

James Joseph Lecture - Dr. Robert Ross
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“ENOUGH”, AND “NOW”

Thank you and Acknowledgement of James Joseph

Thank you and Acknowledgement of ABFE

Thank you and Acknowledgement of Susan Batten

It is truly an honor and a privilege to be invited to deliver the Annual James Joseph lecture to you, and the single most illustrative word to describe this collection of sentiments is humility. Which, of course, my wife believes this to be a good thing. Humility is of great utility in all of our lives, but for a foundation president, it's really quite mandatory.

I want to spend this valued time with you talking about the urgency to save our sons, and the role philanthropy has begun to play, should play, and must play in order to alter a trajectory of hopelessness for too many black and brown young men. This week roughly two dozen foundation leaders will gather in a room for an unprecedented meeting to share passion, ideas, and strategies for improving well-being and achievement in these young men.

There is no shortage of crisis-level issues and challenges facing communities of color these days, and it is with some trepidation that I choose to call out any one specific issue or subpopulation as a rallying cause. But as an African-American son, grandson, father, husband and citizen, this issue is more than academic, more than policy, more than about measurable outcomes, logic models or theories of change; in fact it is deeply, deeply personal. And for me, personal equates to spiritual. And I know that it is spiritual and personal for many of you as well.

You know the data that reflect the urgency of Black Male Youth in particular. Homicide rates that are 13 times greater than white males. Incarceration rates that are more than 7 times greater. HIV/AIDS, 8 times higher. Fatherlessness, more than 100 percent higher. Poverty rates, three times higher. Wages and earnings, one-third lower. High school graduation rates that are more than one-third lower.

As my friend and colleague Angela Glover Blackwell has stated, and as have others, in America's social justice landscape, the African-American male is the canary in the coal mine. And we must have the courage to recognize and call out that the canary is flat on his back at the bottom of his cage.

The cage metaphor is certainly apt. Because of the range of challenges facing young black males in our nation, nothing is more infuriating, frustrating, and outrageous than the incarceration superhighway.

Enough. I say "enough." You must say, "enough". We must say "enough." And then we must do, and we must act. Not sometime in the next decade. Not next year. Not tomorrow. Now.

This past summer I asked, and received, from my Board of Directors at The California Endowment, permission to embark on a three-month study leave to immerse myself completely on this issue. It was deeply enriching and enlightening, and also too brief. My goal was to discern how to help turn my simmering, smoldering outrage and frustration about what is happening to too many of our sons into a disciplined, actionable strategy.

I want to spend the next fifteen minutes sharing those insights with you.

The Interviews

I conducted more than 65 interviews with people – mostly men of color, but not exclusively – representing a variety of perspectives. From preachers, politicians and policy wonks to foundation leaders and felons, I had the quiet opportunity to engage, listen, learn, digest, and reflect. It was a different experience than my typical day as President & CEO; most work days I am engaging in six-to-ten meetings a day, rapid-cycle and rapid-sequence, and there is insufficient time to actually reflect upon about whatever you just heard or learned. A decision must be made and you move on to the next block of time on the calendar.

During this sabbatical, I scheduled no more than one or two interviews in a single day, which provided me the opportunity to listen, and then just "sit with it for a little bit."

I interviewed Marian Wright Edelman, Reverend James Lawson, Marc Morial, Ben Jealous, Tavis Smiley, Cornel West. I interviewed grassroots leaders, program directors, foundation officers, business owners, an actor, and young men themselves. I was unable to garner face time with President Obama, but I was able to interview someone from the White House.

I had three basic questions for my interviewees: 1) How concerned are you about what is happening to our young men?; 2) What must be done about it? and; 3) Who must step up to do it? A fourth question I was able to slip into the end of the interviews, which was: “What should philanthropy do?”

The meetings were scheduled for an hour; most carried on for 90 minutes to two hours. For a handful of conversations, we hit the three-hour mark. There was not a single moment of awkward silence in any of the 65 interviews. The words flowed like a fast-moving stream. The themes and tensions I heard will not surprise this audience.

The first major theme was the matter of race, racism, and racial justice, and I would include the narrative and frame of the portrayal of the Black Man in America. The second major theme was the collection of issues of family, parenting, fatherhood, and culture. The third was the matter of jobs, employment, and poverty. The fourth theme was of the educational system, but I would also add other major systems and institutions where black boys and men reside: beyond schools, these include foster care, juvenile justice and probation systems, prisons and jails. The fifth theme was described in a variety of ways by a variety of interviewees but I chose to define as the matter of trauma and toxic stress.

