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LESSONS FROM KERNER FOR THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

Forty years after the Kerner Commission report is a time for reflection. When I was a kid, my parents made me read Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-education of the Negro*. He had a saying in it that I've always remembered: "The primary cause of human suffering is forgetfulness."

The most important thing for young people is to know from whence we've come, to know our history, to know the struggles, the sacrifices, the fights that had to go into getting us to where we are right now.

With any fair analysis of history, you begin to realize that we are great beneficiaries of the labors of the previous generation, that indeed we drink deeply from wells that we did not dig. If there's anything to draw from that understanding, it's that so much was sacrificed to get us here that we have an obligation to continue to empower our country, to make a more perfect union, to improve upon our democracy.

This can't be a spectator sport, so to speak. It has to be a participatory politics, a participatory struggle. That is the only way we are going to make real what young people say every single day in school – that we are "one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all." Those words right now are aspirational. They necessitate, they demand that this generation take up the fight to make real those words.

At the core of the fight for social justice, in our history and around our globe, from the students who stood up at Tiananmen Square (China) and fought for democracy, to the students in the uprising in Soweto fighting against apartheid, to the students who were in Birmingham in early May of '63 fighting against Bull Connor for

justice, there's something powerful and dynamic within young people that I don't think time changes.

I believe that what you find in the 18-year-olds and the 17-year-olds of this generation, of 2008, called the Millennial Generation, is similar to the things that you found in the X-generation and that you found in Baby Boomers before us.

Young African American men have a unique set of challenges. We live in a distraught present where gross percentages of young black men are ending up jobless or in prison or victims of crime. The No. 1 cause of death for young black men is murder. Let's not avoid the facts of the matter, but instead allow the facts to fuel the search for solutions.

I'm inspired by the young black men I see today who are demanding opportunities for a better education. But I'm also inspired by the young black men I see involved in the drug trade or gangs. Both of them are calling for the same thing. One is calling out of a space of strength and one is calling out of a space of weakness, but they are both yearning for justice.

We've got to answer that call as a community. We can't be about trying to affix or assign blame. We've got to become a society that's much more about accepting responsibility.

None of our problems are going to be solved by black men or by white soccer moms or by this X generation or by immigrants alone. What's going to solve our problems is going to be the collective yearnings and insistency of our country.

This is the message I've enjoyed hearing espoused by Barack Obama, that I'm inspired to see resonating among such diverse populations throughout our country. We are the United States of America. Inherent in that understanding is that the only way our nation will thrive is if we stay united in a common cause, a definite sense of purpose and a willingness to sacrifice for our goal.

Let us not seek as a people to transcend

race. We are a great nation because of race, religion and culture. As Cornel West so eloquently said in a speech here in Newark recently, "we don't want to sanitize, homogenize and deodorize America." We want to have an America that is fully enriched and inculcated in the wonderful diversity and the glorious texture of America. We want to be a country that has a deep Italian culture, a Greek culture, a glorious Korean culture, a wonderful, thriving African American culture whose people know their history and their culture. All these things are blessings. We need to celebrate them, learn from them and know that they are our strength.

We need to immerse ourselves in our own respective cultures and emerge on the other side with a deeper understanding of who we are and with a deeper love of humanity as a whole. That's the gift of diversity. The beauty of the next generation is its diversity, Filipinos mixing with Haitians mixing with African Americans mixing with Europeans. We need to celebrate, not transcend these cultures.

I gravitated toward public service early. I grew up seeing parents who lived service in everything they did, who fed me an understanding from an early age that this was the greatest aspiration of any individual – to live a life of service. I thought it would be in the non-profit world up until my 20s. It wasn't until I turned 30 that I realized I was going to try my hand at elective office.

I've dedicated myself to the cause of healing wounds, bridging gaps, dealing with the unfinished business of democracy. I feel like I'm blessed. I'm on the front lines of the American dream. I'm not sure where I could go to be more effective in trying to make the kind of change I want to make. □

Cory Booker was elected mayor of Newark, NJ, in 2006. Prior to his election he was a Newark City Council member and a community activist.