



## YOUNG ADULT SUNDAY

### CULTURAL RESOURCE

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#### **I. Introduction**

Who are today's African American young adults? At what point can one be considered "adult," younger or otherwise? Generally speaking, three age-range classifications offer some initial help in answering this question: childhood (birth to 13), adolescence (13-17) and adulthood (18+).<sup>1</sup> Using these categories, African-American young adults "are those persons who are in the age group which characterizes those who have graduated their public high school system (provided they have successfully kept pace with their required course of study). That is, young adulthood commences around 17 or 18 years of age."<sup>2</sup> However, let it also be clear that in many quarters of the African American Church, we often consider as young adults to be those who are between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. Yes! That is quite a wide window of age-ranges. Many of us also know about the black church Young-Adult Choir which typically contains persons who are forty! But, that's another story for another time.

Along with the counting of years, emergent young adulthood is marked by certain characteristic signs of maturity that are demonstrated “economically, psychologically, socially, in accountability, emotionally, in values, the community, volitionally and spiritually.”<sup>3</sup> In today’s society, young adulthood is typically a person’s first foray into major financial responsibility, living on their own, and independent decision making. Historically, our African ancestors used rites of passage to clearly delineate the transition from adolescence to adulthood. These were not only ritualistic signposts designating a change in age but also a shift in expectations. In his paper titled “Passages: Birth, Initiation, Marriage and Death,” Paul Hill Jr., founder of the Rites of Passage Institute in Cleveland, Ohio, writes:

When comparing African-American culture to West and Central African culture, one finds in some African cultures definite rituals which youth must experience in order to be recognized as adults. These activities prepare young people in matters of sexual life, marriage, procreation and family/community responsibilities, while fulfilling a great educational purpose. The occasion often marks the beginning of acquiring knowledge which is not otherwise accessible to those who have not been initiated. It is an awakening, a new day for the young. They learn to endure hardships. They learn to live with one another. They learn the secrets and mysteries of male-female relationships.<sup>4</sup>

As Hill points out, “that part of our rich African inheritance characterized by traditions of personal mastery and locus of control through the ritualization of social relationships has been lost.”<sup>5</sup> His organization promotes the renewed use of rites of passage. Across the nation, churches and social organizations have begun instituting such rituals for initiation into African American man and womanhood. Others use typical North American rites of passage, which include baptisms and confirmations, school graduation ceremonies, weddings, retirement parties and funerals.<sup>6</sup> There can be, however, a certain danger inherent in the loss of cultural and community rites of passage. “Bereft of the explicit framing of rites, unconscious and unintentional activities displace conscious and intentional ones, often with deadly consequences,” Hill warns.<sup>7</sup>

In the black Church and African American community, there are still expectations of maturation, formally and informally, individually and collectively documented. Lately, a favorite past time is delineating the differences between the Moses and the Joshua generations as Civil Rights-era African Americans remember that time as the high watermark of black activism and social advancement and, more often than not, lament the Hip Hop Generation’s prospects of carrying the baton. This past-time is played out in churches as young adult pastors step forward and pastors over sixty are asked to move from one vista of ministry to another, and as young political leaders step forward and political leaders over sixty are asked to make room for them. A great deal was said about this during the 2008 presidential campaign.

## **II. Testimonies**

When I was growing up, the word “grown” reverberated as the one-word designation I heard most often around my family to describe someone living on her own, working and paying her own bills, making her own decisions and calling her own shots. As a child, if you prematurely tried to act like you had arrived at such status, you were quickly reminded—“*You ain’t grown!*”

When I taught at Florida A&M University, I made a habit of asking my students on the first day of class to introduce themselves, tell where they were from, their major and what they want to be when they grow up. It used to tickle me to no end how some would react. “I am grown,” one young lady said with a slight roll of her eyes. She was a single mother, paying her own rent, raising her child, attending school, maintaining good grades, working a job, too. Others claimed to be not only grown, but *grown and sexy!*

The second thing I asked of my students that first day: a written autobiography. This was primarily for me to assess their skills, but these autobiographies always made me privy to so much more. There were testimonies of overcoming molestation, stories of parents on crack back home, admissions of suicide attempts, abortions, abusive relationships and unreported rapes, and accounts of confrontations by police. These young people were more often than not dealing with real-life issues that I had not faced at their age, and I was always filled with an empathy surpassed only by my gratitude to see them where they were—in school, trying to make it, regardless of their past.

