

Historical Role Models for Today's Black Males

By Jeffrey Harris

I really do not take time to label myself as a follower of an ideology and all that stuff. I just go out and try to do what I believe is right and to develop as a good person. And that is what I try to inspire young people to do as well—to become good people and to do things that they know will not only help themselves, but also their environment. I also want to thank The Heritage Foundation for inviting me here. I am delighted to speak on the last day of the month that commemorates Black History.

In honor of Black History Month I have chosen to lecture on historical role models, speaking to today's black males. Too little is asked of the black male. He must set high standards for himself. In this lecture I examine some of the problems that plague black males, and offer some solutions. I am the executive director of the organization Commitment to the Longevity and Improvement of Male Blacks, CLIMB, Incorporated. Its purpose is to develop self-determination, self-transcendence, self-direction, and self-esteem in black, adolescent males. The organization uses instructional workshops to develop these characteristics. CLIMB offers instruction in writing, drama, literature, and counselling. The organization will expand to enable participants to learn business skills as well.

With the help of historical black role models, I will share attitudes that will deliver the black male from his bondage. I should emphasize that it is his own bondage. I believe that at this particular time many black males are their own worst enemies. The words that I chose from these historical individuals I hope will imbue within and influence the black males to step up in life and accept the challenge to achieve and prosper in this land of opportunity. All the historical black figures I will discuss have achieved in America, despite adversities and despite bitterness, because they wanted a better life. Moreover, their achievements came because of their own initiative and perseverance, not because of affirmative action or government relief programs.

Reading and Morality. Black American males must be taught values that will enhance their ability for individual development, for individual development will provide the strength that they need to survive in a fast-paced world. Through individual development, the black male can stand strong again. Furthermore, he can strengthen his family, his community, his race, and his country. Reading and morality are two essentials for individual development. These must be inculcated as virtues during the early stages of life. Social and psychological research have found that the most crucial years for human development are the beginning years. One reason black males lack individual development is that they do not read for enrichment. Historical black role model Frederick Douglass stated: "When you are working with your hands they grow larger. The same is true for your heads. Seek to acquire knowledge as well as property."¹ Positive black males in the family,

1 Jeremiah Wilson Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism 1805-1925* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1978), p. 26.

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whether immediate or extended members, should make a point of encouraging good reading habits in younger black males. And black males must be taught that morals are to be practiced and not just understood. At home, members of black families should encourage spiritual reading that can reinforce the moral values taught. The Holy Bible is the best spiritual reading available. Young black males can read it as a reinforcement and enrichment of morals already taught. Reading ability and morality are common achievements, but are rare among many black American males. Unfortunately, black American males have moved away from the spiritual emphasis that has been a tradition in and stronghold of their families for centuries. This must be rediscovered, or the black male will not survive.

Historical black role models Malcolm X and Benjamin Banneker became national figures during their time. Both men elevated themselves by individual development. They developed positive initiative and discipline for independent study. These characteristics are lacking in black males. Yet, by family inculcation during the early years of black males, this can change. For black American adolescent males, Malcolm X is an inspiration. However, they have misinterpreted his message. Malcolm's policy was that individual development was essential for the black male's stability and progress in America. He disagreed with able black Americans, especially males—the traditional family leaders—who chose government-dependency over self-dependency.

Benjamin Banneker's curiosity in the 1800s led to his individual development. Banneker became a self-made astronomer, surveyor, and mathematician. Through self-development, Banneker showed that there was a place in America for the black American other than in slavery. Banneker constructed the first American-made clock. He was responsible for the geographical design of America's Capitol here in D.C. And it was his almanac that the most prudent man alluded to. Both Malcolm and Banneker were able to uplift themselves by reading avidly and having high moral standards. Black males must follow suit if they wish to uplift themselves.

Four Responsibilities. Black males must put responsibility as a priority on their agenda. They must recognize where their responsibilities stand. There are four essential responsibilities that black males must address: 1) self, 2) family, 3) community, and 4) race.

Self: Black males are becoming self-destructive. Shelby Steele states: "There are more black males of college age in prison than in college."² A black male in America has one chance in thirty of being murdered. Ninety-four percent of the violent crimes against blacks were committed by other blacks.³ These are just some of the horrors that black males have inflicted upon themselves. Many black males will argue that the remote cause of these vices is institutionalized racism. Well, I disagree. I dare to argue and question. If you cornered a rat, would it scramble out of that corner and seek safety, or commit suicide?

Family: Half of all black family households are female headed. Malcolm said: "To be a father you must take care of your children. To be a husband you must take care of your wife, be a man. To be a man you must take on a man's responsibility."⁴ Black males' failure to fulfill family responsibilities have changed the complexion of black male and female relationships. Black females are becoming independent of their mates. This makes black males insecure and uncomfortable in the relationship. But they must accept this. They must accept black females as equal partners and

2 Shelby Steele, "Booker T. Washington Was Right," *New Reform* (Fall 1990) p. 23.

3 Joseph Perkins, ed., *A Conservative Agenda for Black Americans*. (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1985), p. 32.

4 "Autobiography of Malcolm X," Videocassette.

they must allow them independence if they wish to sustain the black family. It is the black male's call to preserve the black family.

