

African American Sensitivities

reflections by Gene Marshall
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On February 23, 2002, C-span broadcast a six-hour of panel discussions by some of the most perceptive African-Americans. Their topic was the role of the African-American community on this side of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. The program was put together by the radio talk show host Tavis Smiley and the panels contained well known people like Cornel West and Alan Sharpton as well as a wide array of men and women, elders and youth, Christians and Muslims, politicians, activists, and university professors.

I was absorbed with the program and remained glued to my television set for the full six hours. Here are some of the things that impressed me most:

That African-Americans who are embedded consciously and actively in their history and in the struggles with slavery and with civil rights possess an important perspective on American society, the perspective of marginalized people who, because of the cruel gift of this marginalization, can see the whole society more objectively. Like the canary in the mine who is used to test the air for the miners, the African American community senses ahead of others the foulness of air and the need to change it.

Here are some of the things which this group saw.

- That patriotism does not mean an uncritical attitude toward American life, but rather a commitment to change our society to fulfill the best impulses of American heritage. Such commitment to the future is true patriotism and not to be confused with right-wing self-righteousness.
- That the rulership of big money and the large corporations over our political life is a serious flaw in our democracy.
- That to be willing to sacrifice civil rights for safety is to risk losing them both.
- That the loss of civil rights will allow creative protests to be treated as terrorists.
- That racism and poverty are a planet-wide challenge that cannot be solved without a planet wide strategy; that injustices anywhere on the planet threaten people everywhere; and that United States and other wealthy nations could play a more pivotal role in the alleviation of this suffering.
- That truth must be told to power, that resistance to injustice is a holy life and must never be avoided.
- That playing the race card in the game of social change is utterly necessary because there are no other cards in the American deck. We must watch the dealer and bring our own deck.
- That local empowerment is also a crucial part of the social transformation picture. Local economic self sufficiency and practical resistance to economic tyranny is worth the hard work involved.
- That spirit rootage, basic integrity, an ordered life, and persistent engagement in active compassion are critical factors in realizing the potentials that African-Americans possess for assisting their own people and for healing the entire American society.
- That a new generation of leadership—of common ordinary grassroots leadership is a priority.
- That Christians are not Christian if they cannot respect and work with their Muslim brothers and sisters.
- That working with and among the entire population, white and black, male and female, young and old is the correct scenario for success.

With these and a number of other such emphases I totally agree. I found myself cheering along with the mostly black audience. Cornel West said that though he is a Christian, when Muslims are oppressed, he identifies with them. "I am a Muslim" he said. In this same sense, I, though Czech, Irish and British am also an African-American. The wellbeing and successful work of African-Americans is my wellbeing and my success.

At the same time, I am somewhat disappointed with my African-American colleagues in their lack of emphasis upon the ecological crisis. Many of them, if asked, would admit that the same forces that are oppressing African-Americans are also oppressing the natural planet.

But poverty and racial justice issues were so much in the forefront of this discussion that little or no attention was paid to the ecological context or with how racial issues and ecological issues might mesh together.

Feminist issues were much more prominently present. On this panel were many intelligent, powerful, and highly respected women. The audience may have been more women and men. Rap music that demeans women was strongly criticized. Sacred care of the temple of the body was also emphasized. Such feminine themes were well integrated with the racial emphasis. Justice for women, for all races, for the poor anywhere in the world—all these themes were meshed together in the sensitivities of these panels.

But ecology appeared with far less force, and perhaps with no force at all in the considerations of some. I consider this lack of sensitivity on the part of African-Americans a challenge to me and to the ecological movements I support. These panels of Spirit-filled and truly giant African-American men and women are in some measure blind to the extent of the ecological crisis and to the ways in which the ongoing devastation of the Earth presents all of us with a new master context for all our issues. This blindness may in some measure be the fault of the ecological movements. Perhaps we who see the centrality of the ecological crisis have not done our job in relating our awarenesses to the awarenesses being emphasized by the most sensitive members of the African-American community. Each set of movements has much to teach the others.

African-Americans can perhaps teach the ecological movements something about confronting power with truth, with making the world listen to an emotionally and spiritually charged truth.

Ecologists can perhaps teach African-American something about the bankruptcy of the entire mode of hierarchical civilization, that survival on this planet for all races and classes of humans depends on us working together in the building of a post-civilizational mode of society that is mutually enhancing with the natural planet. Unless this is done, there are no long-range solutions to our racial or feminine or poverty issues. Ecology is indeed the master context, and this has not been decided by a bunch of Caucasian tree-huggers. This master context has been decided by history, by the full drama of cosmic emergence.