

“Never Give Up:” The Development of Young African American Men with Fortitude, Commitment, and Responsibility

by

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Abstract

This commentary focuses on the creation of an African American man that is developed internally to withstand the multitude of pressures, situations, and unforeseen circumstances that may arise within his life. Recognizing and understanding that African American men have the shortest life expectancies, highest death rates from homicide, cardiovascular disease, and cancer, as well as have the highest rates of incarceration, unemployment, and drug usage often times complicated by mental illness, this is no small feat. Clearly identifying and outlining specific principles and creating environments and learning situations that inculcates and develops those principles can establish a holistic foundation and mental/emotional attitude that never gives up.

Introduction

Because of the crisis situation that African American Boys and Men are in as regards this nation, there has been a tremendous response of books, films, initiatives, and manhood training programs created. This outpouring and productivity has been produced by well trained, innovative, and in some cases, brilliant individuals and must be commended. What would additionally help this work is to focus on the internal attributes needed to fully develop and thrive as an African American man. What does a fully developed African American man look like? How does he function, what does he believe, how does he think, and how does he respond to crises? These are some of the questions that additionally need to be asked. Difficult as it may be, they can be answered with one phrase, he is a man who, “Never Gives Up.” His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama, who leads the refugee community of Tibetan Buddhists headquartered in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India said in a talk,

Never Give Up

No Matter what is going on
Never Give Up

Develop the heart
Too much energy in your country
Is spent developing the mind
instead of the heart
Develop the heart

Be compassionate
Not just to your friends but to everyone
Be compassionate

Work for peace
In your heart and in the world
Work for peace

And I say it again

Never give up
No matter what is happening
No matter what is going on around you

Never give up (1)

These are the words of a present day spiritual master, but they easily could have been uttered by our African American enslaved ancestors, or our Native American neighbors, or the countless poor people who have toiled in the fields, factories, and industries of America. Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass or Paul Robeson as well as our grandmothers, grandfathers, parents, uncles, and aunts could have spoken these words. The Dalai Lama's message of "Never Give Up" represents the timeless wisdom of intestinal fortitude that has sustained African American and other oppressed communities since the birth of this nation and nothing expresses the attitude of a fully developed African American man better than this phrase.

What set of qualities develops this kind of attitude? What kind of specific training does it require? These are difficult questions and there are no easy formulated answers. All we can do is dig into our collective memory, spiritual and scientific archives, and personal experiences in an attempt to understand some of the essentials to personal success and the development of an attitude that is adaptable, creative, and resilient. In some cases, individuals are emotionally fragile and mentally unbalanced and this is difficult. In those situations, we do not blame the victim, as there can be hereditary, family, and social factors at work that may make the task seem insurmountable.

And of course, as Michelle Alexander explains in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* and in my recently published *Whose Future is It? Social Control and the Health of African American Boys and Men*, as well as books by Haki Madhubuti, Sidney M. Willhelm, Angela Y. Davis, Dylan Rodriguez, and Loic Wacquant, and others, there is a systematic political and economic advantage in perpetrating a “war on drugs” that equates to a “war on the African American and other oppressed communities.” This results in among other realities, a disproportionate number of young men in prison and dispossessed. Yet, at the end of the day, each person must still take responsibility for him or herself and try to do the things that are needed to have a productive and meaningful life. No teacher, mentor, or manhood development class by themselves or itself can do it for them. Each person has to dig deep within, like Malcolm X starting with the dictionary and the word aardvark and transform their own life. No one said it was going to be easy. It isn’t.