Black males are responsible for many of the vices occurring in the black community. They are responsible for the drug traffic, homicides, and robberies. To counter these vices influential blacks in the community need to fight for community action. They must spearhead community prevention organizations and take back their streets.

Black males must become responsible for their race. Their responsibility is to preserve their heritage and be progressive. They cannot accomplish this by participating in the vices that have plagued them. Historical role model George Washington Carver exemplifies race responsibility. Booker T. Washington wrote Carver, "Carver, you are needed desperately by your race at Tuskegee." Carver responded, "I am coming." Carver's decision was made despite his knowing that lesser conditions awaited him at Tuskegee. Carver by doing agricultural research at Tuskegee advanced his race and the world.

Commitment to Education. Black males failing to progress through the educational system is not because of the curriculum of white America. Negative environments and parental non-involvement are two of the negative attributes. Parents must invest in the children's education and they must commit themselves to their children's academic achievement. Negative environments are the prejudices against black males. Black males must be exposed to good study habits, and not drug use and drug selling. Black males need parents who will monitor their education. Shelby Steele stated: "Black parents must demand that their children work extremely hard in school. They must make sure that their children are well-loved, challenged and rewarded for learning."⁵ Historical role model Marcus Garvey regarded education as the highest priority and the vehicle for progress. This must be reinforced by black parents and encouraged in black males during early childhood. For years, black parents' non-involvement has been one major hindrance to the education of black males. Black males' failure to progress in the educational system is not because there are few black male educators or that there are too many uncaring white educators teaching in black schools. Shelby states: "Resources for school do not follow color. They follow activism and effort."⁶ Decentralized public school policy seems imminent. The system demands parents' input and parents' participation in the decision-making process. Thus, without black parents' involvement and competency, education in the black community and for blacks will be doomed.

Frank Mickens, principal of Boys and Girls High School in New York City, stated, "Staff commitment and dedication and parent development are the key." They are the key elements to a successful educational program. Boys and Girls High School is located in New York City's Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. It has a 98 percent black student population, 2 percent Hispanic. Drug use and sales are a way of life for black males in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Five years ago Mickens became principal. At that time, the school was considered lawless and listed among the worst schools in the New York City area. Today the school is a model for schools throughout the nation. Mickens says he commits fourteen to fifteen hours a day, six days a week, to do his job. One of his commitments is to fight against the teenage ghetto look. Large, gold jewelry dangling from earlobes and around necks was banned. Expensive and stylish coats were also banned when he learned that a city female student was shot because she did not want to relinquish her coat. Mickens then regulated a dress code for boys to enhance their self-esteem. His "dress for success"

5 Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

6 Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

code prepares students for corporate America. Students who were once considered "at risk" are now making the honor roll. More than 300 of the 3,000 or more students have an eighty or better average with no failures. They are honored at a special "Night of Superstars" dinner and given awards. Black parents in Bedford-Stuyvesant and the teachers support Mickens. As a result, a positive learning environment is created for black males and other students.

Accepting America. The failure for many black males to live in America and not accept America as an opportunity keeps them from progressing. Their belief that justice will never be granted, and their acceptance of confusing dialogue uttered by some contemporary black leaders will cause them to remain masters of their own slavery. Historical black role model Thomas Fortune stated, "As an American citizen I feel reborn in my nature to share of the fullest measure all that is America."⁷ This is the attitude that American black males must adopt. They must begin mining the jewels of America.

But first, black males must recognize America as their home. They must know that what they hate is what their forefathers built. They must admit that their regression and stagnation are their own prejudices. Garvey stated: "Prejudice is conditional on many reasons, and it is apparent that the black American supplies, consciously or unconsciously, all the reasons by which the world seems to ignore and avoid him. No one cares for a leper, for lepers are infectious persons, and all people are afraid of the disease. So, because the Negro keeps himself poor, helpless, and undemonstrative, it is natural also that no one wants to be for him or with him."⁸ Historical role model Booker T. Washington was able to mine the jewels offered in America because he was able to accept it as his home. Washington saw America as an opportunity for black Americans. He believed that black Americans had to offer America what it needed. If the American market needed skilled men and women with industrial skills, he said, then blacks should develop those skills. Washington's mission when he opened Tuskegee Institute was to teach his fellow black man the skills needed to prosper in America. He did that.

As long as the grass roots black American keeps rejecting America and waits for the ships to take him back to Africa, he will never be able to prosper. His communities will always be blanketed with decadence, and those who prosper will continue to move out of them. Joshua Smith, Executive Director of Maxima Corporation, stated: "We [black males] do not see the benefits of hard work." He said that this must be taught for their survival and progress in America. Grass roots black Americans must learn that positive, hard work in America reaps positive rewards. If a black male who sells drugs refocuses that energy, dedication, and time he uses in selling drugs to a positive business adventure, he will most likely become a successful businessman. Historical role model Langston Hughes stated: "This is my land, America. Naturally, I love it. It is home." This is what the grass roots black male must believe before he can rise above poverty. Hughes' short stories convey that there is a place for the black man in America. But only when he asserts his own initiative will he be able to find that place.⁹



7 John Hope Franklin and August Meier, eds., *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 24.

8 Amy Jacques-Garvey, ed., *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), p. 22.

9 Rayford W. Logan, ed., *What the Negro Wants* (New York: Agathon Press, Inc., 1969), p. 69.