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Stephen Biko and the South African Black Consciousness Movement: Implications for African American Family Well-Being

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Greetings, and thank you for reading this issue of our ongoing analysis and commentary publication.

Earlier this year (January 17) I wrote an essay reflecting on the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This current essay is similarly the result of my reflections on another great international leader and activist, Stephen Biko.

As described in the book, *I Write What I Like*, "Steve Biko died in 1977 at the age of thirty from a head wound suffered while in the custody of police. For his steadfast refusal to keep quiet about the heinous crimes of apartheid, he is honored as the martyred hero of the South African liberation movement."

Steve Biko became known by many outside of South Africa because of the reason and manner of his death. He was very active in, and credited by many as being the father of, South Africa's Black Consciousness Movement. September 12, 2007 marked the 30th anniversary of Steve Biko's brutal murder while in police detention in South Africa.

Like Dr. King's birthday, I often spend time around this date every year reading through some of Steve Biko's writings and speeches, and reflecting on the significance of his life and legacy. This year, in addition to online accounts of his speeches and work, I primarily found myself re-reading his writings in the classic book, *I Write What I Like*. While reading Biko's words, I most often found myself drawing parallels between his analysis of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and our ongoing struggles against ra-

cism and other forms of oppression in this country.

My intent in this essay, however, is not only to draw parallels between apartheid in South Africa and the African American experience. Others have done so quite effectively. What I would like to do is reflect on Steve Biko's analysis of the South African condition under the apartheid system, the importance of Black Consciousness, and how he thus approached his organizing and community development work aimed at the healing and liberation of the people. Within his ideas I believe there are lessons to be learned by all of us as we endeavor to address the over-involvement of African American children and families in this nation's child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Ultimately, Steve Biko dedicated his life to opera-

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tionalizing a paradigm that sought to heal and liberate African people (and through that all people in South Africa) from the effects of European colonization

and the dangerous myth of white supremacy. It is in his life's work that we can find meaningful lessons.

Let me share at the outset an organizational note for this essay. In several sections I will use quotes from Steve Biko's book *I Write What I Like* to set up or highlight a particular idea or reflection. Where you see references to page numbers, these are page numbers where the quote can be found in the book.

Understanding Black Consciousness

I would like to begin by defining Black Consciousness. I will do so by sharing statements from Steve

Biko about Black Consciousness and its relevance to the healing and liberation of African people living under the Apartheid system in South Africa. In these statements I believe we can find direct parallels to the challenges facing us in our continued support of African American families and communities struggling through our involvement with this nation's child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Each of the italicized excerpts is from the book, *I Write What I Like*.

Defining Black Consciousness

Let us begin by defining Black Consciousness. At risk of over-simplifying a more complex idea and philosophical perspective, I will use a brief excerpt of a definition offered by Steve Biko. I do so fully aware that many African Americans have offered similar definitions and analyses of Black Consciousness, especially as it relates to the African American experience.

On page 49, Biko describes Black Consciousness as: *"the realisation by the Black man of the need to rally together with his brothers... and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that Black is an aberration from the "normal" which is white. It is a manifestation of a new realization that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the white man, blacks are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black. Black consciousness therefore takes cognizance of the deliberateness of God's plan in creating Black people Black. It seeks to infuse the Black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their values systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook on life."*

As may be obvious, Biko's analysis of Black Consciousness exists as a response to the history of European / white cultural, political, and economic hegemony in South Africa. It can be argued that in the absence of European / white (and other) interference African people, and thus African culture and institutional structures, would exist in their own right. Black Consciousness affirms the integrity and value of the African "way" in the presence of oppressive and anti-African people and influences.

As Biko argues, Black Consciousness is not a means towards an end per se. It is a way of being, feeling and thinking that affirms the integrity of the African experience and cultural meaning system. It is a framework through which Black people accept the beauty and value in our experiences and culture, and through such, endeavor to create societal structures, institu-

tions and communities that promote the well-being and optimal growth and development of African people... as we come to understand and define it.

