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Brunswick School Department, Brunswick, ME



Multicultural Education

The Conversation

February 2019

The Culture of the American Dream

“Dreams”

By Langston Hughes

*Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.*

*Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow*

“A Dream Deferred”

By Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

*Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
Like a syrupy sweet?*

*Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.*

Or does it explode?

“The Rose that Grew From Concrete”

By Tupac Shakur

*Did you hear about the rose that grew
from a crack in the concrete?
Proving nature’s law is wrong it
learned to walk without having feet.
Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams,
it learned to breathe fresh air.
Long live the rose that grew from concrete
when no one else ever cared.*

Editor’s note:

Before getting into education, I spent 10 years as a reporter. I was fortunate to meet people from all walks of life and to share their stories. I have spent a night playing cards in a homeless shelter in Roseville, CA, and I have spent an evening at a fete for then Walt Disney Company CEO Michael Eisner in San Francisco. During the past 25 years in education, I have been inspired by students from all economic strata whose backgrounds run the gamut from dirt-floor hogans on the Navajo Reservation and shelters and subsidized housing in Maine to posh digs on New York’s Fifth Avenue, Chicago’s Lake Shore Drive, and in cities around the world.

As a current commissioner on the Lewiston Housing Authority Board, I continue to be fortunate to encounter inspiring people. They all have something in common: **DREAMS**, and people who help make those dreams happen. More often than not, those people are teachers. The following pages are just two such stories that show that sometimes the greatest satisfaction comes from the most distant starting points and the most unlikely encounters. Know that every child has a dream, and know that you are part of that dream. I thank both Michel Bamani and Jason Versey for generously allowing me to share their messages:



Michel Bamani is a former student of King Middle School in Portland, ME and a graduate of Bowdoin College and Boston University School of Law. He serves on the board of English for New Bostonians and works as a financial attorney for State Street Corporation. Michel speaks Lingala, Swahili, and French in addition to English. Michel frequently returns to Bowdoin College as one of his many ongoing commitments to helping others.



Jason Versey is a former resident of Hillview Apartments, a public housing property in Lewiston, ME. Currently a divisional sales manager for Liquid Environmental Solutions in Texas, Jason recently moved his family to Topsham and splits his time between Texas and Maine. He is the author of *A Walk With Prudence* and a former contributor for the Huffington Post. Jason is committed to helping residents of his childhood public housing complex.

The following is from a keynote speech by Michel Bamani at a Cum Laude Society induction ceremony (excerpted and shared with permission from the author):

...

Before I go on further, I would also like to thank all of the teachers, staff and administrators in the audience. All of them wake up very morning, take extra time, more than they are required to -- away from their family and friends, to be with you all, to assure that you have all the resources and help you with what you need. Their biggest goal every day is YOUR success. So when you get a chance, before you leave the halls of this place, say THANK YOU to one of them.

...

I have decided to have a conversation with you all about two things -- 1) Dream and 2) Work. Now please close your eyes. - - Go ahead, close your eyes. Imagine yourself at 25 years old. Where in the world are you living, what city, what country? Who are your closest friends? What is your relationship with your parent or parents? Who are the most important people in your life? What are you doing for a living? What is your reputation? What impact are you having on the world? Now open your eyes. From now, I want you to achieve those dreams you just had.

...

Why do I believe dreaming is so important? Because a dream is a self-image, a manifestation of what YOU think of YOURSELF. No one can combat your dreams, no one can argue against it, no one can deter them, unless YOU let them. A dream is a powerful force and world in which you tell yourself what you want to become, who you want to be. Now a dream is nothing but a fantasy, unless you work hard on making it become a reality.

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The following is from a Huffington Post piece, "Privilege is Not White or Black," by Jason Versey (excerpted and shared with permission from the author):

I need to understand this. This ongoing narrative about "White Privilege" has me completely and utterly perplexed. I don't consider myself to be the smartest person in the world, but here is a simple man's perspective...

It was the 70's, and we lived on food stamps and government assistance programs. I grew up in the projects amid drugs, alcoholism, prostitution, domestic violence, neglect, poverty, sexual abuse, and racism.

My father, who was black, fled the state after beating and stabbing my mother ... I was two. My mother, who is white, raised three children (**on her own**) but made one poor decision after another, exposing us children to things that no child should ever be exposed to, and those haunting memories have left an indelible imprint on our lives.

Incidentally, I witnessed both black and white men abuse my mom. Although we loved her unconditionally, she was often acrimonious, frequently depressed and would regularly spout cruel, unimaginable, venomous, racially charged things toward my younger sister and me — we both had the same father, and we were "little dark" reminders of the physical and emotional pain he had caused her. My oldest sister is four years older than me and had a different father. She is white and regularly got into fist fights at school because other white kids would call her a "n... lover." She grew up angry, resentful, and held us culpable for much of her troubles. My experience with racism is quite different than most because I felt its sting both in and out of my home.