Tensions were evident within and across interviews, and not new to the black community. These tensions reveal themselves on editorial pages; in JET, Ebony, Essence, and Black Enterprise Magazines; and at conferences and meetings where African-American policy experts, intellectuals and researchers gather around the challenges faced by African-Americans. But these tensions also show up at our family dinner tables, in our barber shops and beauty salons, and over a cold beer or glass of wine at a family reunion, Bar-B-Q, or a house party.

In an effort to lift these tensions up, get them out, and place them on the table, permit me to run through a series of direct quotes from some interviewees, most of whom are African-American:

- From a nonprofit leader: “Parents, parents, parents...this is all about the parents.”
- From a Civil Rights leader: “White America has entered its 16th generation of genocide and racism.”
- From a grassroots leader: “We have to get out of the victim-oppressor construct; The victimization mentality is killing us. Just killing us.”
- From the founder of Kwanzaa: “The key is culture, and the first step is responsibility.”
- From a foundation leader: “Why have we, as black people, ceded the conversation on family values to white, conservative Republicans?”
- From a Civil Rights leader: “We are struggling against a culture of diminished expectations for our children.”
- From a public policy leader: “The image of the Black Man goes back to the days of slavery, as he continues to be viewed as menacing, physically imposing, a threat, poised to take the White Man’s property and his White Woman...It’s the Mandingo Myth.”
- From a grassroots leader: “Why do we allow others to control how we are portrayed?”
- From a university Dean: “It’s had to control the narrative when you don’t control the media.”
- From a labor leader: “This is all about jobs, jobs, and jobs. And good jobs. Don’t forget that slavery essentially amounted to full employment.”
- From a community youth organizer: “People fail to recognize that the street is an institution. There is, in fact, a street intellectualism, and the skills and knowledge of what these young men gain are transferable. After all, these kids understand that capitalism is fundamentally a hustler’s game, a pimp’s game.”
- From a researcher: “Why do we criminalize young men who miss school?”
- From a Probation Judge: “I grow weary of seeing the blank stares of hopelessness that I see on the faces of the young people who enter my courtroom.”
- From a civil rights attorney: “We are the only developed nation in the world who sentences children to prison, all of this fueled by the politics of fear and anger in this country. We need a greater sense of redemption, reconciliation, and recovery.”
- From a youth: “Don’t let the prison system make money off of me.”

- From a nonprofit leader: “We need to transform the law enforcement culture operating against our kids that is about trail ‘em, nail ‘em, and jail ‘em.”
- From a physician researcher: “What we now know about trauma is that hurt people engage in hurting people.”
- From a media researcher: “Risk factors are not predictive factors because of resiliency factors; as it turns out, we may actually be stronger in the broken places.”
- From a community activist: “We have a mental health system that is about illness. We need a youth development system that is about wellness.”
- From another community activist and healer: “What we do in our work is to create a sacred space to bring our brand of medicine – healing practices -- to deal with the hurt and the pain in these young men. Because with rage, you become disconnected from your spirit.”
- From a psychologist: “Too many schools and institutions conclude that these young men have an anger management problem. These kids are beyond angry; they have rage.”
- From a California youth: “We need more investment in youth development and job skills, better parks, regulate the liquor stores, more passionate teachers, and healthier food.”
- From a university President: “We must find the hidden stars among our black boys, and support them...the work of our agenda is about reclaiming black males as human capital.”
- From an African-American youth: “Why is it that everything at this conference about me is a negative statistic? What about the good that I do, what about that?”
- From a Los Angeles youth: “Can we please get rid of the identification system that brings up my felonies and my past every time I apply for a job? That’s who I was, but it’s not who I am now.”
- From a white faith leader on this issue of mass incarceration: “We are not recognizing our own complicity in the scandalous theology to define people as unclean. When we engage in charity at the expense of justice we are complicit with the very system that perpetuates the injustice. We must shift from charity to justice.”
- And finally, from a community organizer: “It is the spiritual dimension that will give this required movement a sense of audacity.”

Folks, this is merely a sample of the insights shared with me on the issue of reclaiming our sons. I have pages and pages of them. There are tensions

and differences and struggles and inconsistencies across so many of them in finding an actionable strategy. But each one of them is right, and each one of them is true.

How then, on this complex, thorny, seemingly intractable issue do we move forward? How do we act, and act with a sense of meaningful and impactful purpose?

Thoughts on a National Strategy

As you can see, we must cope with the reality that everyone has their own silver bullet approach for a challenge that defies a silver bullet solution. So this means that a national strategy must have comprehensiveness.

At the same time, a strategy that attempts to focus on everything, or too many things, is doomed to failure. So this means that a national strategy must have focus.

