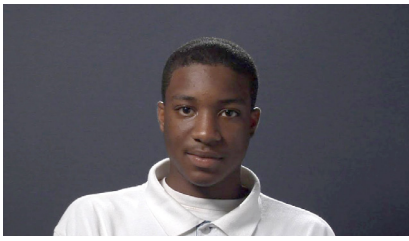
Yes, brother, you is still black. It doesn't matter what you do. You can do anything you want to do. It's a free world, free country, but at the same time...I wanna do those things; I wanna get up out here and do them with you, brother. Holla back at your boy.

Blackness is something that we create, something that we experience, something that we live. And part of that is about being in a body that's perceived as black, a body that's beaten on the street, a body that's arrested, a body that is put in jail, a body that is put on death row, a body that is left to die during Hurricane Katrina. All of those things are about being black and living in a black body. At the same time, blackness is about creating a definition of blackness that can encompass all of the spiritual, performative, and celebratory things that we do as black people. So that's why we have something called soul food, but sometimes we have to spice soul food up by giving it a Korean flavor or spicing it up by putting our own twist on it. So we create blackness in various forms. I think there are some instances where black is not a color but a culture, and when we talk about blackness as a culture that means we can all create it.

Brother man, yes you can still be black. Venus Williams, Serena Williams, Tiger Woods—they went outside of the box and they did something that normally black people don't do. Myself, I like all kinds of music and all kinds of food. Most people who may have looked at you and said you're not black for liking them—maybe they have ignorance to it. Keep doing what you're doing, and try to expose them to it sometimes. But again, brother, yes you are black.

One thing I've found to be common amongst all black men is our walk, to be quite honest. The way we walk down the street, you know it's a strong black man. That walk is confident, it's strong, it's swagger, and it has style.

We have soul. That's what we have.



Why do you get offended if a white person says “nigger” when we use the word every day?

To tell you the truth, I'm offended by both. When I hear a white person say it in my presence, of course my first reaction is to try to knuckle up and see if I can drop them. When I hear a black person say it, I think you're the one who's being ignorant. How dare you? What right do you have to use this word that has such a negative social stigma attached to it? Now, I've heard the argument that by saying it in popular culture we're desensitizing the effect of this word—I think that's foolish.

I don't feel offended when anyone says nigger, A word is just a word. It only means something if you give it meaning.

When a white person says the word nigger, in most cases it implies some type of racism—or could or can. When a black person is saying the word nigger, it definitely is a word that was given by racists, by slave owners, to a group of people. But it was also a word that was internalized by a group of people and used for totally different reasons.

It doesn't matter if it's nigger or honky or redneck or anything. If the intention is to be offensive, then you get upset. I have white friends I could call a redneck or a honky, and they don't necessarily get upset as long as they understand the intentions.

No one ever discusses that other groups, racial groups, do the same thing. They use the word among Italians, Polish, Irish. I've heard them say it among themselves. They call each other dago, polack, guinea, mick. But you understand that you can't use that word in their group and how it would be taken.

My particular generation, it's not like we never used the word among ourselves, but we never, ever, ever, ever, ever said it around white people. But what's happened now, because of this aberrated popular culture, that's become an exchange word for black male.

It's a word we've internalized, we use too publically—we shouldn't use publically—but it is now, in that sense, our word.

I can use that with my friends because we're not intending to do something that's derogatory.

No. All that needs to be removed. Yeah, last post did it. We did it. Our generation did it. We used the N word. But, you know, this is a whole different time period and we really need to try to put a kibosh on it.

I'm going to tell you like this here: I hate the word nigger. I don't like it at all. I never liked it.



So what are truly our issues is my question. This question is to you, the member of the older generation. The older culture seems to focus on a lot of the negative—or what they perceive as the negative aspects of our culture—whether it be the dress, the music, things of that nature.

To me, I don't see that as THE problem or the root cause.

I think it's a byproduct. If you took a step back, would you really say that this is THE problem? Is it the music? Is it the clothing? Is that the problem? Or is it a bigger problem that maybe starts in your generation?

Well, you're probably right. It does start with our generation, but it ends in yours. And you have to take responsibility for it. The problem I have with dress and the music is that it is a symptom of the unfinished business of my generation.

It's funny that you would bring up that question 'cause oftentimes I work with kids and I see them with their pants hanging all the way down to their knees and everything, and their underwear showing and stuff like that, and I kind of equate it with when I was in the '60s. I had an afro, which I would say was about three-feet high, and every time the wind blew I could barely stand up straight. And everybody did. And the older generation at that point was very upset, but it was a form of our protest against the kind of apartheid, like issues that we faced during that time.

Every generation has its own set of imperatives that it's attempting to deal with. And in my generation I'm sure my parents were just as surprised by the ways that we chose to represent: big afros, Maoist suits, dashikis. And even to this day I haven't seen anything more radical in a way of dress than hot pants. So, that was out of my generation!

To this generation, though, one of the things that I as a black man see is those types of things negate the struggles that I went through in order for you to be where you are, to express where you are, and that your expression is not something that I would consider to be helpful to you getting forward in life.

You're supposed to be dressed and acting like you're not still suffering of the shortcomings of our society. You're creating a new society.

A dear friend of mine once said that our children are the poets. They are the picture of what we have produced. They are the result of what we have done and what we have failed to do. And I believe that. I believe our children are. And the second part of the statement was that we as the adults don't like the picture that they have brought back to us, so we condemn them and condemn the picture rather than realize that they reflect what we have done and what we have failed to do as a generation of adults. So the solution to the problem is twofold. I don't believe that we ignore what we see to be problems with our young generation—we can address that. But we have to give them creative outlets. We have to give them positive and constructive things to do. So the adults have that responsibility. But the young people have to have an ear and a heart to receive what we're putting out there also, when we do provide the positive pieces that they can incorporate in their lives. So not an easy answer to the problem that confronts us, but I believe an answer that we can address nonetheless if we address it on both sides of the equation. I hope that answers your question. Be blessed.