Any effort on our part to learn from and adopt aspects of the cultural values and technologies of non-Black peoples must be done on our terms and for the purposes of the continued growth and development of Black families and communities.

Understanding the Black Condition

As mentioned previously, Biko was sharply criticized by whites for his analysis and activism. Not only did many of them disagree with his assertion that African people have a culture that is (at the very least) equal in value to European / white culture, they saw his assertions and activism as a direct threat to their continued hegemony in southern Africa. Their ruling structure and oppressive regime after all was based on the premise (although unfounded) of European / white supremacy in relation to all other peoples.

For his views Biko was frequently detained and brought up on numerous legal charges. The following analysis was shared by Steve Biko while under cross-examination in a South African court during the first week of May 1976. A number of Black Consciousness leaders were being tried, fundamentally, because of their involvement in spreading views associated with Black Consciousness.

In the following excerpt (from page 114), Biko describes for the court the fundamental goals of "conscientizing" Black people as bringing a stronger consciousness of the integrity, honor and empowering potential of Black people's history and culture:

"This is correct, we do make references to the conditions of the black man and the conditions in which the black man lives. We try to get blacks in conscientisation to grapple realistically with their problems, to attempt to find solutions to their problems, to develop what one might call an awareness, a physical awareness of their situation, to be able to analyse it, and to provide answers for themselves. The purpose behind it really being to provide some kind of hope; I think the central theme about black society is that it has got elements of a defeated society, people often look like they have given up the struggle. Like the man who was telling me that he now lives to work, he has given himself to the idea. Now this sense of defeat is basically what we are fighting against; people must not just give in to the hardship of life, people must develop a hope, people must develop some form of security to be together to look at their problems, and

people must in this way build up their humanity. This is the point about conscientisation and Black Consciousness.”

A key message in this text is the notion that people must find the hope and strength to persevere through the process of grappling with and understanding the complexities of our condition. This is a collective process, as people come to understand their condition through critical examination. This is a learning and discovery process at its core, and comes through critical inquiry and analysis... alongside other individuals experiencing similar conditions.

This suggests that a critical activity for adults and youth struggling through life's predicaments must be a critical examination of their circumstance within the context of our historical / cultural experiences in this country. For our purposes in this country, this critical examination must place the substance of the African American experience in this larger society and within the community at the center. Ideally, people must grapple with the meaning of their experiences *together*, and develop shared understandings and collective working solutions as we sort through the challenges presented. This is fundamentally an evolving *meaning-seeking* exercise, and requires constant engagement.

It could appear at face value that many people today are disillusioned at the current state of the African American community. It is certainly possible for people to look at popular depictions of African American families and communities found in the mass media and conclude that we are complacent and no longer committed to any form of struggle. It could appear to many that we have come to accept our condition as being natural, justified, and/or “just the way it is.”

Similar observations and misunderstandings existed in South African society, even during the brutal and unjust years of the apartheid system. In the following excerpt, Biko argues against this observation as being short-sighted and just scratching the surface:

“That is I think understating the position. I think it is possible to adapt to a given hard situation precisely because you have got to live it, and you have got to live with it every day. But adapting does not mean that you forget; you go to the mill every day, it is always unacceptable to you, it has always been unacceptable to you, and it remains so for life, but you adapt in the sense that you cannot continue to live in a state of conflict with yourself. You sort of accept, like the man who was working with the electrician was saying to me, you know, ‘oh he talks this way’. This is his explanation of it. This is his sort of glib adaptation to it, but deep inside

him he feels it. He cannot keep on answering back to him every day: don't call me boy, don't shout at me, don't swear at me, because there is also the element of the job that he has got to keep. He had adapted but he does not forget it, and he does not accept it, which I think is important.”