...

That being said, to blame a generation of people today for the sins of a few ignorant people of yesterday would be completely counter productive to a peaceful civil movement of consciousness that has been pushing this country forward (continued on next page)

Let me tell you a story about someone who at different stages of his life, only had two things for going for himself: dreams and hard work. -- Let me tell you my story. I was born and raised in the Democratic Republic of Congo in a town called Bukavu. My dad was the CEO of a shoe company and we had comfortable life. I was going to a Jesuit, private school and spent my weekends doing what kids did, playing outside with friends. I wasn't a particularly good student, until about the third grade. My dad sat me down and showed me his third grade report card -- he was an excellent student. He told me the importance of doing well in school and how his life is only possible because he applied himself.

So I began my journey of dreams and hard work. Like most 9-year-olds, my dad was (and still is) my idol, so I decided to be just like him and started to apply myself. By the end of third grade, I was first in my class and got involved in after school activities (theater and choir).

Then in 1995, my life completely changed. The Congo went through a civil war, and we lost everything

-- my dad's company got seized, and my mom was being chased by the government due to her ethnic origins from Rwanda. We began a life of exile. We moved to the capital far away from my hometown. Every three months we had to move just to avoid being found by the government. My mom did not leave the house for three years other than going from one house to another to stay hidden.

Throughout this whole time, my parents kept us in school because they said education is the most important thing you can have. I also dreamt then, but those were dreams of peace and life stability. After my parents were imprisoned a couple times, they decided that we had to leave our place of birth. Within one week, we went from a house in the Congo to a refugee camp in the Congo and then to another camp in Benin. We first lived in a tent and then in a brick building where you can fit three mattresses and nothing else -- at least we had peace.

So I continued dreaming. When we left the Congo, we had a total of three suitcases for six people to fit our lives in --so naturally my dad grabbed enough clothes to last each of us a week and our diplomas. No family photos, no souvenirs, just clothes and diplomas and grade reports.

We arrived in America in February of 2000. None of us spoke English and I was 14 years old. My dream journey continued, and I dreamt of speaking English well, attending a great college and becoming a lawyer.

My first week of schooling in ESL, I did well on a complex multiplication problem. When my ESL teacher asked me how I did it so quickly, by hand, the only English words I knew to say were, "I like math." But I wanted to say that I had studied math my whole life. My ESL teacher looked at my transcripts from the Congo and saw that I had done well (from the third grade on) and decided that I should move to a higher ESL level despite my English not being up to par. This allowed me to be exposed to much more advanced English speakers and to
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and beyond the ugliness of racism for the past seventy years. I just won't do it.

I share this with you, dear reader, not for purposes of solicitousness or pity but simply for background and perspective. I want you to know EXACTLY where I'm coming from as I make my next few points. I have a confession to make. Despite what I experienced as a kid, I want you all to know that **"I AM PRIVILEGED"** and I make no excuses for it.

First and foremost, it is my PRIVILEGE to live in the U.S.A. Regardless of my brown skin color, my difficult childhood and or the disadvantages I experienced growing up. **By some miraculous lottery of the universe...I,** the spirit of me, was born a citizen of the United States. What an incredible gift. To me, it is the greatest country on the planet. It is a country that has allotted me certain unalienable rights that offer Life, Liberty and the PURSUIT of **(not the guarantee of)** Happiness, which is much, much more than what is offered by many other nations. I am free to worship how I want, to live how I want, to say what I want.

I am not a victim of the system. I am not a victim of somebody else's privilege or of anything else for that matter. I blame no one for the circumstances of my life ... not my absent father, not my mother, not my government, not Republicans, not Democrats, not my employer, not my neighbors, not my wife, not my children, not any one -- black, white, or otherwise. **I am and always will be a product of my own personal choices, and how I consciously choose to think and act.**

In fact, it is I who owes a debt of gratitude to this country simply for the opportunity to wake up, every single day, within the safety of its borders, and to live within the beauty of its Constitution. It is a country that my son and many other people like him are willing to die for. Yes, this country is not perfect, but if we want it to be better, then that it is up to you and me. I am proud to be an American. This country with all its flaws, regardless of what others might say, IS **exceptional.**

It was my PRIVILEGE to have someone care about me in high school. I owe this man a debt of gratitude

and choose to pass on his living legacy of compassion and care to the next generation -- starting with my own children. Edwin "Skip" Capone was my high school football and track coach. He never saw color. He treated me like his own son and taught me discipline, enthusiasm for life, and to have pride and value in myself. He was there for me; he did so out of love and not out of some perceived sense of "white privilege" guilt. Skip believed in me, he helped me and numerous other kids (white and black) out of his own limited resources and taught me to channel my deep anger into a more positive way of living.

