

POINT OF VIEW

BETWEEN THE LINES

PROTECTING CULTURAL VALUES AND PROTOCOLS; SOME THINGS AREN'T FUNNY

By A. Asadullah Samad

Saving our youth, our people and our communities are going to be dependent on how well we save (and defend) the cultural values that made us intrinsically committed to one another as family and community. Cultural values are also the basis for establishing a just society. Long before the counter-culture started talking about "family values" (their code word for a return to anti-social welfare and neo-conservative politics), Black people, by the large, have always been a fair-minded and sensitive to certain family values. True family values. Even in light of being raised in an

anti-black society, our elders taught us not to take on the ill-spirited, disrespectful morays on this country's culture, which were (and still are) counter to what we all know is right; in terms of how one shows respect and treats everyone equal. And our elders instilled that sense of right, sense of values and social protocols in most of us. It was more than about knowing right from wrong. It was about knowing what was proper and respectful, in maintaining the dignity and respect level of the family and the community. Disrespectful children were not spared the rod. Disrespectful people were

admonished and corrected at every turn. And there were some cultural protocols that were (and still should be) sacred. You know them—a child speaks to every elder; never raise your voice to your elder; always respect the position of your elders (even when you differ) and most critically; never raise your hand to your elder (any elder) for any reason.

These days, you have children walking past adults without speaking (and when they do speak, they call you your first name). Not a day goes by where you don't see a child yelling by or at an elder (be it a parent, guardian or whoever). There is a constant disrespect for the wisdom that elders try to pass on to our youth (on issues like the value of education, the importance of spirituality and the value of family). But the greater violation of our cultural protocols is the growing physical abuse inflicted upon our elders. And as has been the case with other facets of black sensitivities and culture, libraries have been taken with this issue in the media that have undermined our social perceptions in the larger society.

In fact, this business about young men hitting "old ladies" has become a punchline in some comedians' humor and there is a growing tolerance to accept this behavior as "just comedy." This is an asinine kind of lead that you don't see any other culture following. You don't see Stallone, or Van Damme or even Jim Carrey

(as silly as he can get) punchin' old women. You don't see any Asian or Latino or Italian cultures showing there senior in any role other than reverence or respect. If anything, the old man (or woman) beats up the younger one or fends off any assault this new, disrespectful world might bring about. Except some of our comedians, particularly the Wayans Brothers on the Warner Brothers television series and in their new movie, that think this kind of behavior is funny. I don't care how humorous you try to make this activity, punching an old woman (even if she puts up her fists) or walking her out in front of a bus or bringing some other unsolicited harm to seniors is not funny. Let me repeat this; this punching seniors business as a form of humor; that's #ain't funny and it shows an infringement on cultural values that shouldn't be tolerated. Our cultural protocols need to be respected and protected.

I say some of our comedians because a few have protected this protocol that our seniors never get "too old" to dish out a whuppin'. Martin Lawrence did a piece last year where a young man walked into a bank and thought he was going to disrespect the old bi-focaled security guard (that Martin plays from time to time). The young man took a whuppin' right there on the floor of the bank (bumrushed and held down by other seniors while the security guard looked for his dislocated

glasses knocked loose in the struggle).

It was a hilarious piece of comedy but it also protected a much heralded cultural value of respecting seniors at all times or you get what you deserve. Eddie Murphy did a similar piece with Della Reese in the movie "Harlem Nights" where he challenged her integrity and she beat him up in a fist fight (until he pulled a gun and shot her in the foot). Redd Foxx's infamous line that "she'd still be whuppin his a** if he hadn't shot her" reinforced by Eddie later apologizing and Della tellin' him she'd whup him again if he got out of line clearly shows how parody can (and must) respect the boundaries of cultural values if it truly expects to elicit the kind of humor our people will respect. Our people aren't fools and we don't laugh at just anything, particularly things that go against the cultural values that maintain our collective dignity in the eyes of society. Eddie Murphy used to tell a joke about how upset our people used to get when he'd make fun of Stevie Wonder's blindness. It wasn't because the joke wasn't funny, but because our cultural protocols taught us that it was wrong to make fun of blind people (or anyone with a physical disability). Murphy would mock the responses that people would "roll up" on him with ("Yo' momma taught you wrong, that's all. Yo' mamma just taught you wrong"), meaning that a violation of our cultural values and protocols was a reflection on



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your upbringing. Our parents and grand-parents not only taught what was wrong or right, they taught us what was funny or not funny. To laugh at something inappropriate brought forth the appropriate check in attitude we'd remember long after the event.

There are many other examples of how we can protect our cultural sensitivities and still be respectfully funny. Maybe the Wayan Brothers (Keenan—the producer, Shawn and Marlon—the actors) need to seek these examples out so they can understand what is appropriate and what is not when it comes to our values and protocols. Maybe they should consider this commentary a little attitude check before we have to go tell "the man" to pull that bull@#! off the screen and bury our own artistic talent in the process. They don't tolerate any attacks on their cultural sensitivities (as cancelling Arsenio proved). Neither should we.