This is a critical point for us to consider and reflect on because we see signs of adaptation to oppression all around us. These appearances can be, and often are, confused with signs of defeatism. Many families are forced to live in neighborhoods riddled with crime, substance abuse, sexual abuse, substandard housing, inferior educational opportunities, environmental pollution, police brutality and other pathologies. While families frequently reject these conditions and behaviors as unacceptable, we tend to find ways to adapt in the interest of *getting by* and avoiding what are too frequently negative repercussions and retaliation.

The same applies to the subtle and more explicit forms of racism African American people encounter daily. We do not accept any of it per se. We are clear that it is denigrating and disrespectful. Yet we often find ourselves silent (or *silenced*) in the interest of “getting by,” keeping our job, avoiding physical confrontations, etc. Paul Lawrence Dunbar describes our reality very clearly in his poem: *We wear the mask*.

Let us also not forget or minimize the strong sense of fear and insecurity felt by many African Americans as a result of the experiences of individuals and organizations that dare to speak out and organize actively against the status quo. Freedom is not free, and as history teaches us, the price can be costly.

Meanwhile and on a deeper level, if you really watch the daily lifestyle patterns, routines and behaviors of some segments of our community, you can see very clear signs of fatigue and depression when it comes to any form of meaningful struggle against oppression. As I mentioned earlier, I do not believe we have become a lifeless and lethargic people. To the contrary, we continue to be among the most expressive and culturally rich peoples in the world. What I am saying is that a great number of black folks have adopted lifestyles that allow us to “get by” and preserve some sense of sanity and energy to make it through each day (e.g. “living for the weekend”).

Too often, unfortunately, this is a lifestyle devoid of any critical examination of our individual and collective condition. It is a lifestyle devoid of any real and meaningful “us-centered” institution-building activity. It is thus a lifestyle that keeps us disconnected from

one another when it comes to identifying and developing workable solutions to the challenges facing our families and communities.

This is why the punitive child welfare and juvenile justice systems (among other systems) can come into our communities, with no meaningful resistance from us, and fill a void of problem-solving for our so-called “at-risk” families and youth. There is a great deal for us to learn from Fannie Lou Hamer about what it means to be “*sick and tired of being sick and tired.*”

Toward a Critical Analysis

The child welfare community in this country has yet to fully acknowledge the historical foundations (ideas, values, etc.) upon which this nation’s child welfare system was built, and how that foundation has contributed (and continues to) to the state of affairs we refer to as racial disproportionality and disparate outcomes in child welfare. The same can be said for juvenile justice in this country, although some steps have been taken to force jurisdictions around the country to critically explore and address these dynamics.

The Substance of a Collective Critical Analysis

I believe there are a few critical questions we must reflect on, within a framework of Black Consciousness and with a sense of urgency, as we continue our efforts to bring our children and families home from and out of the clutches of the punitive child welfare and juvenile justice systems:

1) What does our history and culture tell us about what it means to be “well?” 2) What would optimal health and wellness look like for African American children and families in today’s society? 3) What is it about the African American experience that has rendered so many of our families vulnerable to the challenges we find ourselves facing? 4) What can we learn from prior generations of African American families and communities about family and community well-being? 5) What resources are necessary to heal and realize the optimal development of African American families and the broader African American community? 6) What can each of us do as individuals, but working collectively, to secure and make strategic use of these resources so that our families and communities become well? 7) What must each of us stop doing in order for us to realize optimal African American family and community well-being? 8) What is it about America’s human services and juvenile/criminal justice institutions that has made them historically op-

pressive in their relationship to the broader African American community? 9) What strategies can we employ to reverse this historic pattern?

If we can respond to the above questions effectively, keeping in mind the observations and reflections offered by Steve Biko, we would find ourselves well on our way to healing our families in a way we have yet to realize. I don’t assume that these are new ideas. I am also fully aware that many individuals and organizations have grappled with different variations of these questions repeatedly during our many years in this country. Revisiting these prior conversations, speeches, and writings is a natural starting point.