Clearly, the cover can’t fully disclose the book’s content. These students had been through some stuff. They were living through tremendous circumstances—and they were pressing on. They reminded me of our foreparents who struggled against malicious odds to gain educations in the 1800s and early 1900s. Many of my students joined the church I attended, were willing workers, faithful worshipers and committed tithers. And with all that, from time to time, they were confronted by the “thou shalt nots” of church folk who looked at the students, their attire, their posture, their tattoos and their piercings and said in attitude and treatment, “*You ain’t grown or you ain’t the type of grown up we want you to be!*” When it comes to church, we’ve got to ask ourselves, what are the true markings of maturity? Is it about how we look? What we wear? If we know when to sit or when to stand? Are we trying to force our traditions down young adults’ throats? Should we instead be feeding their spirits?

I once preached it this way:

Oh, if we would only learn that we as the church should be helping, not hindering people who are trying to get to Jesus. Oh, if we church folk would only learn to stop blocking people’s way to the Master. Oh, if we staunch and hard-core A.M.E.s would stop placing stumbling blocks in people’s paths as they try to get to Jesus! Instead of worrying about the length of her skirt, I need to help that sistah get to Jesus. Instead of trying to force a doily on her head, I need to help that sistah get to Jesus. Instead of fussing ‘cause she ain’t wearing stockings, I need to help that sistah get to Jesus. Instead of condemning her for wearing pants to church, I need to help that sistah get to Jesus. Instead of fussing about her sometime-y attendance, I need to help that sistah get to Jesus. Instead of gossiping about her past mistakes, I need to help that sistah get to Jesus. Instead of worrying about if she’ll try to take my position, I need to help that sistah get to Jesus. Instead of worrying about if she’s after my man, I need to help that sistah get to Jesus!<sup>8</sup>

As my relationships grew with students, there would be moments when I would borrow the tactic of Raymond V. Haysbert, chairman of the Baltimore-based Parks Sausage, who shared a bit of advice with a young Kweisi Mfume as Mfume was seeking his first political post; A local power

broker, Haysbert was taken aback by Mfume's flamboyant attire. "I could see right away that he had a real problem," Haysbert says. "I told him to dress for where you're going and not for where you've been."<sup>9</sup>

Mfume listened—and went on to blaze a trail through Baltimore's City Council to Congress and to the top of the NAACP. Correction and direction are best dispensed within relationships and within the scope of love expressed through empathy and compassion just because we want to see others succeed. On Young Adult Sunday, we embrace those who have arrived as today's leaders; we validate their experiences, we love their uniqueness, and we share in their hope for things to come.

### III. Quotes from African American Young Adults

The real way to help poor kids succeed in the information economy is to teach them to process information in their own heads effectively, not use word processors and spread sheets.  
(2008) -- Omar Wasow, Executive Director,  
BlackPlanet.com, and he launched the Brooklyn  
Excelsior Charter School

In terms of the rising AIDS rates in our community, homosexuality, and teenage pregnancy, we are discussing these issues more and trying to make the Gospel relevant to issues which are rampant in our community. Jesus is not going to strike anyone down for talking about sex.  
(2007) -- Rev. Eboni K. Marshall, Youth Minister,  
Abyssinian Baptist Church, New York

It is time we wake the sleeping giant: the parents who have children attending public schools. Alexis de Tocqueville said that people in a democracy "reign supreme." The parents of public school children have never fully realized the power they have to bring change to underperforming schools.  
(2009) -- Harold Ford, Jr., Politician and  
Chairman of the Democratic Leadership  
Council

Everybody in Newark who knows the streets can tell you the five top drug-dealing and violent streets -- and if you have no calls coming across, then your job is to confront the conditions that create the violence. The guys standing out there so brazenly -- unless you keep them off-balance, they think *they* own the streets. Well, it's time for the *community* to own the streets.

For me, it's a leadership issue -- and if I have to stay out on the streets till four o'clock every morning, I'll do it. I *know* we can do

this. The city as a whole, I *know* we can solve our problems -- they're not bigger than we are. I believe in my *heart* -- and I have no right to believe otherwise, because human history is a testimony to it -- that we can change things. The question is, can we muster the collective will? King said it more eloquently: The problems today are not the vitriolic words and the evil actions of the bad people, but the appalling silence and inaction of the good people.

