

EDITORIALS • COMMENTS • OPINIONS

Child Watch

A Call To Black Families

By Marian Wright Edelman
NNPA Columnist

The distinguished theologian Howard Thurman once described an oak tree in his childhood yard with leaves that each autumn turned yellow and died but stayed on the branches all winter. Nothing—neither wind, storm, sleet, nor snow—dislodged these dead leaves from the apparently lifeless branches. Dr. Thurman came to understand that the business of the oak tree during the long winter was to hold on to the dead leaves before turning them loose in spring so that new buds—the growing edge—could begin to unfold. At winter’s end, what wind, storm, sleet, or snow could not force off passed quietly away to become the tree’s nourishment.

My parents were like that oak tree. Throughout most of our history, most Black families have been like that oak tree. Despite enormous assaults and pressures, Black parents and elders remained determined to hold on and persevere long enough to prepare the next generation and give them a better life. During Black History Month, many Americans take time to remember the achievements of amazing Black individuals. But, Black families deserve their own praise for all we’ve accomplished. At the same time, we need a new call to action, because our children are facing what I and many believe is the worst crisis since slavery—and need adults’ strength and influence more than ever.

Black people devoted to family saw us through the unspeakable assault of slavery. Beloved historian John Hope Franklin and others have reminded us that traditional myths about slavery destroying Black families are a lie: the slavery system and individual slave owners may have done their very best to try to destroy the families in their control, but it didn’t work. When slave owners tried to mate us for childbearing, we made our own systems of traditional marriages and commitments. When they tried to treat parents

and children as nothing more than disposable and interchangeable property, we learned to honor and revere our mothers, fathers, and ancestors and to see our children as children of God.

We’ve all heard stories of the lengths many newly-freed slaves went through after Emancipation to try to be reunited with family, sometimes traveling for hundreds of miles in desperate attempts to find loved ones. At the same time, we also learned to create other networks of extended family and near-family that laid the foundation for strong Black communities and nurturing Black children. Families saw us through Reconstruction and did their best to shield and protect children during the dark days of Jim Crow, mob rule, and lynchings. Throughout segregation, many Black families and communities reminded children they had dignity and worth. Long before the phrase became popular, our mothers and grandmothers took their time braiding our hair, neatly pressing our clothes, and reminding us every day that Black was beautiful. During the Civil Rights Movement, many Black families fought together every step of the way. Many parents participated in the struggle for an end to segregated schools and facilities because they knew they wanted a better education and world for their children. In Birmingham, Alabama, Jackson, Mississippi, and across the South, Black children marched and were attacked right alongside and often without their parents.

Our families have seen us through many crises, but there have also been threats to Black family stability and reports of Black family breakdown throughout our history. Drugs, poverty, violence, and unequal opportunity have battered our families mightily. But, many of us who are committed to strengthening Black families believe the forces undermining Black family life are turning in a dangerous way, and many Black children are treading through treacherous new territory. A toxic cocktail of poverty,

illiteracy, racial disparity, violence, out of wedlock birth, and massive incarceration is sentencing millions of children of color to dead end, powerless, and hopeless lives and threatens to undermine the past half century of racial and social progress. Those of us who see the threads of our families, neighborhoods, and social networks fraying under the burden just as our children need us most know we need to reweave the fabric of family and community that supported us and got us this far. This is why we’ve launched the second phase of the Black Community Crusade for Children (BCCC).

The Black family has been the strongest defense Black children have had throughout our history, and must become so again to help lead this crusade. Our children have been nurtured and protected in the past as best as we could because of the hard work of committed and determined Black adults—and today, it’s our turn. Too many Black adults have gone AWOL and need to come home to family. We’ve already withstood powerful storms and we will withstand this new and dangerous storm by banding together as a Black community to protect all of our children. As the words of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” remind us, we’ve come over a way that with tears has been watered. We’ve treaded our path through the blood of the slaughtered. We’ve already come this far on the way, and it is not time to stray or let our children down on our watch. Wake up and stand up for our children who are asking for and deserve our help.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children’s Defense Fund whose *Leave No Child Behind®* mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.

Oscar Season A Repudiation For African- American People

By Julianne Malveaux

Months ago, we knew that there would be no African-American Oscar winners, mainly because we knew there were no Oscar nominees. What a denouement from that glorious year when both Denzel Washington and Halle Berry were winners for films that, if flawed, celebrated their artistic genius.

While the Oscars have not been an equal opportunity experience, there have been celebrated nominations and wins that have lifted up African Americans in film, and it may be a mistake to take just one year and turn it into a trend. Still.