The Context of a Collective Critical Analysis

What does/would a collective critical analysis process look like? You don’t have to look hard to find examples; nor is it difficult to create the space for these efforts. The seeds for this kind of critical analysis process and collective organizing work exists informally in many places. For example, go to a typical barber shop after a Black athlete, entertainer or politician gets in trouble with the law. You will see Black folks talking about what these individuals should have done differently, as well as how unjust society is when it comes to Black people and interests. You see some of this play out in the more progressive churches, other religious institutions and some civic organizations as well.

Most of us have our opinions about what we feel is a society that is racist and unjust at its core. The problem is that most of us do not belong to, or are otherwise disconnected from, organizations that engage in this kind of analysis and social justice work every day.

I am arguing that we need more structured and deliberate spaces and opportunities to have these conversations. We have the physical places and mechanisms to do so. They include: our schools, colleges and universities; our local community centers; our neighborhood and other civic organizations; our fraternities and sororities; as well as our local parent teacher associations. What we have to do is create a more deliberate and dedicated time and space in these various settings.

What could these programs look like? There are various forms that these critical consciousness-raising efforts can take. We need more non-fiction book clubs that function more like study groups, and fewer that spend great deals of time reading the lusty fiction novels that are ever more present in our community. I

suspect that will offend many people. So be it... our ancestors and future generations deserve better. We need more movie viewing and discussion groups that critically analyze the images of African and African American individuals, families and communities displayed on the screen. These groups must be organized and prepared to speak and write about their observations and critical findings. We need Saturday Schools, Weekend Academies and after school programs that are explicitly dedicated to the mental, spiritual, and physical development of our children and families, and with a lens of Black Consciousness and social justice. We need more churches and other organizations to host lecture series and cultural studies groups that provide a critical focus our communities' challenges.

The outcome of all of these activities should be a clear analysis of who we are, where we have been and where we are going. It must also be a goal of ours to develop the institutions and resources needed to meet the needs of our children, families and communities. There must be no dichotomy between the social justice advocacy and other self-help activities of our organizations. Both have been a strong part of our community tradition in this country, and must be reclaimed as a part of our organizing efforts moving forward. There are examples of all of these efforts in existence. We need much more of it.

Is Our Goal Systems Reform or Transformation?

Many people have raised the question of whether we are involved in societal and systems reform efforts, or more fundamental societal and systems transformation efforts. On page 49, Biko argues that the aim of the Black Consciousness movement was not to reform the system, but to completely transform it. Reform, according to Biko, implies "an acceptance of the major points around which the system revolves." The same is true, from my perspective, of the systems of child welfare and juvenile justice in America. The basic val-

ues and principles undergirding current practice and policy in these fields is contrary to culturally responsive principles of child, family and community development and well-being. Thus, we seek to redefine the fundamental functions of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. It is true that some efforts are and have been underway to do so in this country; however, to date those efforts have not reached a critical mass.

Concluding Thoughts

I have offered the ideas presented in this essay as a way to stimulate more critical thinking about how we approach our work in education, child welfare, juvenile justice and broader youth and family development. We must approach our work from a perspective rooted in a substantive analysis of our historical and cultural experiences in this country. It must be centered in a framework of Black (African) Consciousness.

One of the key messages and examples Steve Biko shared with us is that our power and our strength comes from our *collective* critical examination of and attention to these dynamics. The natural product of such critical examination is the identification of the working solutions to our challenges, and the collective courage and commitment to: 1) start right now, and 2) start where we find ourselves.

We have the ability and resources, right now, to address the major challenges that face African American youth, families and communities. What we need is an institutional infrastructure to support it. As I have mentioned a number of times before... We can do this! And we can do this in our lifetime!

Let us commit ourselves to doing what we must to heal and rebuild our families and communities! Let us *stop* doing those things that distract us and stand in our way! Our children, and those yet unborn, are depending on us. We have a lot of work to do! - OAM

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