It was a PRIVILEGE to go to college. I didn't go to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton. I was fortunate enough to simply be accepted by Springfield College despite my 820 SAT score. I was an athlete, but I washed out of the football and
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accelerate my learning of English.

Then the work began. I knew I had to catch up to other students quickly and then to surpass them... English was just a tiny little barrier that I had to step over to get there. I began reading books like *Matilda*, *Big Friendly Giant*, and other books that most Americans probably read when they were much younger. I also watched TV, not movies or cartoons -- I watched the news and documentaries (not for content necessarily, but because I had to learn the words, the tone, the lexicon of a sophisticated English speaker) with subtitles.

In high school, I asked to be put in all honors level classes after my freshman year because I did well in college level classes. Despite some teachers telling me that I should wait, my dreams kept driving me and my self-image. I was ready -- no one could combat my dreams, no one could argue against them, no one could deter them, unless I let them. I dreamt and I worked. I knew that being in honors classes was important to allow me to be challenged mentally and also to fulfill my dreams of a getting into a good college and then into law school.

Now, I don't want you to have this belief that there is a magic formula out there of just dream and work hard and all that you want will come true.

Your dreams and hard work will be less fruitful if you don't take the time to establish relationships.

Through my dreams and hard work, my family has always supported and encouraged me. My friends kept me humble and grounded and helped me. My hard work was only possible because when I stayed after school in middle school, teachers like Ms. Darby and Mr. Gervais would stay with me to help me. When I had questions before or after classes in high school, Mr. Beck and Mr. Brown would sit down with me to explain me things. When I applied for colleges, Mr. Beck was the one who recommended Bowdoin College and saw my potential -- even better than I could in myself.

What I am trying to say is don't let your dream, hard work, and ambition blind you. Be a good person, cultivate your relationships with your friends, family, and teachers. Ask for help -- I was born in a culture where asking for help was a sign of weakness and one was supposed to figure it out all on their own. It took me a while to understand this about America, but I can absolutely tell you that only those who ask for help, receive it. People can't help you or give you what you want or need unless they know that is what you want. So use your resources. Use those resources to grow and to continue challenging yourself.

...

What I want to leave you with is this: DREAM and WORK! DREAM BIG and WORK HARD. Work hard so that one day, you can say, I made my dreams come true.

track programs by my junior year. However I, tirelessly, worked full time hours as a residential counselor for children with behavioral problems... I also had the great honor of being a Resident Assistant but later lost that position halfway through my senior year. I used a resident's meal ticket -- he had dropped out and left me his school ID and lunch badge. I was supposed to have turned it in to the Dean of Students -- I didn't. I couldn't afford a meal plan, so I used it for a few weeks before turning it in. I was caught and it cost me my R.A. position as well as the free room and board it afforded me. I am and always will be a product of my choices. I completed the rest of my senior year with my head down and ashamed, but I finished, nonetheless, and earned my degree. It was a privilege to go to that school, and I almost squandered it. However, I learned more from working exhaustive hours and getting caught for stealing than I ever did from writing papers and taking tests.

It is a PRIVILEGE to be a father and husband. To love and to be loved is a miraculous thing, but make no mistake -- true love is sacrifice. It is an act of will, both an intention and an action. True love is not an emotion; emotions fade. Real love is a choice of the heart. It is a conscious act of perpetual kindness, forgiveness, grace, and patience. It doesn't dishonor. It isn't selfish; it does not seek for itself. It has no pride. It does not give up when times are hard. It endures in our most arduous moments and is completely selfless. That being said, experiencing this kind of love is the most challenging, yet most intrinsically rewarding thing a human being can experience. We can all attest to the fact that nothing worth having (**in this life**) ever comes easy. That is the beauty and wisdom of sacrifice. There is no greater joy to me than coming home from a hard day's work and being greeted, enthusiastically, by my wife and kids. This happens every day, and I never tire of it. To me, **this is privilege.** It is and always will be a true honor to give them all I have -- body and soul.

To be able to provide them a life that I had only dreamed of as a little boy growing up in the projects will always be my greatest accomplishment.

...

Are we not all privileged in one way or another? ... As a society, if we buy into this "white privilege" narrative ... doesn't that create a stream of consciousness that will eventually erode away the vitally important and essential life-shaping characteristic of personal accountability? Doesn't it convey a message that seeks to blame and mentally bind others to a narrative that says, "I am a victim."?

For me, this way of thinking will only cripple our society and destroy any progress we have made in the pursuit of true racial unity. I don't know about you, but I'm just not down with that.