

A DIALOGUE ON RACE SERIES

Breaking The Chains Of Psychological Slavery

INTERVIEW BY JOY RAMOS



Na'im Akbar

Na'im Akbar has been described by Essence magazine as "one of the world's preeminent African American psychologists and pioneer in the development of an African-centered approach to modern psychology." His books and articles exploring the personality development of the African Americans have led to numerous network television appearances, including "Phil Donohue," "Oprah Winfrey," "Geraldo," and "Tony Brown's Journal."

Q: Why do African Americans have so much trouble getting beyond racism?

Na'im Akbar: I think it should be phrased the other way. Why doesn't racism go away? I think that's the reason we can't get away from it. It changes its forms and manifestations. We're not on plantations or the back of buses, but we're still dealing with the daily confrontations of corporate America. So, the ongoing reminder is that racism is an essential discriminating force in this society made inescapable. As long as there's a reality, it would be actually psychotic to not be conscious of a reality that constantly confronts you if you are of African descent.

Q: Are African Americans psychologically coping well with racism?

Akbar: When you look at the

African American community across the board, even though there's a growing level of consciousness and progressive kind of thinking, the young people (of Generation X) are probably the least capable of dealing with racism than any generation of African American youths.

The reason this is true is because these kids were raised by parents who bought into the idea that things are better now. Our prominent presence in the media began to dull our sensitivities to the fact that even though we were present, we still weren't powerful. We began to confuse presence with true change and influence. Our young people then have been brought up liking information and abilities to really deal with the realities of racism. So, they then somehow see themselves as kind of floating in a morass.

Our young people don't really understand that a lot of our barriers to our advancement are racist barriers. We still interpret ourselves as being inferior and incapable rather than understanding the real dynamics of society and until we can realistically assess where our personal limitations and where are the persisting barriers of racism, I don't believe we'll be able to move ahead to heal ourselves.

Q: How can one heal from racism to get their personal power back?

Akbar: Health is the ability to engage in self-affirming behaviors. The more the people are able to do what's necessary to preserve their lives, the healthier they are. As long as we are engaged in these massively self-destructive behaviors, it really has a great deal to do with

our loss of personal power.

For example, we then put most of our resources back out of the communities rather than turn them back into the communities. We are actually bleeding out our personal power and economic resources. African Americans are engaging in many self-destructive things. We do that because we have not healed to regain the personal power of one's will or self-determination to affect their lives in positive kinds of ways.

As we are able to accept and understand ourselves and move beyond the continuous hurt, what we begin to discover is our capacity for self-determination in ways never imagined.

We need to take a more active role in determining where we (African Americans) are going as a people. When you look at us in terms of the statistics on Black economics, crime and health conditions, we don't look very healthy. But, when you look at things as in increase in self-esteem and self-awareness, there is a growth in those things that is noticeably positive.

Q: Is a formal apology and reparations given by the federal government necessary in healing from racism?

Akbar: An apology is an important symbolic gesture. And, I think that

people didn't understand the importance of that as a symbolic gesture until the whole Clinton scandals came up and how even those people who were making a mockery at the significance of an apology suddenly found that if they could just make Clinton apologize, at least there would be a demonstration of Atonement. It's very significant.

I think there needs to be some type of reparations program. I'm not sure a direct financial payment can be done. The immediate victims

are no longer around. Even many of the things that are pulled back with affirmative action could be earmarked as reparation programs. African American students should have easier access to educational funding. And, African American businesses should have easier access to start-up loans in order to be compensated.

The point is that those kinds of gestures would show an ownership of the destruction and a willingness to engage in the healing process from the European-American side.



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CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Harriet Tubman
Conductor, Underground Railroad
1820-1913

Harriet Tubman's name is synonymous with the Underground Railroad, that clandestine path to freedom for so many enslaved African-Americans. As a conductor on this secret route, Tubman made more than 20 trips, guiding as many as 300 slaves to freedom in Northern states, earning her the nickname, "Moses" and a \$40,000 bounty on her head.

Beginning in 1860, she campaigned publicly and aggressively against slavery and for women's rights. During the Civil War, she worked as a nurse as well as a soldier, spy and lookout. After the war, she moved to Auburn, N.Y.

Despite her Civil War service, she did not receive a pension until more than 30 years after the war. When the \$20-a-month pension did arrive, she used it to establish the Harriet Tubman Home for the aged and needy. In 1978, she became the first African-American woman to be honored with a commemorative postage stamp from the U.S. Postal Service.

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