

Editor's Note

I am currently involved in teaching a course “Transcommunal Cooperation in Multicultural settings” for a group of men—Latino, African-American, Native American, and White—who are incarcerated at Deuel Vocational Institution or DVI (also known as “Tracy State Prison”) in California. We developed this course as a response to the positive initiative of this coalition of men who are working across ethnic lines. Their cooperation amongst themselves is a living transcommunal model of constructive engagement that provides a positive counterweight to ethnic tensions, competition, and conflict in the prisons and the wider society. The course is also facilitated by the work of the community organization Barrios Unidos (United Neighborhoods) which has been bringing constructive cultural programs to Tracy for years. Barrios Unidos has a long record of bringing Latino, African American, and other communities together in the search for an end to violence in our neighborhoods and for positive social-economic strategies to revitalize our communities. The essay below was sent to me by Mr. Nate Williams, who is incarcerated at Tracy, is a student in the class, and is one of the key creators of this educational coalition initiative along with Mr. Ernest M. Barela, Mr. Michael F. deVries and many others.

-John Brown Childs 1 May 2008

Black and Brown: Violence and Peacemaking among African-Americans and Latinos in Compton, California—the Hub City

By Nate Williams

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(Writing from DVI, Tracy State Prison, California)

From Deep Within the Belly of the Beast...

What is it with the Hub City today?

Why do we hate and kill each other at a rate that's disproportionately higher than that of other people? Sure, we've heard the excuses before that we're “prone to crime, violent by nature, poor and oppressed”—but what are the real causes?

Here we are, countless articles and news reports later, and our precious communities are still in a state of distress. It seems that the problem of black vs. brown crime doesn't seem to be improving, but rather is steadily getting worse by the day. But what is really going on?

It is apparent to the observant eye that more than not we're acting in the way that we're expected to act. That is, we are fulfilling a role in society that is decided and encouraged by people other than us—African Americans and Latinos. All we need to do is to look at television or listen to the radio to experience the sobering statistics or the self-hating mess of *!#\$&*! that now passes as black/brown “entertainment” on the evidently racist major networks to confirm this fact. Thuggishness and gangsterism, misogyny, brutality, and ignorance are now virtually synonymous with black/brown life in the eyes of many, both inside and outside of our communities, as a result of both our actions and of the way in which corporate America sanctions and glorifies negative images and behavior.

Our worst attributes are always awarded, paraded, and celebrated by those whose job it is to keep us in a state of distress.

“Harsh” you say?

Hardly.

Fear of non-whites is a big business in America. Television “entertainment reality” shows like “Cops” and virtually all news broadcasts amplify the manifestation of that fear and the acceptance of its so-called remedies like an increased police presence, more prison construction, and the passage of “tougher” laws that reduce the flexibility of the courts. Besides, do you think that black/brown life really matters to those in control? Do you think that they care if we kill each other off?

We must understand that our focus and priorities need to change. Nobody can be relied upon to care about us but Us. This should be obvious to all of us by now. Things that many in our communities seem to imitate and emulate (“game,” “pimping” “the life”—all about exploitation of ourselves by ourselves--). Enough of this. Do you think that the bank, the phone company, or a prospective employer cares about your street game; your pimping? The game so many want to play in our communities may make you seem cute in the eyes of shallow folks but what you know is more important than how you look or act. Contrary to popular belief both inside and outside our neighborhoods, being slick and shady is a dead end. Only through education and hard work will we move beyond simply survival on the street to our success as communities and peoples.

Meanwhile the mass media (music, movies, television) are contributing factors to the self-destructive paths being walked by so many in our communities. But criticizing the media or even changing it are not the only solutions. Many of us have a pent-up rage that easily triggers aggression that often results from a combustible blend of cultural and racial baggage that we carry.

What we need to do now is to break out of the framework of self-destruction expected of us which is abetted by the centers of power. Angry black and brown men without focus are not a threat to anyone but ourselves and have become objects of ridicule both among those inside and those outside our communities. Again...who cares if we kill each other off?

We must care!

It can be argued that black/brown life is viewed by many as being worthless. So it should come as no surprise that many studies confirm that the punishment blacks/browns receive when the victims of violent crime are white is far more severe than if the victims of African American or Latino. Add to this the lack of economic opportunity, a deep sense of powerlessness, and alienation that many of us experience from our early youth, and the picture becomes all-too-clear that society is not set up for our benefit.

We have to make our own way.

And in order to get on that way we must first respect each other and ourselves. "Easier said than done" you say? Why? Everything is easier when we get along, when people in different communities can respect one another and work together, especially since it appears that there are those in this society who do not want us to do exactly that. The name of the real game now is to be focused. Stay focused not only on the present but on your future too. How many young folks today can't envision themselves older than 25? How plan for any future at all?

The devaluation of black/brown life by systematic racism and the media encourages many of us to have disrespect for life and to act out our aggressions on others with the victims being women and other black/brown men. When this happens we all loose.

And what about gangs and drugs? The introduction of crack cocaine by the CIA into our communities during the 1980's made black/brown youth gangs bigger and more dangerous than they had ever been before. The illicit profit of drug trafficking provided and continues to provide, vicious incentives for those of us without direction, opportunity, or hope to murder ourselves. In fact much of the recent escalation of murder rates in many inner city areas in America can be directly traced to busted drug deals, competition over markets, and disputes over territory and bruised egos.

So what must we do? We must take responsibility, first and foremost for both ourselves as individuals and as communities and collectivities. We must understand that our black/brown brothers and sisters are not our enemies. Again--we have no one to look out for us but us. When you see wrong speak on it and intervene. Reach out to your friends and families if they are at risk and be receptive to other people's points of view if you are feeling like violence is the only alternative. You just might save your life or the

life of someone you know. Let's bring back the peace, love, and soul in Compton that was once all we knew.