What do films depict? In some ways they are reflections of our hopes, dreams, visions, fantasies and realities. Those who “green light” films offer opportunities to films that resonate – a stuttering king, a troubled ballerina. Those of us who know writers and thinkers in the African American world know there are equally compelling figures, but those who see film often reflect the sensibilities of their own age. In other words, what did it take for someone to decide that The Great Debaters would be a film that resonated? Why has Tyler Perry had to go the independent route? Who interprets culture and reality? Through which prism do they view the world? What do they see?

I think this question is especially pointed during this Great Recession,

when there are such compelling economic stories that can be cast in a comedic and/or a dramatic light. I know that entertainment is partially about escapism, not just reality. Why else would a king’s stutter be more compelling than a sister’s foreclosure?

Still, if I could give a green light, I’d ask someone to dramatize the story that Iyanla Vanzant tells in her latest book, *Peace from Broken Pieces*. How does a nationally acclaimed spiritual leader, teacher, and commentator emerge from a woman who has been broken, battered, abandoned and then some? Isn’t there some drama there? Why not tell that story?

Or if a king is so compelling, what about a queen? Why not tell the stories of the African-American women in Black History who have made tremendous contributions. If we can talk about Ray Charles through Jamie Foxx, what about Cathy Hughes through Angela Bassett?

Imagine the resonance of an entrepreneur so dedicated to her dream that she slept in the radio studio when she could not afford rent so she could keep her dream alive. Or what about Maggie Lena Walker, the woman who founded Penny Savings Bank in Richmond, a woman with a scant second grade education? Can we get some drama from the story of Elizabeth Keckley, the seamstress who supported a dissipated white master and his 17 relatives with her needle, a woman who bought her own freedom, became the confidant of First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, and only fell out with her

when she wrote a book because she needed the money?

Popular culture does not lift these women up, no matter how dramatic their stories, because we have not often been able to bridge the racial divide in drama, culture, and entertainment. Whatever is compelling in these stories is often muted by the racial aptitudes that shackle our nation.

Thus, it is more interesting to learn of a British king who can’t speak the King’s English than an enslaved man like Frederick Douglas whose elocution inspires a nation. We could put the Frederick Douglas story on film, but we’d have to deal with the miscegenation that makes many uncomfortable, the Black man, the White wife, the cultural barriers. Better to run to England with a stuttering King.

I’m not mad at Colin Firth and *The King’s Speech*, but I’m mad at a Hollywood that won’t take chances, a Hollywood that won’t lead with the films that are “green lighted”. If films reflect our turgid reality and our royal fantasies, not the vision for a redemptive future, then films hold us back instead of moving us forward. This Oscar season is an exciting season for many individual artists. It is repudiation for African- American people.

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The Misinformation Campaign Against Public Employees

By George E. Curry
NNPA Special Correspondent

After listening to the governor of Wisconsin and financially illiterate journalists, its easy to gain the impression that city, county, state, and federal employees are overpaid slouches who benefit from hefty pension and generous retirement benefits funded by unsuspecting taxpayers.

Such a conclusion, however, is grossly inaccurate. Many of the misperceptions about government workers stem from the heated debate in Wisconsin over whether the state should limit the collective bargaining power of state employees. One constant refrain is that public employees are overpaid.

According to an analysis of recent census data by the *New York Times*, public employees enjoy a pay advantage over those working in the private sector, but not because of the reasons cited by opponents of collective bargaining.

“The Times’s analysis found that over all, median wages for state workers exceeded that of private sector workers in all but three states – Indiana, Missouri, and New Hampshire,” the newspaper reported. “Those numbers, however, can be deceptive. State workers tend to be more highly educated than those in the private sector: More than half of state workers have college degrees, compared to just over one-quarter of those in the private sector. Researchers have also said that states tend to employ few high school dropouts.”

In Wisconsin, the epicenter for the debate over public employees, government pay exceeds private sector pay by 22 percent. But, more than 60 percent of state workers hold college degrees.

Public workers are paid four to 11 percent less than private-sector workers with similar education, job tenure, and other characteristics, according to the Center for State & Local Government Excellence.

The Center on Budget and Policy reports that teachers make up the largest share of local and state government workers, totalling 6.9 million, followed by protective services (law enforcement officers and fire fighters) with 2.5 million, higher education (2 million) and health (1.4 million).

Some experts project that pension shortfalls will reach as high as \$3.2 trillion this fiscal year. However, Dean Baker of the Center for Economic Policy & Research, dismisses that likelihood.

“...It is worth noting that the size of the shortfall in many of these funds has likely already been reduced as a result of the fact that the stock market has continued to recover from its downturn in 2008 and 2009,” he said.

