

If Someone Calls You the N-Word

(What Would You Do?)

By: Teri Miller Barker



“It’s not what people call you, it’s what you answer to.” I’ve heard a pastor, a politician, and Tyler Perry’s Madea character say various versions of that quote, so I’m not quite sure who actually deserves the credit for it, but I consider them words of wisdom, especially to someone who gets easily worked up or offended with name calling. In the last year, the n-word has received an unprecedented amount of media attention, like it’s a brand new word that just happens to offend certain people. Well, guess what? I have a little newsflash. The word “nigger” and its variants have been offending people for centuries, and with the help of celebrities like Michael Richards, Don Imus, and Duane Chapman (Dog the Bounty Hunter), who have voiced their racist opinions about African Americans, the n-word has become personified and taken on a life of its own.

In my opinion, the media gives the n-word far too much energy and power with coverage that sensationalizes its use. It enrages the African American community, and the next thing you know, we have the NAACP and Black civil leaders, Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, demanding public apologies from the perpetrators. In July of this year, the NAACP staged a mock burial of the n-word, with pallbearers and all, during its annual convention in Detroit, to signify its death and the end of its use. Give me a break. N---er or n---a, depending on your pronunciation of it, is too big to contain. It’s uncontrollable. Not to mention, the influence hip-hop music has had in helping this word achieve mainstream acceptance in our society. I hope I can say this without receiving any backlash from my brothers and sisters, but I couldn’t care less about people’s use of the n-word. People like Richards, Imus and Chapman don’t define me. I’m a black woman who is secure in who I am. They can go on tirades all day long, spewing racial comments about n---ers, and it won’t faze me one bit because it doesn’t describe me. And plus, I’ve met enough people in my lifetime who weren’t African American, that qualified to be n---as because of their behavior. At one time, it was used exclusively to insult people of color or of African ancestry, but over the years, the word has evolved. It’s not just used to refer to a race of people anymore, its also used to describe a behavior, attitude, or mentality of someone who’s acting ghetto or ignorant. It’s an equal opportunity pejorative term that will embrace anyone of any color who lives up to its meaning.

Regardless of the protests and burials, the n-word will always be used primarily as a derogatory term pertaining to African Americans. There will always be this double-standard that makes us feel that we can freely use it amongst ourselves, but if someone

outside the race uses it, he or she is stepping over the line. Don't ask me why because there's no reasonable explanation. Is it hypocritical? Yes, but that's just the way it is.

African American comedians have used it in their stand-up material for years. As a child growing up, my parents had Richard Pryor's albums. His routines were peppered with n--a this, and n---a that. Blacks and whites alike attended his comedy shows, and the media didn't make headline stories about it. People enjoyed it and found it entertaining.

Chris Rock did an HBO special in 1996 called *Bring the Pain*. In his standup, he did a bit about the differences between n---as and black people. N---as, according to Rock, are the black people who live up to stereotypes. He then goes on to explain that there is a class of respectable black people who don't. In essence, what he was saying is that not all black people are n---as. Rock stirred up controversy with his constant use of the word, and was criticized by people who didn't appreciate his views. The media touched on it but didn't blow it out of proportion.

In July, 2007, during a soldout show at Black Enterprise's 14th annual Labor Day weekend event, Eddie Griffin found out that the n-word is no longer an acceptable term, even when used by black comedians. Someone literally pulled the plug on his mic and shut him down while he was performing his routine because of his repeated use of the word. Black leaders are tired of black comedians building their careers with material that demeans African Americans. The flagrant and careless use of the n-word on a national or international platform confuses other races and gives them the idea that it's acceptable to all black people when it is not.

Nigger/nigga is very controversial and, because of its complexity, is in a class of its own. It's a versatile word that can describe a race, or a mentality. In some cultural environments, it's acceptable, while it is utterly offensive in others. It can be used affectionately by some and maliciously by others. And since we can't erase it from our language, or ban it, or bury it, we have to find another way to control it.

I really battled within myself, trying to decide if I wanted to try to address such a touchy, sensitive topic, because I'm not the owner or originator of the n-word. I cannot speak for other African Americans. I'm not the authority on who can and cannot use it. But I feel like I need to tell people that if we can learn to not dignify other people's ignorance by responding or overreacting, future uses of the word wouldn't garner so much media attention. Sometimes when you ignore people and pay them no attention, they go pick on someone else because they realize they are not getting the rise they expected from you. We need to save our protest energy for true injustices that are committed against us. We feed the frenzy when we get ticked off and allow others to define us and provoke us. The media knows they can always use the n-word as ammunition to get us fired up because we always respond to it. I decided to tell people to ignore it. We can't get upset every time someone says "nigger." Like Madea said, "It's not what people call you, it's what you answer to."