The most important change that ever happened to us came as a result of integration. The black family was destroyed at that time. Because when I grew up, families and neighborhoods meant something. Every neighborhood had role models—doctors, lawyers, teachers, everything—all lived on the same block. But when they had these open houses and people was able to move, all the people who had any influence moved out of the neighborhood and left the neighborhood to all the rest of the people who had nothing but children, no values. The kids grew up without any role models, without anyone looking after them or taking care of them. That destroyed the neighborhood, and that's where the crack houses came in all of a sudden. In 1955 there was no such thing as crack houses that anyone knew anything about. Every neighborhood would clean their own neighborhood—the people wouldn't allow that to come in. But then as they moved, the people who had any influence and allowed them to move in different neighborhoods, all of them left and flocked to a better neighborhood for themselves, and left the majority of the poorest people back in the neighborhood. That is why you see what's going on in the big cities today, because they have everybody with any influence living at the top of the hill and all of the rest of the people living at the bottom of the hill.



Growing up, I've seen black people who've made it out, either financially or educationally, change who they are. So my question is, how has your financial success or your educational success compromised who you feel that you are on the inside for what you feel that people want you to be?

I'd have to say the first answer is that I feel like I've compromised my membership in the black community. It's not because I left the community, or the community left me. But it's as if there's a zero-sum rule—that the more successful a black man becomes, the less the community seems to embrace him. And it's also got a little bit to do with how that black man is defined by the non-black world. It's as if your success makes you “other.”

An example of a conscious way that I did that is with the soul shake. I remember growing up in Dallas, Texas, and meeting my friends on the street and you walk up to them and you give them a soul shake. I also remember the day that I stopped doing that, on the courtyard at Harvard. I remember walking up to them and instead of giving them a soul shake giving them the corporate handshake. I remember walking through the hospital, the floors and doing the same thing, being conscious that when I see my friends I should just give them the corporate handshake. And, you know, the disappointing thing was, one day, walking down the hall was a cardiothoracic surgeon who came up and soul shook ME. The moral to the story is, don't try to be black, just be yourself. By definition, you're black.

Imagine yourself being a knight, and you're riding into battle. A knight has to put on his armor, and a knight has to have his shield and sword. For me, if you're going into a corporate environment, you can't go into a corporate environment the same way you would if you were going to your grandmother's house, or if you're going to McDonald's, or if you're just comfortable. There is a code, and there is a shielding, a layer of protection that you need for all of the harmful things that are going to be in all of those environments, because they're equally treacherous. I just look at it as, you've got to be confident in who you are, know who you are, and just know that in certain environments you have to dress a certain way, and the way that you speak is just about how relaxed you feel in those environments.

And I must say, it has not changed me at all. What has changed is people's perceptions of who I am and what I'm about, and which, in the black community, has created a dilemma. Because we have the idea that for an individual who has succeeded is now not part of that community but part of some other community that we believe we're not a part of.

On the one hand, the reality is when we get into these positions of power we make people uncomfortable. So that's one thing on the one hand.

On the other hand, in all different types of professions, there are certain things that you have to do in order to be successful. There's certain ways that you have to be. But there's a difference between adapting to different situations and being in a hostile environment because you are black.

So I haven't changed who I am. I've gained new skills. I can adapt to many different situations, but I am still me. I am still me at the end of the day, and I'm not afraid to be that.

There's a thing in this world called maturity. It's something that is sort of undervalued in the black community today because people tend to be centered around this idea of what I call "ghetto-centricity." That is, that the ghetto is at the center of all black expression, which is a very recent phenomenon and a very divisive one, because the truth is everyone evolves. No one stays the way they were when they were 18, 19, 20. If they did, they wouldn't be human. I wouldn't know what they'd be.

As black people, as black men, we need to be in the process of evolution. There's no "ultimate blackness." There's no ultimate black street credibility. There's who you are then, what works for you at that moment, and who you become next, and who you become next, and who you become next. You take everything that's ever happened to you, and you keep adding on top of it, and that's life.



Black man, who are you? Who are you as it relates to your purpose with humanity here on earth? Who are you?

Hi, and...the other questions were easier! You just threw this at me!

So the question is, who am I? I'm just like other people, trying to create a better world with the resources I have.

Speaking for the black people, but as an individual, I think I'm here to make change, to create new things, and live my life. That's why I think I'm here on earth. And what I want to do is have fun with my life and create change and do things and find out things that people don't know and do things people never seen before. That's why I think I'm here on earth.

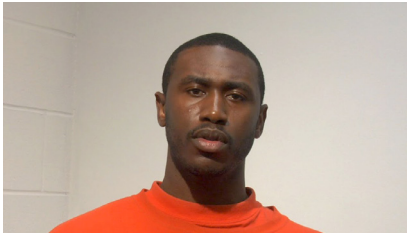
I'm a black man. I'm somebody that stands for greatness, somebody that wants better for myself, somebody that wants better for my community, and somebody who just wants the world to be a better place, not just for me but for everybody.

I don't really know exactly who I am, but I know who I want to be. I want to graduate from college with a degree, work in Juvenile and help youth. That's what I want to do, but I don't know what life brings.

I think I'm here to be an activist and be a voice for not only black men but for gay black men.

I am a dedicated father, husband, friend, and soldier to my community. I have a profound determination to continue to hold a torchlight of our ancestors.

I'm a black man. I'm a father in the community, a father in my household. I'm a husband, I'm a son, I'm a nephew, I'm an older brother, I'm a good friend, I'm a working man. What I'm here to do is what I've done. Not the bad, but the good, and that's how it should be looked at.



This is for the brothers that go to school, that have been to college, have degrees, possibly have well paying jobs. What makes you better than a brother who came from poverty, who stands on a street corner, or who works a garbage man job or a job that's not making as much as you? What makes you better?

Brother, that's the wrong question. Nothing makes me better. If you look in my eyes now, you're probably seeing anger, frustration—it's not anger actually, it's frustration. I'm just sick and tired of being sick and tired. I'm tired of the excuses; I'm tired of the problems. I'm almost saying to my people: stop having babies. If you can't be a parent, if you can't be a father—if you don't know how to be a father, ask somebody! But I'm tired of babies having babies, and I'm tired of black men not showing up in the lives of black men. Because then we won't have to ask these stupid-ass questions because you'd have somebody at home answering these questions! And what made an Andrew Young an Andrew Young is he had a father, and he had a mother. What made me ME is I had a father, and I had a mother—the only probable difference between my life and your life. Because I bet you're just as smart if not smarter than me. Because if you are surviving in America without all the traditional attributes and the education, and the credentials, you are one solid hustler.

