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Sylvia Henderson: We Got Apologies, Now What?

Maryland and Virginia express “profound regrets” for their roles in the American slave trade 300 years ago. Both states approved resolutions acknowledging their respective responsibilities for maintaining “the institution of slavery and its attendant evils.”

Whew! Now that “we” (African-Americans) have these profound regrets — just short of apologies — expressed to us, what do we do?

State Sen. Nathaniel Exum (D-Dist. 24) of Capitol Heights, whose great-grandfather was a slave, sponsored legislation hoping to empower African Americans. Perhaps. Yet, I believe that no person can empower anyone else. Empowerment comes from within. We empower ourselves.

State Sen. Verna L. Jones (D-Dist. 44) of Baltimore notes that the Maryland resolution “is about stepping back to remember something many don’t want to remember; a way to move forward.” OK. This is more in line with my thinking. Since no one alive today has direct experience with the slave trade, an official statement that prompts Americans to think about this aspect of our history is not a bad thing.

Now that this statement of regret is official, where do we go from here? Without actions — personal, responsible and definitive — statements on paper have little, if any, credence.

I submit five calls to action we can take now:

1. Stop making excuses. Take the situations we find ourselves in today and do something to improve them. This is easier said than done. We claim social ills keep us chained. How many of us speak up or act to alleviate social ills? How many of us who can vote, do so?

Statistics reveal a high incarceration rate for African Americans. More startling is how much of the rate represents black-on-black transgressions.

Before blaming the descendents of slaveholders, when do we descendents of slaves pick up where our newly freed ancestors strove to take their future generations? We have access to museums, school activities, organizations, education, multi-media and print resources in libraries and institutions. Use them as a means to attain horizons beyond our communities.

2. Make ourselves hireable and promotable. Learn, demonstrate and practice the behaviors that represent professionalism. Value a positive work ethic. Use good language skills. Be on time. Give care to the work product whether it is a manufactured “thing,” service, skill or knowledge-based specialty. Mentor and coach others to do the same.

As baby boomers enter the next stage of life, it behooves us to prepare and encourage our replacements to succeed. Embrace what creates success and end claims of “acting white” or not being “black enough.”

3. Remove negative language from our vocabulary. Eliminate the “N-word” from our minds and mouths. Use endearments that inspire self-esteem rather than denigrate and demean. Show respect to elders and to each other. Sit down and eat dinner together — as families and friends — and have conversations with each other. Share successes, learn lessons from mistakes, and continuously encourage and uplift each other.

4. Be fiscally responsible. Learn about money and how to use it to grow — as individuals, as organizations, and as a people. My father believed that we, as a people, will never advance if we do not learn to ensure our future generations have more and do more than our own generations. Dad also stressed that we cannot take our money with us; one of the reasons for working hard is to enjoy the fruits of our labor. We just cannot pick all the fruit or there will be no pollen left to spread for future growth and regeneration.

5. Adopt positive attitudes. This does not mean we walk around with a perpetual smile. It means to be optimistic, helpful and

welcoming. When you spot the opportunity, act on it even when it means getting dirty or sacrificing now for future gain. Immigrants see opportunities when they come to our country and optimize on what they observe. We have the advantage of this being our home, even though it was originally forced upon previous generations. African Americans are just that — Americans, born in America (usually), who happen to have African ancestors.

Instead of being jealous of or angry at others, we should step beyond our comfort zones to associate with people who are different from us. Affiliate with “successful people” and support as heroes those who earn (rather than contract for) their successes.

These calls to action are just that — calls to act. If we deem the “held back” viewpoint valid, then move forward by getting our buns in gear.

“They” officially regret the bondage “they” created. Now what about our own bondage? When we free ourselves from our own individual mental and emotional bondage; when we change our mindset because of or in spite of the messages we receive about ourselves and our places in the world; when we act and do, we then give credence to the apologies and regrets we seek and receive.

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