Thirdly, the matter is urgent, requiring immediate action, but also requires a long view approach. So we must proceed with both urgency and patience.

Finally, I was impressed with the array of adjectives and descriptors used to capture a most urgent crisis: “mass incarceration”, “the cradle to prison pipeline”, “the school to prison pipeline”, “the prison pipeline,” “the incarceration superhighway”, or “the prison factory.” Dr. Ken Mason of Southern University utilizes the term “The Wolf” to embody the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems that engulf and house so many of our young men.

In other words we need a systemic approach to dismantle a systemic beast of stigmatization, marginalization, criminalization, and incarceration that engulfs our young men. We have communities and systems in this country who are effectively mass-producing inmates through hopelessness. So I began to turn my attention to a systems approach to dismantle off-ramps to prison while simultaneously strengthening on-ramps to opportunity.

As is often the case with complex challenges, one wrestles and squirms to land on an actionable framework that spurs a workable plan. And often the inspiration emerges from an unlikely source.

In this case, the word is radar. We need radar.

As my sabbatical was drawing to a close, I experienced a moment of feeling overwhelmed with all that I heard. I had promised my Board of Directors that the purpose of the three months was to explore and land on an actionable strategy. Although I had gleaned numerous insights, I felt no closer to a focused strategy than I had twelve weeks and 60 conversations earlier.

That particular evening, I was reviewing some notes and documents, and I had the Military History channel on in the background. I am a bit of a military history fanatic, not because I enjoy violence or violent action, but I find myself intrigued by the leadership and strategy insights gleaned from war and battle as the most extreme form of a political instrument.

The featured story on the Military History channel that night was about the invention of radar.

In 1935, storm clouds were beginning to gather over Europe. Hitler had seized political control of a new Nazi Germany, and he had begun to show and flex his military might. Great Britain, barely two decades from the horror of the First World War, anticipated that war with Nazi Germany was coming, and was nowhere near ready.

In the fall of 1935, a British researcher began to experiment with concept of radar, an electronic signaling device able to detect approaching aircraft from long distances.

Between 1938 and early 1940 Hitler ruthlessly savaged or conquered, and in succession, several European nations: Czechoslovakia, Austria, Poland, Holland, Belgium, France. Great Britain was next in line, and Hitler declared war on England in the fall of 1940.

During this time the British researcher further developed the new technology of radar, and had begun to collaborate with the British government and armed forces. At first the radar technology was only able to detect aircraft a few miles away. Over time they were able to detect the speed and direction of enemy aircraft approaching from over 200 miles away.

Despite aggressive and brutally designed air raids, Hitler failed to defeat and conquer England, in large part because of the use of radar as part of an integrated defense strategy by the British military. They were able to detect approaching Nazi aircraft and bombers with enough time to mount and rally a defense to intercept the enemy in the nick of time. It was this early warning system that led Hitler and Nazi Germany to lose the Battle of Britain, and disrupt Hitler's momentum.

Folks, in order to save our young men, dismantle the on-ramps to the incarceration superhighway, and create on-ramps to opportunity, we need radar. We need a system.

We need an early warning and support system that specifically informs us, at the earliest possible stages, when one of our boys or young men is signaling difficulty, trouble, or hopelessness, and connects him to a system of support, and available assets in the community.

I then proceeded to immerse myself in the data and research about early warnings, and engaged in several follow-up conversations.

In short, I landed on three evidence-supported, primary early warning signals where boys or young men are essentially telling us: "I may be in trouble and I may need to be connected to some help."

Those three warning and intervention opportunities are: 1) Third grade reading levels; 2) Chronic school absence; and 3) School suspensions or expulsions.

My friend, colleague, and mentor Ralph Smith of the Annie E. Casey Foundation helped point me in the direction of the criticality of Third Grade Reading. Through his leadership in the national Campaign for Grade Level reading, we understand that in most urban public school districts, 80 percent or more of black boys are reading at less than proficiency in the 3rd Grade. Let me repeat that: Eighty or more percent. This is utterly unacceptable and should have black people writhing in collective agony over this somber reality.

Moreover, education experts tell us that between preschool and third grade children are learning to read; after third grade they read to learn. If you have a significant gap in reading proficiency at third grade, the chances for educational doom increase significantly in the school years that follow.

The second warning point is chronic school absence. On the basis of some terrific research by Hedy Chang, we now know that children who miss 20 or more days per year of school are signaling serious risks: health, dental health, or mental health issues; a depressed or substance-abusing parent in the home; potential family dysfunction, child neglect, or just plain chaos. The risks hold true whether the child is in kindergarten or the ninth grade.