So the old John Bryant would blame my friends, you're lazy, get off your rear-end, go get a job. This John Bryant says, we come from different places, but we're all God's children and I hear your pain, but what are we going to do about it? What are we going to do about it? Because over or around it, we've got to get to it, because nobody cares. Nobody cares about your drama. At least in Dr. King's day, you had love and hate. You knew exactly where people stood. Today you don't have love or hate, you have indifference. Nobody cares enough about your drama to hate you. So when I go into schools I say, stop the flossing, stop the profiling—nobody gives a damn about all that. We have made dumb sexy. We have dumbed down and we have celebrated. We have got to make smart sexy again. One to five...I live my life eight to ten. One to five is mediocrity. The Bible says be hot or be cold—if you're lukewarm I'll spat you out. Translation? Even God doesn't like mediocrity. Five to seven is entertainment. That's the woman you date, but you don't marry. Eight to ten is excellence. Brother, live your life eight to ten.

Introductory Sequence

So I have a question for you: what does it mean to you to be a black male?

What is your purpose in life?

How do we reclaim our communities?

At what point do young people stop respecting their elders?

What are you doing to make your world, your community, a better place?

How?

How?

How do we break the cycle?

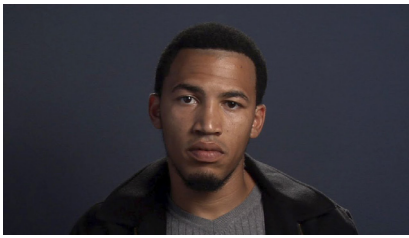
Why?

Why?

Why do so many of us live in the present tense?

What?

What?



Why am I considered a traitor to my race, or you guys consider me an outcast simply because I choose to date outside of my race? It's not that I don't like dating within my race, but it's just that I was raised to believe that you judge people determined on their heart and their personality and moral fiber, who they are as a person, not on the color of their skin. Why is that?

Well, I wouldn't go so far as to call you a traitor. I don't care, but I'd accuse you of ignorance again. Obviously, your parents, they told you not to have any discrimination, but I'm quite sure that their parents and their parents before them were discriminated against because of the color of their skin. So that's why I'm accusing you of being ignorant, because you obviously are not paying attention to historical events that have transpired and are still going on today. If you go out in public with a person outside of your race, you're going to be ostracized.

So, that's your choice, and if you can live with it, live with it. You're in America, and it's been going on since the founding of this country.

I don't see why we've got to go anywhere. There's brothers that have got blue eyes and ginger-colored hair, there's sisters that are coal black, there's sisters that are buttermilk yellow. I mean, we're a varietous race of people. There are plenty of people who have made different choices as far as who their personal mate is, and still did things that were helpful to us as a group, as a community. That being said, personally, I believe that our women deserve the best that we have to offer, and whatever I have to offer, that's who's going to get it.

I'm really conflicted by that question myself because I date outside the black race really frequently, and I'm conflicted because on the one hand, I agree that we should be able to look at people for their human content and make those kinds of human connections, and I've done that. But also, politically, I understand that there's ways in which people outside the black race are offered as more attractive, as more of a great kind of relationship, as someone to be seen with. Your status as an African American man, just by who you're associating with, and all of that, has denigrating effects for the way that black women are projected and portrayed. So I think that we have a lot of work to do in that area. We don't want to go down the road of saying you can only date one kind of person, but we also have to reflect, ourselves, on why it is that it's so easy for so many of us to look to other women and other racial groups for the most intimate kinds of relationships that we can have in our lives.

Well, my brother, I'm the same way. I wouldn't date no black women as well, because black women, they're something else. They're a trip. Black women make you go to the light, you know what I'm sayin'. I also date outside of my race as well, because black women, they will make you do some things that you never thought that you'd see yourself doing.

I would say that some folks would consider you a traitor to your race because they have a very narrow vision or a narrow view of what love should look like. A lot of times that comes from what they see or what they desire to see. I think because black people don't have and are still fighting for many things in life, and they feel that if they see black men with Asian women or with white women, they have to fight for their men. They feel like they're losing their men to prison and various other social ills. I think within that camp there's also a population of people who will say you're a traitor because they feel that's what they're supposed to say because it's the black thing to say, and if you see an interracial couple you shouldn't agree with that. But I say, love who you love, and that's how things are supposed to be. I've dated white women. I've dated black women. And as I've gotten older I know that I should be with a black woman. And I love many things about the woman that I'm with. I love her confidence, I love her poise, I love her strength, I love her attitude. I love the fact that when I fall down she'll pick me up, and when I achieve she'll cheer for me. I feel you can get that more so with a black woman. I'm not saying that a woman who loves you won't cheer for you and won't feel for you when you hurt. But I think a black woman, she knows where you're coming from, she knows where you want to go.

Most of my elementary school teachers were white. There was Ms. Coolidge, first grade, blonde hair, blue eyes, cute. Thinking back, she was probably only in her twenties. I had a crush on her. She used to kiss us at the end of class. Back in the '70s, I guess it wasn't called child abuse at that time or inappropriate, so she would kiss all the kids on the cheek when we left class. So one day I got a bright idea that when she came to kiss me on the cheek I would turn my face and kiss her on the lips. So as a little boy I was kissing white women.

[Starts to laugh]



What do you really think about white women?

[Many laugh]

I think white women is cool. I don't see nothing wrong with them. I don't see nothing wrong with no race, me personally. That's basically how I can answer that. I mean, they're cool to me.

Physically, I've seen some very pretty white women. I've never really dated a white woman. I don't know if that's a character flaw or something. I find some of them extremely attractive, I just feel more comfortable with women of my own race. That might even be racism on my part. I saw a few white women walking here and was like, "damn!" and kept walking.

I don't really think about white women. The fact of the matter is, in my youth I went through all the experiences that we go through to conquer those undeniable things. Then I realized that they're not important. I recognize also that part of our problem of having a question like "what do we think about white women?" is because we have had this beauty standard imposed on us of which white women are the symbol, and we really need to help our sisters recognize that they are the beauties of the world as they are naturally. So white women don't play a role in that.

