

We Can Make Changes to Empower Ourselves

By Teri Miller Barker



Disinherited. Displaced. Discriminated. Disgraced. A dissed race. African Americans are stepchildren, trying to assimilate into a country where our roots are very shallow. It started over 550 years ago when we were abruptly torn from our homeland and brought to a foreign country in the grossest mode of exploitation imaginable. As precious cargo. Human cargo. Exchanged for ammunition, spices, or whatever good was needed at the time. Shipped here as a commercial product packed like sardines, sometimes lying in our own excrement. One can only imagine the sores, infections and diseases our people suffered as a result of traveling for several weeks under those conditions. We had the strength and resiliency to keep on keeping on despite the atrocities we witnessed or experienced day-to-day, year- to-year, for over 400 years.

Our tragic, involuntary disconnection from our culture and our lack of self-knowledge manifests as a deep, depressing, emotional wound that has yet to heal. There is so much self-destruction in the African American community. Although we get a significant amount of assistance from society, some of it is our own fault. Somewhere along the way, we dropped the ball. Somewhere between “We Shall Overcome” and “I’m a Survivor”, we relaxed on our laurels. We forgot to tell our offspring the stories about our struggle because we became too comfortable and complacent with the achievements of our forefathers and mothers. We have relied on the schools’ curriculum to include Black achievements each year in February, which only brushes the surface of our rich, deep history and contributions to this country and the world. There’s an old adage that says ‘until you tell your own story, it won’t get told properly,’ so we can’t depend on others to be our storytellers. We have evolved from Negroes, to Colored, to Black, to Afro-American and African American. Some prefer to be called Americans of African descent. Regardless of the brand or label we carry, we have a past that we can be proud of. It’s our present image that needs an extreme makeover.

Outside of Black-on-Black crime, high unemployment rates, and poor education – which are all interrelated, if you ask me – there are a couple of issues within our realm of control that

we can resolve to give ourselves a facelift. One, we can stop degrading ourselves through our music. Particularly rap. I like some of it, especially the songs that sample Old School music. But here is where I get a little fickle - I like the music, but I don't like the lyrics 90% of the time. I'm tired of Black women being called hoodrats, bitches and ho's. Tired of our young girls being bombarded with messages that they have to drop it like it's hot, make it clap, touch their toes, or back that thang up to get a man. I'm tired of our men buying into the pimp, thug, gangsta and hustler mentality that is heavily promoted in our music and videos. With the pimp and ho themes dominating our mainstream music, it's no wonder we have such high percentages of illegitimate births, single mothers heading households, and disproportionate representation in AIDS cases. Why do we think it's the norm to have casual, meaningless, premarital sex? Our men are conditioned to "hit it and quit it" and our women psych themselves into believing that they don't need a man, when in fact, we need each other. We're no longer the mothers and fathers of our children because we've allowed ourselves to be reduced to baby mamas and baby daddies. And it ain't cute, it's ignorant. I remember when that *'My Baby Daddy'* song came out in 1997. It had a catchy, Old School beat, so I was really feeling the music, but I thought it would be, hoped it would be a novelty song that would be forgotten once it fell off the charts. But nooooooo, we had to embrace it, nurture it, raise it and commercialize it until it became an acceptable way to refer to parents in our communities. We have to get back to being responsible and respectable mothers and fathers to our babies.

Another thing we can do is stop giving our children ghetto-centric names like T'Niqua, La-Quandria, DeVonte' and Raquan. Don't be mad at me for saying those names *sound* Black. We are good for expressing our creativity through names we give our children. Why? Because it sounds pretty or because it's a clever combination of the mother and father's names. When we do this to our children, we are, in essence, setting them up for difficulty in a life that's already guaranteed to be challenging. It's sabotage. They're defeated before they can even enter the game. Not trying to offend anyone who has given a child an unusual, difficult to spell, cumbersome to pronounce name, but I think you need to understand that as minorities, particularly Americans of African descent, we already have so much stacked against us, that we shouldn't make it easy to be stereotyped or categorized. Studies refer to those names as "exotic." Exotic is something that is strange. Strangely beautiful or strangely fascinating. There is nothing beautiful about made-up names with apostrophe's, and hyphens when they can impede yours or

your child's ability to succeed in school or the workforce. There is nothing fascinating about a name that encourages others to prejudge you or attempt to define you without ever having met you. It's not fair, but research also shows that not only do people assume that T'Niqua and DeVonte' are Black, they assume that they come from low-income and poorly educated backgrounds. There's nothing wrong with wanting a name that sounds good, but names should also have meaning. Just about any book on names will tell you that names have impact on character, destiny, success and failure in one's life. So it's not an astonishing revelation when studies show that names like Amber and Joshua are granted job interviews, while names with odd spellings and pronunciations often get rejection letters or no response at all.

Black-on-Black crime, high incarceration rates, high unemployment rates, and poor education are challenges we face as a result of circumstance because, as the descendants of slaves and slave owners, we are here in America by default. There are civil rights organizations and churches that advocate for us through educational workshops, job programs, and grassroots involvement in our communities. However, the music we listen to and the names we give our children are not civil rights issues. There are changes we can make to empower ourselves and help improve our image. We can start by refusing to support and promote artists, music or videos that depict us as pimps, ho's and hustlers, and stop giving our children burdensome names that create hurdles in their pursuit of a better life.