Part of the debate over public employees is based on raw politics. “In many states, Republicans who came to power in the November elections, often by defeating union-backed Democrats, are taking aim not only at union wages, but union power as they face budget gaps in the years ahead,” the *New York Times* reported.

Wisconsin is one of those states. “On paper, Wisconsin might seem an unlikely candidate for an assault on unions,” a story in the February 18 *New York Times* observed. “Like many other states, it has grappled with large spending gaps during the economic downturn, but its projected deficits for the next two years are nowhere near the worst in the country – more like the middle of the pack. Its 7.5 percent unemployment rate is below the national average. Its pension fund is considered one of the healthiest in the nation, and it is not suffering from huge shortfalls that other states are facing.”

Perhaps the most misleading aspect of the debate is that Wisconsin is giving state employees something that they have not earned.

David Cay Johnson destroys that myth in a column posted on www.tax.com.

“When it comes to improving public understanding or tax policy, nothing has been more troubling than the deeply flawed coverage of the Wisconsin state employees’ fight over collective bargaining,” he writes. “Economic nonsense is being reported as fact in most of the news reports on the Wisconsin dispute, the product of a breakdown of skepticism among journalists multiplied by their lack of understanding of basic economic principles.”

He continued, “Gov. Scott Walker says he wants state workers covered by collective bargaining agreements to ‘contribute more’ to their pension and health insurance plans. Accepting Gov. Walker’s assertions as fact, and failing to check, created the impression that somehow the workers are getting something extra, a gift from taxpayers. They are not.

“Out of every dollar that funds Wisconsin’s pension and health insurance plans for state workers, 100 cents comes from the state workers. How can that be? Because the ‘contributions’ consist of money that employees chose as deferred wages – as pensions when they retire – rather than take immediately in cash. The same is true with the health care plan. If this were not so a serious crime would be taking place, the gift of public funds rather than payment for services.”

Johnson provides this simple analysis: “...State workers are not being asked to simply ‘contribute more’ to Wisconsin’s retirement system (or as the argument goes, ‘pay their fair share’ of retirement costs as do employees in Wisconsin’s private sector who still have pensions and health insurance). They are being asked to accept a cut in their salaries so that the state of Wisconsin can use the money to fill the hole left by tax cuts and reduced audits of corporations in Wisconsin.”

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Why Should We Care About The Arab Democratic Revolt?

By Bill Fletcher, Jr.
NNPA Columnist

The momentous democratic revolt sweeping the Arab World has captured the interest and imagination of millions. The energy and courage of the participants has inspired movements in other parts of the world, including in our own Wisconsin (with the fight against the governor’s attacks on public sector workers).

The Arab democratic revolt has the potential to change global politics. This is absolutely no exaggeration. The governments that are facing their people’s wrath are—with the exception of Iran, and to some extent Libya—governments that have been in the pocket of the U.S.A., in some cases for decades. They have been allies of various U.S. administrations and have helped the U.S. government to move otherwise unpopular policies in North Africa and the Middle East. While various U.S. administrations have mouthed about democracy, they have been quite comfortable holding hands with governments in North Africa and the Middle East that demonstrate not a shred of respect for democratic rights.

Therefore, what is important for us to understand is that it is quite

possible that the U.S.A. may lose key allies in North Africa and the Middle East and, for the first time in decades, actually have to negotiate new relationships based on mutual respect with countries that they have treated as vassal states.

It is also important to recognize that the Arab democratic revolt has been Al Qaeda’s worst nightmare. Consider for a moment that the revolts, although including Islamist forces (in many cases) have not been religious revolts or religiously inspired revolts. They have been a response to the economic and political injustices that people have suffered for years. In fact, in a courageous and historic act of solidarity, Coptic Christians in Egypt protected Muslims during a Friday prayer against the forces of then dictator Mubarak. There had been a fear that during prayer Mubarak’s internal security units would attack. The Coptic Christians indicated that they would not let that happen.

Finally, these revolts are not revolts that were the result of outside forces, except and insofar as you acknowledge the role of the Internet and social media sites such as Facebook. The reality is that it has been the people of these countries, often inspired by hearing

about or reading about uprisings in other countries, who have taken their respective futures into their own hands. This step is monumental, thus making this what is often called a “teachable moment.” We can learn from the example of the Arab people, for instance, that despite immense, if not overwhelming difficulties, that it is possible to successfully resist and create a better world.

We not only have much to learn from the Arab democratic revolt, but we should also find ways to offer our support. If history is any standard, the U.S. government will do what it can to win the new governments back into the fold of the West rather than treating these new governments as sovereign partners who have chosen a different course. Obama and Congress need to accept this understanding and they will if and when Black America and other people of good will speak out in a chorus of millions.

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