You know, there's just something special, I don't know. I grew up in Togo, and so I was always something different. As a little kid there was something, I guess you could almost say exotic, about white women. Because I wasn't them, there was something different, and just something...a unique flavor. That's all that I can say, too.

I think it's kind of sad, though, in 2011, that people still have a problem around other people's business when it comes to affection and love and connection. I think that everyone should love everybody else, as corny and cliché as that sounds. I always ask people who have a problem around folks dating folks that don't look like them, I say, "How does God factor into this?"

So I think that if it wasn't for a white woman, we wouldn't have our current president. I guess a black man had something to do with that, too. So here's a lesson to you: if more black and white folks got together, we'd have more brown presidents. I'm going to go find me a white woman, excuse me.... [Starts to laugh]

[On having a Black president]

I didn't believe we could have one.

They'd say, "Little Johnny, when you grow up, you could be president." But for little black boys, we'd think "yeah, that's not a reality."

I'll never forget the day after the election, walking into my school and seeing the joyful faces of students.

Yes, you can be president. Anything is possible, even in this country.

We have a black president. Everything is possible.

And the fact that he's married to a sister, and has two beautiful young daughters, I mean, that's a home run.

That has to fill you with pride. On the other hand, I'm not black for a living.

I don't think that I feel any different now that Barack Obama is president.

President Barack Obama is not going to come raise your children.

Just because we have a black president doesn't mean that anything has really changed, or people's perceptions or misconceptions have been altered.

President Barack Obama is not going to make your mortgage payment.

Black men face challenges, the same challenges that we faced before we had a black president.

President Barack Obama is not going to save your life.

You still have to do what you have to do as a black man or a black woman or a black child to succeed.

We should not look to Obama to solve the problems of African Americans. That is still our problem. We have to solve them, and get him to contribute to it.

He has what it takes. I don't agree with everything, as a black man, with everything that he's done. But guess what? I've never met one black man that I've agreed with everything that he's done.



My question is, if all whites were gone, who would you be? Who would you be, because black is no longer relevant as a definition without white?

I'd be who I am. I'd be John Holton. I'd be the person who is speaking to you. I'd be the person who is a member of a family. I'd be the person who intends to strengthen his family every day. The absence of white people doesn't define or limit my definition of who I am.

The diversity within a community is usually greater than the diversity outside of that community. So the same struggles with ideas, the same views that are problematic, are still going to exist. It would just take the form that now, the people parroting those ideas would be people who looked like you as opposed to that abject other who you could now point to and say, "Well, they're the problem."

Great question. I think I would be a chief. Me and my brothers would have our own cattles, have our own land, and I would tend to my land. I would still, more than likely without whites, I would still be in Africa. And, I don't know, I would probably have three or four wives, have a lot of land, just enjoying life, looking forward to being the elder of my tribe. I don't know my tribe. I could be "Parleelashootiashantee" [*sic*], 'cause I don't know. I believe I would still be in Africa, enjoying life and being civilized, and just improving the world. Improving the world from an African point of view.

The truth is, if there were no people of European—white people, as we call them—there would still be yellow people, there would still be red people, there would still be a wide range of colors. So I don't want to presuppose the world as just black and white, because it's not just black and white. It's much more diverse than that. There's many, many people in the middle between black and white. The other thing is, you know, if you look at the history of pre-colonial Africa, you're talking about a history of tribalism, regionalism, ethnicity. One thing, if you really go to Africa and deal with Africans, they're ethnically different. The ethnic difference in Africa is no different than the ethnic difference in Europe. The Kenyans and the South Africans and the people from what we now call Nigeria are ethnically different, and they are very aware of that. It's what defined Africa before the white man came. So to say that if we remove white people that the basic rivalries, the basic ethnic differences that kind of define people would disappear is a fallacy.

If all whites were gone, well, you know, if you look at a map, and you look at the world, you'll see that this peninsula of Asia called Europe is not a continent. They really, as a standalone, make little difference in this world. They have, through this modern history, conquered things militarily, but I don't think that they would be missed if they were gone.

If whites were taken off, if there were no whites on planet Earth, I would still be a proud, dignified black man. And I would still have a profound determination to bring about love and unity within my community. So nothing would change for me, because within our community today we still have problems. Self-hatred is still very prevalent. We are still continuing with the skin issue amongst ourselves. So if every white was taken off the face of the earth, our problems would still be the same.

[On the role of media]

The role of media on our view of who we are is massive.

Everybody knows who and what you are, what you should be and what you can be. They're running that crap at you. Running at you every day, 24/7.

You know who's more influenced by pop culture and media than children and adolescents and teenagers? We are at our most vulnerable states, and we're sponges to all information. Now it is also our lens to the outside world, which is therefore our lens to what's attainable for us in life.

If you use, for example, a show like *New York Undercover*, which was a very popular show, there were important things for me, as an actor, to portray on a show like that. I would hug my son. I would have him kiss me. I would kiss him. If the props department said, or if the script called for, you know, "JC is sitting in the house while G is doing his homework watching television"—this would actually be scripted—and I would say, "This is absolutely not going to happen." In fact, I'd tell the props department to go and get books and fill the space with books, whether it be a table or if he's sitting on his bed, surround him with books just to portray that image. I was very conscious of little, subtle things like that, that I understood were impacting millions of people around the world.

Broadway, as we know Broadway, gained its position as almost the national theater district around the minstrel shows that were put together in the 19th and 20th centuries. What is it in the consciousness of white people that makes them need to have these kinds of images of black people in order for them to feel good about themselves?

White people are everything in media—they cover all bases. We see them holding, holding and succeeding, in all jobs. So when Timothy McVeigh blows up the—when the Oklahoma City bombing happens, it doesn't affect white people, it doesn't change the way they have to live their lives. They're not then profiled for it, because there are 370 other representations of them in the media. And that is the media, by the way—like, news is media. It is all written and effected and manipulated. These are these things we call truths. So yeah, it matters. The way we are represented in media matters.



This may seem like a silly question, but I want to know. Am I the only one who has problems eating chicken, watermelon, and bananas in front of white people?

[Many laugh]

I don't have a problem with it. Period.

I'm going to be honest with you. I don't even eat watermelon because of the connotations it has around black people. But I will eat some chicken, though.