The third warning point is the matter of school suspensions. At The California Endowment, we have already established, driven by input from community leaders in our Building Healthy Communities' sites, the issue of school suspensions as a critical marker of community health. Folks, ever since the combination of the so-called national War on Drugs, in combination with the fallout of the school shootings at Columbine, we have seen an insidious and pervasive epidemic brewing on suspending and expelling kids from our nation's schools. And surprise, surprise: black and brown boys are suspended from school, at all grade levels, at disproportionately alarming rates.

Data from researchers at USC tell us that a single suspension reduces the likelihood of a young man attending community college by 40 percent, and that figure rises to 70 percent for four-year college.

In our Healthy Community sites in Fresno, South Central Los Angeles, East LA, East Oakland, and Richmond, we heard directly from young people that they view this phenomenon as the portal to the incarceration superhighway, where the pattern of Black and Brown males begins for being stigmatized, marginalized, and ostracized for their behavior.

I would argue for and submit a fourth intervention point, which is that of our boys and young men in our juvenile justice and probation systems. We must transform these systems from those merely housing thugs-in-training to ones of reconstructing pathways to opportunity, achievement, and well-being.

So, if someone were to anoint me as national czar for the reclamation of African-American boys and young men, I would offer up a strategy anchored at these four points: 1) the early childhood-to-third grade window; 2) chronic school absence; 3) school suspensions; and 4) juvenile probation. You can already begin to imagine how existing strategies of parenting and

fatherhood programs, mentoring, summer jobs and internships would feed and support such a strategy. School and community partnerships would flourish in response.

In addition, you can see where the public policy and advocacy work would be required as well: greater investment in the early childhood years, reducing and or eliminating out-of-school suspensions; replacing unreasonably harsh discipline practices with restorative justice and other more accountable and effective policies; monitoring and reporting systems for chronic school absence; the incorporation of wellness, physical and social-emotional health into school achievement testing approaches. Our kids are much more than walking test scores.

Such an early warning and support system spurred into action to address the crisis in black boys would have a beneficial effect for vulnerable children and youth of any gender, race, or ethnicity.

In California, we are actively pursuing a funding strategy to catalyze systemic approaches anchored in this framework.

I want to close by offering both an optimistic observation about the roles that philanthropy has begun to play, as well as a sobering one.

Thanks to the extraordinary work and leadership of the Open Society Foundations, we have a Foundation Center assessment of the philanthropic funding directed at black males. Due to limitations in coding and gaps in data collection and reporting, this assessment probably represents a floor of activity, rather a ceiling. But I am pleased to report that within 24 hours leaders from 25 foundations already investing in black male achievement or Boys and Men of Color work will gather for an unprecedented conversation about the urgency of this national crisis.

As an African American male and leader in philanthropy, this current level of commitment both warms my heart and sobers my soul.

It warms my heart in the following way. During my sabbatical I did an informal review of not only what these foundations were investing in, but who was carrying it. This was no exhaustive, methodologically sound review, but as best as I can tell, in virtually every case where a grantmaking strategy was targeting these young men, a person of color at the foundation –

either at the staff level or in the board room – was responsible for driving it. I can think of no better testimony to the question of why diversity and inclusion matters in philanthropy. They have names like Shawn Dove and Rashid Shabazz, Ray Colmenar and Charles Fields, Trabian Shorters, John Jackson, Maya Harris, Maisha Simmons, Julio Marcial, Susan Batten, Gail Christopher, Geoff Canada, Lani Guiner, Dr. James Kyle, and Dan Boggan.

On the other hand, we urgently need a greater commitment and investment on this front from our colleagues in philanthropy, and here is the sobering corollary: in the absence of black or brown people at these foundations courageously pushing or catalyzing the agenda, and as best as I can tell, there would be virtually zero philanthropic investment in the crisis of black males. We need to ask ourselves the question of why endangered species of whales, and condors, and fish, and frogs merit the focused attention of white liberal philanthropy, but black males as an endangered species merits no such rallying cry. I know that our friend and colleague Emmett Carson is about to publish a paper regarding his thoughts on this issue.

This is the precise reason why diversity and inclusion in philanthropy is beyond a numbers game: it is about equity, and it is about justice.

Join me in a round of applause and recognition for the foundation officers at these foundations for leading the work that they do, and I strongly believe that the work of the Open Society Foundations merits particular attention.

I'd like to close this evening with my favorite quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is certainly not among his well known or oft-cited quotes. But I can think of no better statement that summarizes how those of us privileged enough to operate at the nexus of philanthropy and social justice must behave. The quote is this:

“What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

In other words, I assume we love our black and brown sons. But can we, and will we, implement the demands of justice on their behalf?

Thank you.