TO BE EQUAL

Getting Americans Back To Work

By Hugh B. Price, President, National Urban League

The widened gap between rich and poor in America is threatening our democracy. Workers are being laid off by the thousands, companies are downsizing, families are falling apart, and the ranks of the poor and homeless seem to be growing. Yet, experts tell us the economy is on the upswing.

Certainly, good things are happening. Many cities are upgrading their "quality of life industries" by revitalizing their business districts and neighborhoods, building new sports stadiums, museums and sparkling restaurant districts.

But in those and in so many urban centers, the poor, the unemployed and the homeless can't afford to use those facilities. When you see them there, they're often begging or sleeping in doorways. That's not supposed to happen in America.

From what I've seen in traveling through dozens of cities, the plight of the poor is in stark contrast to economists' claims that inflation is leveling, that interest rates have fallen and that unemployment is declining. Americans are justifiably worried and skeptical about their future.

Cities define civilizations. Vibrant cities boost our morale; decaying and dangerous cities depress us and scare off tourists. If the poor, the homeless and the have-nots have no role in the rebirth of our cities, their welcome revival efforts won't reach their fullest potential.

Government policymakers, business leaders and economists must devise a work-based system of self-reliance that lifts the urban poor out of poverty and allows them to support their families with dignity. Of course, such planning must include education and training in current and new skills required of an efficient workforce. But we also need employer incentives and income supplements to benefit low-wage workers.

Job creation programs must



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be established for employable but unemployed people in communities where there simply are not enough jobs to go around. The approach must be historic because it's one thing to instill potential workers with proper work skills, it's another thing to inculcate workers with the job know-how that employers require, such as punctuality, politeness and reliability.

Here are a few examples of new initiatives some of our Urban League affiliates have undertaken:

In Detroit, plans are underway to establish an Employment Training and Education Center that will provide GED certification and computer training courses. Instruction in occupational, employability, entrepreneurship and customer service skills will be offered, along with an automatic job search system and a day care facility.

In Los Angeles, the Urban League and Toyota are partners in operating a modern training facility that will enable residents from the South Central community to learn all facets of automobile servicing and repair. We suggest that this exciting and very practical approach might work with the big three American automobile companies in inner city communities throughout the country.

If our cities and our society are to prosper, if we are to continue to be the leader of the industrialized world, we must reverse socially corrosive economic trends that undermine public confidence.

America urgently needs to reorganize its employment and income policies so that the 21st century will be the century when, once and for all, we make America work for all Americans.

CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

A Call To Stand For Children

By Bernice Powell Jackson

This has been a tough year for our nation's poor children. Their welfare has been teetering like a seesaw on the edge of Congressional rhetoric and political expediency. Millions have almost lost their health care, their school lunches and food stamps and the much-needed dollars which their unemployed or underemployed parents have received.

After several months of political games and stalled budget negotiations, no one is quite sure yet what the Governors' proposed solutions to the welfare and Medicaid stalemates will actually mean for the poorest of the poor or whether those proposals will actually be accepted by the Congress and the President. While President Clinton had seemed to hold the line against the harshest welfare and Medicaid "reforms," both the President and Congress are under increasing pressure to solve the budget problems and get on with life as usual in Washington.

Meanwhile, those who are concerned about children—about poor children and not-so-poor children—are taking our children's future into their own



Bernice Powell Jackson

hands and calling for a National Day of Commitment to Children. This day, to be held on June 1st, will be a day of family and community renewal, celebration and commitment to our nation's children—all of them. Called Stand for Children, it will be held in Washington, D.C. at the Lincoln Memorial, the site of the historic 1963 March on Washington.

"This will not be a partisan or political day," said Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defense Fund, in announcing the day. Rather, it will be "a day for all Americans to transcend our differences and affirm what unites us as a people: a sense of fairness, a loving desire to raise moral, healthy, and educated children; a belief that in the richest and most powerful

nation on earth no child should be left behind," she added.

This massive day of commitment for children and with children is also designed to send a message to Congress and the President that the fundamental moral principle of doing no harm to children is a line which must not be crossed. It is designed as a day to hold ourselves and our elected leaders responsible for putting children first.

This national day of commitment will be a day for parents, grandparents, aunts and

uncles, advocates and providers, educators and students to come to Washington and participate in this historic day. It is being sponsored by a number of national, state and local groups who are hoping that thousands of their members will participate. If you care about our children, then be prepared to take a stand for them. Be prepared to come to Washington on June 1st.

(For more information, contact Stand for Children, 1832 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20009, 1-800-233-1200.)

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