I've never heard the bananas one. Bananas, really? Huh.

I don't know if you the only one, but it is not a problem for me to eat whatever I want to eat in front of anybody.

You're not the only one, brother, to be honest. Every time—I still eat chicken, I eat a lot of watermelon, and I love bananas—but I'm always looking over my shoulder, wherever I'm at, seeing who's watching me eat this watermelon and this piece of chicken and this banana, always. You're not the only one.

No! I know plenty of African Americans who, as a rule, will not eat watermelon in front of white folks. Now, for me, I have difficulty relating to the question only in the sense that I've never, ever liked watermelon, and I don't eat meat. So I don't find myself in the situation where chicken and watermelon comes to a head. But I do know that there are times where you feel like you are the stereotype because, you know, if they say, "Hey, do you want to go play some basketball?" And, of course, I love basketball and I played it every single day, but there's a part of me that wants to say, "No, I don't want to play any basketball. What makes you think I want to play basketball?" But in those moments I think we have to be honest with ourselves and just know that there are some things that are true. Yes, we like chicken and we like watermelon. There's nothing wrong with that, and there's nothing to be ashamed of.

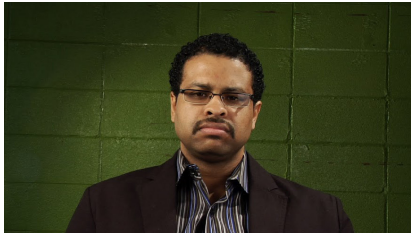
It's not a silly question, brother. My family sells 50 thousand pounds of watermelons every week in the streets of south Chicago, Milwaukee, and Gary, Indiana, and have been since 1953, and we're okay with that. And by the way, I like fried chicken. In fact, I'm going to make some tonight.

I don't know if you're the only one ashamed. I'm not ashamed, but I do give chicken a second thought sometimes, even when I mention it. But I always pass it off as sort of in a jokey-joke way, because I do love chicken.

Watermelon? I don't eat watermelon so much, so I'm not really so much ashamed of it. Bananas? I hadn't thought about bananas because I always think about a banana—because I'm gay—in a sexual way. So when I peel a banana I'm always self-conscious in front of anybody because of sexuality, but not because of race.

I think really that question leads to a deeper question: why are we so concerned of what they think about us? That's what the real question is. I don't really care. You know, I know somewhere in there I do care, but in my consciousness and what I'm going to say, I don't really care what they think. You know, I don't need their approval in order for me to go ahead and be me, or in order for me to do my job, or in order for me to be who I'm going to be. I don't need their approval, I don't need their job—none of that.

I think it's really important that we stop worrying about what they think and start worrying about what you think about yourself and maybe what the little black kid next door to you thinks about you. Fuck some white person and what they think about you eating a watermelon or anything else—your shoes, your jacket, your hat backwards. I don't go with the sagging pants, but you know, whatever you're doing is because it's your cultural identity. Order your food or whatever. What they think about is not really important.



My question is, which one do you consider first: Are you a black or are you a male? Are you an African American or are you a man?

When I wake up in the morning, I see a proud, distinguished, on-his-verge-to-be-successful, black man.

Definitely when I wake up each morning the first thing I see is a black man.

It's sort of hard, coming up in America, to divide black from anything that relates to black people—my manhood or anything else. For me to define myself entirely as a man, sure, I could go ahead and do that. I could just say, "I'm a man." Being a black man is completely different, but that's not the reality that I face. I'm judged not as a man, I'm judged as a black man.

When I get up and look in the mirror in the morning, I feel like I see a man, but I feel like there's other energies that I feel that sort of...

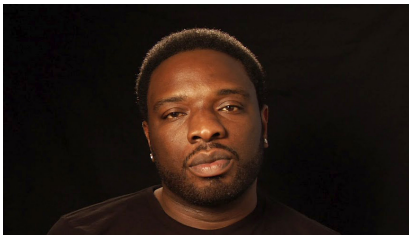
I identify first as a man, and then as a black man, and as an American man, and frankly, my family is from the Caribbean, and I look at myself as a Caribbean American. So I guess, in that order, that's how I identify myself. As a man first, and then I identify my heritage from there.

Yeah, I feel like I'm a man. I do feel—I feel like I'm a man first, only because—that's a tough question because I think in terms of sexuality. All this other stuff could come into play in terms of identity. I just mean that in terms of energy and how I relate to other people, I feel like I'm a man, but I never wake up and say, "Oh, I'm going to hang out with the boys today." In terms of being black, I live in a black neighborhood, but...

I'm a man. I'm a man first, never been a question about that.

...don't think about it so much. I think because I have a sexuality issue, I think my more commonality is my identity and my relationship. Even thinking about my mother and father and how I relate to them, and people in my family, it seems to be more of a gender issue.

I am a man. That is what I am. It just so happens that I'm a black man and I live here in America.



The first question that came to my mind was, do you think both black straight men and black gay men should all come together, hold hands, and sing “kumbaya”? [Laughs] I just thought that was silly.

Black men loving black men is THE revolutionary act.

I think that the liberating experience starts with self-acceptance and self-love.

I love myself, you know, me being a gay black man.

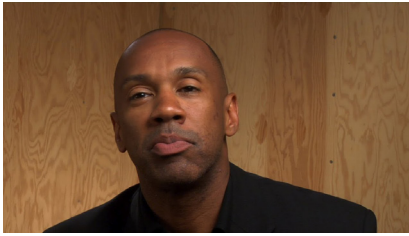
I'd like to encourage all black gay men who are out to be out and be positive in a community, constructive, building way.

I have no problems with being openly gay in the black community.

My coming out was kind of supported.

I live in a predominately black community. I grew up in a predominantly black community, and I've never been in a black community that didn't embrace me. It's a bad rap that the black community gets about being more homophobic than white folks. I think homophobia is homophobia, and you shouldn't quantify it.

But I do wonder if straight men who are homophobic would join hands with a gay man. You know, like a straight man, not somebody who's eccentric, would they—I'm thinking more of the Million Man March, the black Million Man March or something—would it kind of happen, right?



