

Have Blacks Lost Their Spirit for Social Activism?

Written by Jessica Williams-Gibson
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During the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s, African-Americans mobilized and marched for issues such as segregation, racial discrimination and voting rights.

Issues Blacks face today include unemployment, health disparities, mass incarceration, education declines, voting hurdles, gun violence and the deterioration of the Black family among many others. These issues matter to African-Americans, however many would argue that very little action is taken on these issues or if an outcry does occur, the passion soon fades.

Have Blacks lost their spirit for social activism? Have Blacks forgotten how to come together to affect change?

Dr. Derek B. King Sr., a professor at Martin University and nephew of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; Rev. Thomas L. Brown, son of local civil rights activist Dr. Andrew J. Brown and pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church; and Barbara Bolling, a member of the national board of directors and the Indiana State President of the NAACP, give their thoughts.

The Black church has changed.

King believes that Blacks have lost their spirit for social activism for several reasons. He says that during the civil rights movement, issues of racism were clear and victories that were won

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because of the movement caused people to believe “the fight” was over.

Most importantly, he believes the Black church has changed.

“The messaging has changed. There are some Black pastors who try to keep their congregants aware of issues that affect Blacks disproportionately. But the majority of the messaging coming out of the Black church does not speak to systemic challenges,” said King.

“Some of the people who were well respected in the Black community was pastors. Much of the messaging that comes out of Black pulpits today is prosperity preaching...get paid...get your breakthrough. When we talk about things that affect Blacks, we’ve fallen asleep behind the wheel.”

Despite his strong opinion, he said there is considerable concern in the Black community about homicide rates; however, there is a laundry list of important issues that Blacks are either unaware of or don’t care about.

“We’ve gotten selfish. If it doesn’t affect me, it’s not my problem. During the civil rights movement, it didn’t matter how much money you had or how much education you had, Blacks in the south sat on the back of the bus. Up until 1965 Blacks in America could not vote. These issues affected all Blacks,” he said.

“Unless it affects a measurable population of Blacks, we will raise our voices and take some sort of action, but generally, (we have the attitude of) ‘if it doesn’t affect me, it’s not my problem.’”

Apathy has increased.

Brown agrees with King and says that Blacks have lost their social activism because they’ve lost their spiritual activism.

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“We have become lazy and apathetic. Our religion has become part of the secular movement and not the spiritual movement,” said Brown. “Our Black church is about religion, not spirituality.”

He also echoes King’s sentiments on rampant selfishness in the Black community.

At 70-years-old, Brown not only actively demonstrated during the civil rights movement, but his father, Rev. Andrew J. Brown was a local leader fighting for justice. Brown has also sat amongst noted Black leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy and even Malcolm X.

Although Brown has not stopped speaking out on issues in the Black community, he pinpoints the 90s as the beginning of the decline of the Black activist.

“We were moving toward the notion of making money and becoming financially successful...getting status,” he said. “We started copying our oppressor.”

Brown does recognize the awe and accomplishments of President Barack Obama, but reminds Blacks that “we have not arrived.”

To further prove his point, he said that when Blacks do speak out on issues, it’s usually on issues of grief such as the Trayvon Martin issue. Blacks need to speak out about all injustices, including Black-on-Black crime.

Increases in technology spewing information quickly have also aided in Blacks glossing over issues. People are hustling and are all about survival while simultaneously losing sight of their historical passion for change.

He also believes Blacks have lost the concept of sacrifice.

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Technology can be overwhelming.

Bolling does not agree that Blacks have lost their spirit for social activism citing the Trayvon Martin marches that occurred across the country and the outcry during the 2007 Jena 6 incident involving high school students and racism in Louisiana.

She said that when issues such as those arise and reach people's hearts, Blacks do mobilize and march.

On the other hand, she also said that technology and the barrage of news that people are faced with does make tackling issues overwhelming.

"If something does occur, you have to act instantaneously. If it takes you too long to get to your point, people's minds will wander. You got to be ready (to fight injustice) all the time," said Bolling.

People should not only be vigilant in addressing new issues, but also remember issues that took place during the civil rights movement still affect Blacks today. She cites today's Voter ID laws mirroring poll taxes of the past.

Solutions to the problem.

King, Brown and Bolling are hopeful that Blacks can regain the passion that once fueled mass social change.

King looks to Black media to use brutal honesty and inform the public about issues going on in the African-American community.

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Bolling said that Blacks should educate today's youth about the past and prepare them to fight for injustices.

She also said that instead of people looking for a "new Dr. King," President Obama or groups like the NAACP to solve all of Blacks' problems, average people should take a stand and fight for issues they are passionate about.

Brown agrees that the answer to the problem lies in volunteerism.

"We've got two or three generations caught up in feeling that they're entitled. People need to volunteer," said Brown. "Well, my daddy, Dr. King, Andy Young, Sam Proctor and all those guys used to say 'it's got to get worse in order for it to get better.' We have not hit our bottom yet."

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