

Our Shared History, Our Common Humanity
By
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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

First let me congratulate you on an impressive quarter century of effort to preserve the history and traditions of people of African descent.

Certainly, this is a very special anniversary. After 25 years, you have established your place as a mature institution that has survived the growing pains and is now ready to expand in breath and depth.

I applaud your commitment to helping all of us to understand our history. This is a critical task because it is the pathway to a greater understanding, appreciation and acceptance of our common humanity.

Too often, humanity seems divided by barriers of all kinds--race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, age and social class—barriers that do little except to blind us to the reality of our common bonds.

With both our hearts and our intellect, we know that as citizens of the universe, we are far more alike than we are different.

It was Samuel L. Johnson, one of the great writers of the 18th Century, and someone who struggled with several disabilities, who made the observation that:

"Men, however distinguished by external accidents or intrinsic qualities, have all the same wants, the same pains, and, as far as the senses are concerned, the same pleasures."

We are all prompted by the same motives, he said, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure."

Recently, there was a story in the news about a two- year old girl who was left alone at home for three weeks, and there been several other cases about parents hurting their children in unspeakable ways.

These stories elicit rage, anger and sadness among the majority of us. Why? Because they run afoul of our own instincts and that of all the people we know.

It is the natural instinct of parents to protect, not harm their offspring. This cuts across the specie regardless of race, culture or ethnicity.

Human beings also cherish a common desire to self-actualize, to reach toward that which we believe will bring us a sense of fulfillment. Many of us go further to make sure that our quest for self actualization is such that it will enrich others and not merely themselves.

And, with relatively few exceptions, we can agree that the citizenry of man wants a peaceful and harmonious world.

These are fundamental desires that have no groundings in race, religion, ethnicity or other social groupings.

Oddly enough, our society, explicitly or implicitly has created no amount of false dichotomies, even as it seemingly embraces the notion of a Fatherhood of God.

Should not this fatherhood of God extend itself to a brotherhood or sisterhood of humankind? Should not this acceptance of a Fatherhood of God extend itself to recognition of the oneness of humankind once we have eradicated all those artificial barriers?

The dichotomies which we create not only polarize, but they stratify the human society. People of color, like ourselves, more often than not, are at

the low end. Our talents, our wisdoms, our cultures, our contribution to civilization, our humanity are too often devalued, if not denied.

The work of groups like the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society is critical in fostering a cultural, psychological and moral re-wiring that will allow more of our truths to be told--in our own voices, and reaffirm the fact that our heritage is one to be embraced with pride.

Our story, the story of African peoples, is a continuous ebb and flow; a story for all the ages, as timeless as eternity in both its substance and reach.

It began in the womb of mother Africa

It has spanned the infinite reaches of the Atlantic

It has melded and gelled in the heart of America

In the far-flung reaches of the Caribbean

Across the length and the breadth of the universe

It is a story of pain and suffering.

It is a story of hope and triumph.

We must embrace it as the core of who we are,
the source of our sustenance and the basis of our quest for peace, harmony
and respect for human dignity throughout the world.

Just over three weeks ago, I participated in a remarkable ceremony at
Howard University's Andrew Rankin Chapel. It was a ceremony signaling
the re-interment of the remains of 400 of our ancestors after undergoing
years of laboratory study at the University.

In case you are unfamiliar with this story, these were the remains of African
Slaves unearthed from an abandoned cemetery in New York more than a
decade ago.

In the process of preparing the ground for a new federal office building,
construction workers discovered what turned out to be a 19th century slave
burying ground.

Howard University was fortunate to have had the opportunity to study those
remains and ultimately gained keen insight into the lives of the earlier
Africans on American soil.

Thirty percent of the remains, it was found, were those of children under the age of two, and another 15 percent was below the age of puberty.

Many of the children were underdeveloped as a result of malnutrition and prolonged illness. There were evidences of hard labor in children as young as six.

Not surprising, the life expectancy of captive Africans was short. Women lived only into the early thirties and men into the mid-thirties.

Among the artifacts recovered was a complex, heart-shaped design made from 93 nails on a coffin lid. Historians identified it as the Sankofa, an Ashanti symbol (Explain the meaning of the Sankofa). It was a direct link to home, particularly the cultures of Ghana and the Ivory Coast.

Another poignant cultural reference was a string of glass beads found with the remains of a young woman. The blue, green and white glass beads, believed to represent water, were meant to help her on the trip to the afterlife, back over the water to Africa and her people.

These artifacts helped us to understand how deeply connected to their culture the Africans remained, a connection that must have been their anchor through the trials they endured.

Today, as people of African descent, we often invoke its greatness as the birthplace of human civilization. But just as often we struggle to understand its maladies.

Like Walter Rodney, the great Pan-Africanist scholar, perhaps, we lament the ravaging of the continent which led to places like the New York Burial Ground, and like Marcus Garvey, we fear and hope all at once, that our destiny is inextricably tied to that of our motherland—that real respect and acknowledgement of our greatness will not come unless the glory of old Africa can be restored.

And we fear that restoration is impossible for a continent that seems too wounded to recover.

We must allow our moments of fear, but let us not forget that we have survived with the core of our humanity still intact.

It is this spirit of triumph that we must maintain as we move forward in this millennium and as you begin the march toward your golden anniversary.

We must not forget that despite its fractiousness, the ideal of the African culture is co-existence and community, and the Strengthening of relationships in the world for the sake of peace and harmony.

It is from that ideal has sprung all of us with our innate dislike for injustice, our instinctive resistance to oppression and the yearning for peace and community that is so integral to our culture.

We must continue the struggle for these ideals within our communities and without.

Like the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, Howard University is dedicated to preserving and promoting the best of our heritage.

Through projects like the just-completed research on the African Burial Ground; the Moorland Spingarn Research Center, which next to the Schomburg Center houses the largest collection of research material on

African heritage; the South African Research and Archival Project (SARAP); and the ongoing study and preservation of art, music, dance, language, history and other characteristics of cultures, Howard continues to make a sterling contribution to an informed understanding of our past and present.

Our programs in Health Sciences, meanwhile, are dedicated to not just to the provision of quality care to the under-served, but to a discovery of causes and development of cures to the diseases that disproportionately affect members of our community.

The recent establishment of the GRAD BIOBANK, a database of African-American DNA, represents groundbreaking work in this area.

We believe that a thorough examination of the all the characteristics that we share is critical to isolating those variables that may lead to a predisposition of certain kinds of pathologies.

Finally, in all of our efforts, the fight for civil rights remains central.

Howard University was founded on this very notion that the “negro” no less so than anyone else, deserves the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that little black children could and should aspire to become teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, members of the clergy; that, as members of the human race, they have every right to live their lives with dignity and respect.

Throughout its storied history, Howard has remained committed to reinforcing these principles because from the very beginning, the founders understood that our destiny as human beings is inseparable.

They understood that a profound understanding of our history can only lead to a profound respect for all of humanity.

It was no less true then, than it is today. Our challenge is to advance those dreams for the advancement of all our people.

I thank you for being a worthy and devoted ally in this process and I wish you every success.