I want to ask my heterosexual black brothers: Are you threatened by black gay men? What challenges do you face? What fears do you face? Do they scare you? Do they make you afraid? Do they make you uncomfortable? Do you feel like there's a compromise, that your masculinity is compromised? And why is that? And what that does ultimately to our sense as a community, as a people.

I think a short answer I could give for that, without offending nobody, is that there's no more reproduction. I mean, that's the end of the black race if we had all gay people. I mean, there's no reproduction.

I'm pretty open. The only challenge that I would face is to establish boundaries. Whatever makes your boat float, that's all good. But just know that I don't get down like that. And besides that, I don't really see any problem. I'm very open to everybody. Life is life, and like I said, whatever makes your boat float makes your boat float. I love all my blackness.

Personally, I try to embrace everyone. And I'm not just saying that just to be saying that—I really do. And it's been a struggle for me to engage homosexual men in general because a lot of time they think that you're available to approach. No matter if you've identified yourself as being a straight male, they think that you're easy to bring over, if you will. And those guards sometimes are kind of brought up on occasion by the aggressive nature, on occasion by some homosexual men. And so for me personally, a lot of it has to do with how I'm approached as a straight male by the gay community and them respecting my heterosexuality.

I do have a deep belief that to be gay is not something that the Creator wanted us to be. I don't think that it's a natural way of life. I don't think that it's a way of life that He would be pleased with.

I can just speak for myself. I'm not putting a lot of energy at targeting anybody, whether I agree or disagree with your sexual preference, and I have a number of gay friends, both black and white. So I'm not putting a lot of energy into that. I think your question may be more from the fact that the media may be putting a lot of energy in—a lot of negative energy—into it

and making you feel like it's a message coming from other black folks. I can't speak for everybody, but I'm just saying that I'm not putting a lot of energy into having a negative feeling or a negative intention towards anybody.

I have nothing against gay people. I'm not gay, but, you know, everybody loves somebody, and if who you love happens to be the same sex, I have nothing against that. I don't exactly support it, but you have to live your own life.

I mean me, personally, I'm not really intimidated or feel like I'm compromised by being in the presence of a gay brother. To each his own. Just from my experience, you know, growing up, it was always taught that to be gay was wrong and there was no other way of thinking of it. But as I grew and got a chance to interact with people of different cultures, different beliefs, different sexual preferences, I was able to accept people for who they were and not who I wanted them to be.

I'm not threatened or scared or have any fear from black gay men, or any men, in general. I do not like to be confused with gay men. Like, I don't like when people mistake me, if I dress proper or wear more form-fitting clothes. I don't like to come off as being gay, and I don't like to be confused within that paradigm. I don't have any problems with anyone else's desires, how they live their lifestyle, but I don't want any misconceptions or anything to be misconstrued.

[In a funny voice] Long before anyone knew who [?] was, I used to—y'all better not put this on your little movie, because I'm gonna sue somebody! I'm gonna get Warner Brothers and Disney and Mickey Mouse and everybody else to protest this movie...[goes back to normal voice]. So people get really disturbed when they see me do this particular type of character because they feel like, "damn, you do that too well." So I think that, as far as sexuality is concerned, I think sexuality is as individual as a fingerprint. I grew up in a household with a homophobic father. I grew up in a community where homophobia was rampant. And I think even as a kid, until I got older and had friends that I paid attention to their journey, did I become more sensitized to what does it feel like, or what does it mean to feel like you may look a certain way or have certain proclivities that maybe don't line up with what people think is a society norm. I just think it's important to live and let live. I'm not really interested in trying to steer somebody away from something that feel so natural to them. I have too many friends—gay, lesbian, transgendered. I know people who have even been born hermaphrodites. I just think that God doesn't make

mistakes, and so people will debate this probably forever. Some people will think it's wrong, but I really try to live my life without judgment. So for those of you who may feel you're judged by family or friends or society, one of my favorite things that I like to say to people who think they can judge me is, I say, "What you think about me is none of my business."



Are you comfortable with the impact of your actions on your community and the world?

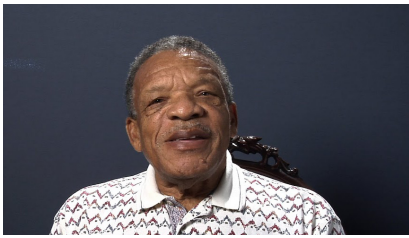
For years I was comfortable with my impact on my community. For years I was comfortable with my impact on the world... until just recently, when I started developing a conscience and started getting information that what I'm doing is wrong. When I started developing a sense of wrong, I started understanding that I'm not making no positive impact. When I started seeing my daughter and my grandkids complaining about what I'm doing, I started realizing that I'm not making a positive impact. And I asked myself one day, when I leave, what type of impact I want to have on the world. And I want it to be a positive impact. If it ain't for nothing else than my family says that I was a good guy and I provided for them in the right way.

I am. Every day I think about what that is, for me. As I've gone through life, I start every day really thinking about my impact and my actions, and it's never anything that ends. It's something that's really, literally, one day at a time. It sounds cliché, but it's one day at a time, and some days are better than others. Some days I don't feel so good about it, and I'm embarrassed, and I've just got to pick up and try it again the next day.

Yes, I'm very comfortable with my actions and with the impact that I'm making on this world. I'm actually part of a group on my campus at Columbia College that deals with social justice, and we're advocates of change. We try to speak up for minorities and the gays and blacks and Asians and the whites. We do it all. And I really feel that my actions through this group will make a difference.

I'm very comfortable with the impact of my actions on my community and my world. After being drafted to a war that was not of my own choosing, what I wanted to do with the rest of my life was to make a contribution and to give back. So rather than going into a profession—even though I had a college degree—I worked for 15 years in community organizations, trying to turn our community issues around in favor of black people. But at the same time, I don't want to pat myself on the back. I just think that's something that we should all do, as a commitment to ourselves and our families and our communities.

Yes, I'm very comfortable with the impact of my actions. When I was 16 years old, I was in the Black Panther Party, which was one of the greatest experiences of my life. I was part of an organization that took a lot of risks. We did a lot of things that served the community. As a matter of fact, our effect was so profound that J. Edgar Hoover called us the most dangerous threat to the stability of the United States that's ever existed. As seeing as the United States was founded on the genocide of the Indian and the enslavement of the African, I consider that an honor to have someone say that we were dangerous to the stability of these United States. That being said, in 1982 I came on the Chicago Police Department. I'm now retired, and I use my position to continue to serve the community, not as a representative of the police department in the community but as a representative of the community as to the way policing should be done in our community.