(2008) -- Cory Booker, Mayor, Newark,  
New Jersey

The country has evolved on race. I think in the next 15 years there will be six to 10 African Americans who, if their careers take the right turns, will be in position to contend for the presidency. That's breathtaking.

(2007) -- Arthur Davis, Congressman,  
Alabama

#### **IV. Music for the Moment**

Three songs, “My Worship Is Real,” “To be Young Gifted and Black,” and “Brotha” all echo the cries of today’s young adults. The first, a favorite of twenty-first century praise teams, is a frank statement that declares that the worship of young adults, though nothing like their parents, is still genuine. The second, an old song from their parents’ generation, is still important to today’s young adults who may not discuss race issues as much as their parents did, but are not color-blind and are aware of the obstacles blacks in America still face. However, this generation is ready for the challenges because they are “young, gifted and black.” The final song, “Brotha,” a rap favorite, is simple but profound for all young adults who are doing things differently and yet making us all so proud—“don’t let nobody hold you back; no, no, no.”

##### **My Worship Is For Real**

You don't know my story  
All the things that I've been through  
You can't feel my pain  
What I had to go through to get here  
You'll never understand my praise  
Don't try to figure it out  
Because my Worship  
My Worship  
Is for real

I've been through too much  
Not to worship him

Hallelujah (repeat)  
My Worship is for real

Thank you Jesus (repeat)  
My Worship is for real

Lord I Love you (repeat)  
My worship is For real

Yes (repeat)<sup>10</sup>

**To Be Young, Gifted & Black**

To be young, gifted and black,  
Oh what a lovely precious dream  
To be young, gifted and black,  
Open your heart to what I mean

In the whole world you know  
There are billion boys and girls  
Who are young, gifted and black,  
And that's a fact!

Young, gifted and black  
We must begin to tell our young  
There's a world waiting for you  
This is a quest that's just begun

When you feel really low  
Yeah, there's a great truth you should know  
When you're young, gifted and black  
Your soul's intact

Young, gifted and black  
How I long to know the truth  
There are times when I look back  
And I am haunted by my youth

Oh but my joy of today  
Is that we can all be proud to say  
To be young, gifted and black  
Is where it's at.<sup>11</sup>

**Brotha**

So many times you tried to cut we  
you wanna tear we down but you  
can't touch we  
We ain't invincible  
but Lord knows we're beautiful and  
blessed

check the affirmative  
(oh yes)

Brotha don't let nobody hold you  
back no no no  
Don't let nobody  
hold ja, control ya or mold ja  
Brotha don't let nobody hold you  
back

Am I my brother's keeper?  
Yes I am!

So many times you tried to burn we  
You wanna break we down  
(Use and discard)  
We ain't invincible  
but Lord knows we are magnificent  
and blessed  
Check for the positive

Brotha don't let nobody hold you  
back no no no  
Don't let nobody hold you never no  
Brotha don't let nobody hold you back  
Don't let nobody  
hold you never NO  
Brotha don't let nobody hold you back no no no

If' nobody told ya brotha, I'm here  
to let you know that  
You're so wonderful  
You're so marvelous  
You're so beautiful  
You're splendid  
You're fabulous  
Brilliantly blessed in every way  
Ya'll can't touch we

Brotha don't let nobody hold you back<sup>12</sup>

### **Notes**

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2. Ibid., pp. 4-5.

3. Ibid., p. 18.
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5. Ibid.
6. O'Neil, Dennis. "Rites of Passage." Behavioral Sciences Department, Palomar College, San Marcos, California. Online location: [http://anthro.palomar.edu/social/soc\\_4.htm](http://anthro.palomar.edu/social/soc_4.htm) accessed 19 February 2009
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8. "A Woman's Issues," preached March 26, 2006, New Bethel A.M.E. Church, Altamonte Springs, Florida by Maria Mallory-White.
9. Stodghill, Ron. "From Table-Pounder to Inside Player." Business Week 1 March 1993.
10. "My Worship Is For Real." Online location: [http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com/gospel\\_music\\_lyrics/my\\_worship\\_is\\_for\\_real\\_264.asp](http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com/gospel_music_lyrics/my_worship_is_for_real_264.asp) accessed 19 February 2009
11. Simone, Nina and Weldon Irvine. "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black." Online location: [http://www.lyricsfreak.com/n/nina+simone/to+be+young+gifted+black\\_20100554.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/n/nina+simone/to+be+young+gifted+black_20100554.html) accessed 19 February 2009
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