

## Let's Talk About It! - The 'F' Word: Life in America with a Felony

Written by Deric Muhammad  
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From the time the first slave ship landed in Jamestown, Virginia, life in America has been a rough journey for Black people. Four hundred and fifty-seven years later, statistics indicate that it still is. And if being Black in America isn't rough enough, try having a felony on your criminal record. It's like being asked to race Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps with cement shoes. Before you can get a good start, it seems you are already weighed down.

"Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" It's the "line in the sand" on every job application that legalizes discrimination. It's the line item that often determines whether a young, Black male will humble himself to flip burgers or compromise himself to hustle crack. Even McDonald's makes it difficult for a felon to find honest work these days. Such is life in America when you've been convicted of a felony. **You pay your debt to society. Then you are punished for the rest of your life. America must learn that not everyone who has a felony is a criminal. And not everyone who is a criminal has a felony.**

To be a felon in the land of the free is no different than having a plantation's brand on your back during the days of slavery. Society limits opportunities for you so the chances of you returning to that plantation (prison) are almost guaranteed. The inability to find gainful employment is just the beginning.

A felony conviction could very well prevent you from finding decent housing, exercising your right to vote, being eligible for Federal School Financial Aide, obtaining trade certifications, etc. **One out of every 13 Blacks of voting age cannot participate in the 2012 Presidential Election due to their past criminal history, a number four times greater than that of non-Blacks in America.**

Nowadays a felon can't even apply for food stamps. In the words of Sister Michelle Alexander,

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author of

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, this indicates that a convicted felon is not even "fit to be fed."

This is one of the most profound hypocrisies considering the history of this country. **Consider the fact that many, if not all, of the early Europeans who came to America were felons themselves.**

Society refers to them as the Founding Fathers. I call them "

**The Founding Felons**

." Europe emptied her jails and sent her convicted criminals here as a way of ridding herself of the dregs of society. America represented new opportunity for its Founding Felons. The nerve of this nation to be so unforgiving of ex-felons when she, herself, was founded by criminals.

**The presidential candidates will not likely speak up for America's millions of disenfranchised felons. Why? It's simple. Way too many of them cannot vote.**

I refer it as "the F word," because in our social structure it is likened to a profane word; a "cuss word," if you will. However, those who are struggling to move forward in life with the "ball and chain" of a felony on your record must become acquainted with another "F word." That word is FAITH.

Regardless of what mistakes you have made, there is no blemish in your past that God cannot erase. In scripture He promises us beauty for our ashes. He promises to throw all of our sins into the sea of forgetfulness if we would, but, have FAITH in Him. That FAITH in Him does not simply require that we pray. Once we get up from our prayer, we must embark on a journey to "do for self" and have enough FAITH that we can make a future for ourselves and our families regardless of our criminal record. Brothers and sisters, it can be done!!!

If you can't find a job, find a way to make a job for yourself. If they've denied you the right to vote, find a way to fight against felon disenfranchisement. There are other ways to participate in the political process. If they won't give you food stamps, take a piece of land in your community and start an urban garden and grow your own food. If they deny you decent housing, learn how to build your own home. If they won't give you financial aid for school, get a library card and educate yourself the way Malcolm X did. I know that these things are easier said than done. However, if you have FAITH the grain of a mustard seed, you can remove the social consequences of having a felony on your record.

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The Honorable Elijah Muhammad set the blueprint for socio-economic development for Black men and women coming out of prison. He created what is likened to an "underground railroad" for ex-felons, regardless of their religion, that was not dependent upon the government of America. He taught Black men and women how to, first, forgive themselves and then discipline themselves to cultivate their gifts and talents, ultimately becoming owners of their own businesses and architects of their own futures.

When I look at the concept of recycling and "going green," it amazes me how White people can pour unprecedented resources into the recycling of things, but place very little value on the recycling of the human spirit. If the Lord's prayer says "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," then what chance does America have of being forgiven of her history if she won't even forgive the "trespasses" of those who have made mistakes and paid their debt to society. Think about it.

*(Deric Muhammad is a Houston-based activist in the Ministry of Justice. Visit his website at [www.dericmuhammad.com](http://www.dericmuhammad.com))**{jcomments on}*