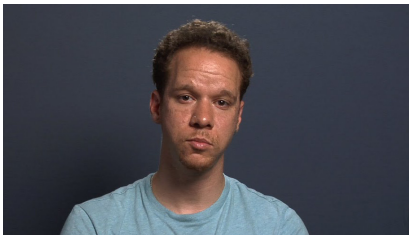


Welfare has done a lot to destroy a lot of the values that black people had. You know, it's amazing. It's a true saying that if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. You teach a man to fish, you don't have to feed him anymore.

You know, it's just upsetting, man. It's upsetting, when you struggle, when you work, and you pay your taxes, and you pray, you're tired, you get knocked down. This is not for one individual age group—it's not for young folks, there's old fools out there, too. Public assistance is set up for providing food and nourishment. Section 8 is also. You've got all kinds of support groups, but you abuse them, you know, my tax dollars. Get your ass up and work! Everybody goes to work! My mother has been working all her life, my father's been working. I work. My children work—they go to school.

But you have those individuals who wanna rob. I've had two home invasions. Nigger, get up and work! Why do you sell your Linc? Why do you smoke so much weed? Why are you the biggest consumer of all these expensive clothes, but yet you don't have no job? You're not contributing to the system. That's what I hate about niggers. Niggers!

I'm angry because I've got to go up and work. And what I work for, I've got a nigger to come steal it. And why don't they have the respect for my family, when we come into a theater, or a restaurant, they gotta be cussing. They're cussing, and they're using all kinds of foul language, and they're being descriptive of the females, of bitches and hoes, you know. Is your mother a bitch and a ho? You have no respect. Respect! R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Find out what it means to you. I know what it means to me.



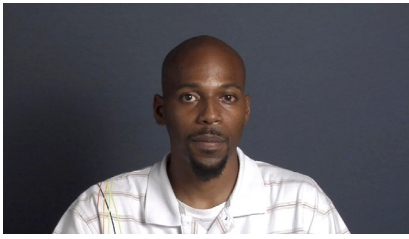
My question I want to pose towards black men who are, in one way or another, too closely affiliated with the American legal system. Specifically, this goes towards brothers who are incarcerated currently. My question for you is, don't you realize that by becoming caught in this system and by engaging in the activities and whatever behavior that landed you in prison that in fact you're actually falling prey to a system that's designed to keep us trapped? If you realize that you're falling prey to a system designed to keep you trapped, what are you going to do to change your behavior and stay out of this system? That's my question.

I first have to have the desire to change and really focus on the impact of my violence. The things that I do know that are affecting my community, once I know that and I'm empathizing with that, I'm really saying, "I'm fucking up my community." I fuckin' cuss. I'm sorry. I'm tearing down my community. I have to have that desire, man. That's just straight to the point. I do realize that I am prey to the system, because the system is designed to keep me down as much as possible. But I also have to make the decision, like, you know what, I'm not going to give them the ammunition. Even though it's designed to keep me down, it's my decision to let it keep me down. So I really have to look at what have I done to tear it down, and build it back up—my life, as well as my community. And not let it take advantage of me, even though it's designed to tear me down. Find a way to fight back.

The cycle is very vicious. Just going and seeing the corner, seeing everybody there, being respected, and—you just want to be respected. That's how you start. And once you go to jail, you're probably a young man that had a family or got some people that you take care of, that you want to see out of this bad situation. So you start accepting the fact that you're going to jail and you're going to do some time because you were trying to take care of your family. There's a point in my life, in my personal experience, that I was just done. There was no way that I could be there for my family in jail. Let's just be realistic. I want to be there for the family, but I'm in jail. So now I'm writing letters back to mom, who probably can't pay the rent and the lights and all of that, to send me some for soap and toothpaste and all of this. How am I there for the family? It comes a point when you realize if that's your point and what you were trying to do out on the corner, in a part of this vicious cycle, and you're just done! And you're going to be there for the family when you make that decision.

Personally, me, right, I didn't realize that it was a trap. I had heard it was a trap, but I believe that there are certain things that you have to go through in life to even realize what's going on with them. And based off of this—I'm 25 years old and this is my first time being arrested, and I will probably be going to the penitentiary for a while—I can now realize the traps in it. And what will I do different now? Man, a whole bunch, honestly. I can better prepare for the trap. I'm not planning to come back, and at the same time I'm preparing not to come back. And that's it.

My brother...ooh. I was in prison in this state for 22 years, 7 months, and 22 days. I forgot how many hours. But let me tell you something, I went in as a thinking person so I didn't come out as an unthinking person. I didn't think society owed me anything, but I do think that I owe me something. And that raised my consciousness. My motto of anyone who was in prison was the beloved master, brother minister Malcolm X. And learning from him, and not being bitter, or seeking things that were impossible, I decided to transform society and myself in the process. It's not an easy process. It's not an overnight process. It's a process, and you have to keep thinking process. And once the brothers and sisters also get out, we have to make it possible to be safe and to hold them accountable for the wrongs and the harms that they've done brought to our community.



You know, I wonder, black man, are you really ready for freedom? And if not, what would it take for you to want and need this freedom?

To be totally honest with you, I'm ready for freedom. But I don't think all of us are ready for freedom. I think a lot of us are not confident for freedom. I think a lot of us don't love ourselves enough to be truly free. I don't think freedom is some grand destination that we're trying to finally get to at the end of some long history. I think a lot of us are afraid to be free every day of our lives. I think in some ways we are regulated by being black. I think there are certain things that are assumed and expected of us, not only of white people, but of ourselves. So if we really want freedom, if we really want to be free, we have to get ready to be ourselves and live unto ourselves. That's the question.

Am I ready for freedom, and what would it take for me to want that freedom? First, I'd have to stop and ask myself—that's a tough question, because freedom for me is a mind state. You know, because you got some people who's not in jail, who's not free. You got people who's in prison in dysfunctional relationships. You got people are in prison with jobs; they work 9-to-5 that they don't like. Some people are in prison with alcohol or drug abuse. So I would have to really ask myself, what's been imprisoning me? What's imprisoning me is my self-esteem, my lack of self-esteem. My lack of self-esteem has led me to commit crimes, to hurt people, manipulate people, right? Because if I love myself there's no way that I could walk outside this room and punch somebody, if I'm esteemed within myself. So to be free to me would be, I would have to change. So in order for me to grow I have to change, because if change is necessary for growth, in order for me to grow I would have to adapt the mentality that something's got to change. I'd have to change my mind state, I'd have to change the way I talk, I'd have to change the people I interact with. That would be free.

There's something right here, right, dedicated to all of those out in the streets asking, "Why?" And at the same time I ask why. And what about out here, for real? [Starts singing] What about our people...?

A lot of times, you don't know that what you're hustling is hurting people.

Society as a whole is made to steal things and make me think that I've got to place ownership on things that I can't even have.

That's my life story. Throughout my life, I've always done things to sabotage myself.

I was taught to be tough, be hard. You know what I'm saying, don't bow down to nobody.

I feel like America don't give me no choice—put my family in the projects, little opportunity for anything.

And what's been imprisoning me is my self-esteem—my lack of self-esteem.

It hurts, it don't feel right.

So what do you want? What do you think you need to actually go through so you can realize, damn, I need to wake my game up?

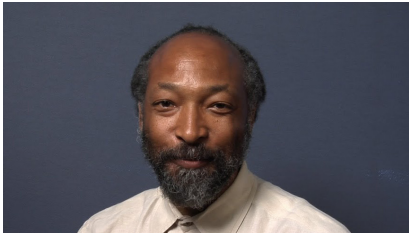
Ever since my incarceration, I've learned to value me. 'Cause there's no way I could give value to my community if I haven't given it to myself.

It's my job to be everything I can be, man, and lead by example.

I will now seek out the proper channels to help myself, like maybe be a substance abuse counselor or work at some boys' club.

I'm just gonna understand that I can do something different, and have an opportunity by making my own opportunity, by taking the information that I'm given and learning to do something different.

I don't feel like I've got to harm nobody to get the things that I want now.



Why is it so difficult for black American men in this culture to be themselves, their essential selves, and remain who they truly are?

I'm always true to myself, but it's just that when I come outside—I'm living in Bayview-Hunters Point where it's dominated African American. It seems I always get looked at a different way, stared at, or even called names, and it's kind of hurtful, coming from my own people. We're all supposed to be united, grew up in the same neighborhood, and it's just the put-downs kind of make me not so true to myself.

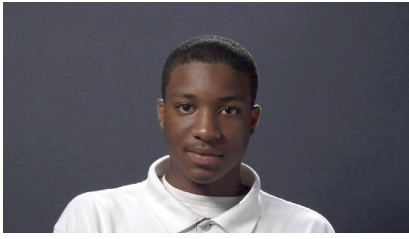
As a race of men we have been given a set of standards that are not our own standards. There's so much media hype and feedback that doesn't allow us that sense of knowing who we are. And when you think about the concepts of slavery and what has been passed down through the years and generations, being yourself takes a great deal of work, a great deal of study. It takes a great deal of introspection to be able to go inside and find who the real you is. For me, it's the fear of persecution. I went through that as a younger person to where if nobody else is doing it I don't want to be the first person to try out a new style or anything, I don't want to be my authentic self. I don't want people to see the real me. I'll do that around different people, I'll show them my authentic self. But when I come back to the 'hood, I got to put on that mug because I don't want anybody to try me.

It is so hard to be yourself in this day and time because in a sense we're dealing with a jungle atmosphere. You have to be strong; you sometimes have to put on this front in order to survive. It's a hell of a thing. I've met a lot of real good brothers in my life, especially in prison, and they put on this hard persona. It's not who they really are, but it's about survival right now. We were taught to be hard; we were taught that if you smiled, you were soft. So we walk around with this temperament that's not really the real person.

I simply think that it is difficult for some of us to be who we are because we don't know who we are. We don't know what our passion is; we don't know what makes us angry; we don't know what makes us black. We don't know why we should be happy to be black. We don't know why we should be happy to embrace some of the things that other cultures may deem adverse in our history and our culture. You have to embrace that, you have to know who you are, and it should never be difficult to be who you are, not just as a black person but as a person, period.

I think we are all becoming. I don't think there is any essentialized self that you are born to be or are. We're all on a path towards taking on new and more complex and interesting identities. And my hope is that African American men and boys will try to understand that there is no essentialized you, and you can be whomever, however, whatever, you choose to be. And you can go back and change that if you want to.

I'm not sure that the question invites a fair answer. It suggests that there's a monolith of how black men are supposed to be in this world. So if I'm being my true self, what does that really mean? So I think the question might be reframed: how does one authentically show off who they are in their black skin?



Why do you get offended if a white person says “nigger” when we use the word every day?

When the white person says nigger, he really means, in my judgment, to demean the person he’s calling by that term. When black people use it, it is sometimes used the very same way, and that is not good. But it can be used in a loving sense, a tender sense. It can be used when people understand each other and when they know that that word is not designed to degrade or to negate one’s personality. We also have to realize that there are niggers in the world. Don’t think that you can think away niggerhood. It’s very deep here, and you had better recognize it when it faces you. If you’re not able to recognize niggerhood in people, then you are going to be a victim.

So getting rid of that word does not get rid of the reasons for that word, and it doesn’t get rid of the concepts that go along with that word. There are niggers in the world, and by that I mean people who’ll take you for all that you’ve got, who will not respect you, who despise you, who hate you, and call you nigger. But I could wish that the word could be done away with, but it can’t be done away with. It can be turned into an endearing term. One thought on that, from the Bible—the term “samaritan” was once equivalent to the term nigger, and when the opponents of Jesus wanted really to hurt his soul and his spirit, they said, “You are a samaritan.” That’s the equivalent of saying, “You are a nigger.” We know your mother; we know where you’re from. We’re not born of fornication. They meant to destroy him. But over time, over 2,000 years, it has lost that connotation, and now we see a samaritan as someone who does good. So maybe the term nigger in 2,000 years may mean something different from what it is now. But we can make it that way—we have to make it ourselves.