Haki Madhubuti, who along with his wife Safisha, has created four independent schools, a publishing company, and raised four adult children and has written over 31 books consisting of poetry, African American culture, and the present-day and future survival of African American people. Several of his books specifically deal with issues of African American boys and men. In *Tough Notes: A Healing Call for Creating Exceptional Black Men, Affirmations, Meditations, Readings and Strategies*, he outlines a method for developing exceptional Black men. Though the task is huge and difficult and even Haki would admit, impossible to systematically program, his suggestions convey the time tested, concrete, practical ideas born out of personal experience. Here, he is writing about something he has done, something he knows, not something he thinks, researched at a major university, or is projecting could happen. His chapters on “Empowering the Self,” “Finding the Exceptional You,” “Women,” “Progressive Nurturing: The Saving Grace,” and “Liberation,” are instructive in that they holistically attempt to educate the reader that material wealth, fame, or even power are not the only attributes of an exceptional Black or African American man. (2) This man may or may not possess these qualities, but ultimate success is determined by a set of criteria that encompasses the whole person and includes their commitment to African American liberation and freedom in the fullest sense. Yet, in his riveting autobiography, *YellowBlack: The First Twenty-One Years of a Poet’s Life, A Memoir* he illustrates more fully the idea of never giving up. Here he explains how he had to largely fend for himself and his younger sister after his mother died from alcoholism and drug addiction while he was in early adolescence. In the Prologue poem titled, “Yes,” he writes,

*“I have nothing of my mother’s
but memories
I have no piece of cloth,
Nor any re-read books,
No recipes for spaghetti,
cakes or coleslaw.
There are no photographs of the two of us
Laughing or holding hands,
I don’t even remember the beauty of her voice.
All I have deep inside of me are her last
Words, “you are smarter than us Don,
Use the library, take care of your
Sister and learn from what I have done wrong.” (3)*

Both of these excellent books (*Tough Notes: A Healing Call for Creating Exceptional Black Men, Affirmations, Meditations, Readings and Strategies* and *YellowBlack: The First Twenty-One Years of a Poet’s Life, A Memoir*) serve as practical manuals of how a young man might extricate himself from a vicious web of lack of self-esteem and self-knowledge, unemployment, and poverty to become productive, creative, and empowered. They also clearly explain why and how he never gave up.

Equally inspiring is the story of Eboni Boykin. Even though this commentary focuses more on African American boys and men; it could easily be about African American girls and women. Her story encompasses what both groups and other poor and disadvantaged children face in America daily, such as homelessness. She was recently featured on Melissa Harris-Perry’s show on MSNBC and featured last May in an article written by Terrell Jermaine Starr. Starr writes,

“Eboni Boykin spent most of her childhood moving from one homeless shelter to another with her mother in the St. Louis area. She also enrolled in more than 14 schools for one reason or another. But that did not stop her from realizing her dream of being accepted into an Ivy League school, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reports. The 17-year old senior at Normandy High School has been accepted into Columbia University in New York City on a full scholarship.”

Now a second semester freshman, Ms. Boykin expressed the tenacity and drive it took her to achieve her goal with poise and dignity. She said,

“Seeing the absolute worst of life is the ultimate motivation,” and, “Getting into Columbia definitely teaches me that just keeping the faith and not giving up pays off. And it just teaches me if you hang in there you can have anything you want if you are willing to work hard for it.” (4)

While it is obvious that both Haki Madhubuti and Eboni Boykin have achieved seemingly exceptional goals, they have something inside of them that told them to “never give up.” They and others who have survived, thrived, and empowered themselves have something that says, “don’t quit.” What is it that says that and what are those qualities? And although everyone has those attributes potentially, how does one tap into them if they are not readily manifested in their lives?

In his autobiography, *The Window 2 My Soul: My Transformation From A Zone 8 Thug to a Father & Freedom Fighter*, former gang-banger Yusef Shakur outlines how he was able to transform himself. Unfortunately, it took going to prison to do it. There, he met his father, and because of the tremendous amount of work his father had done on himself while in prison, he was able to help his son grow and benefit from that relationship. They both exhibit the “never give up” attitude with great determination. Yusef writes about his transformation;

“For seven years, my thinking, values, morals, and behavior would be heavily influenced and dictated by thought patterns that revolved around Black self-hatred; I had internalized these negative thoughts and, ultimately, I released them upon whomever I considered my enemies-through vicious acts of violence. By openly/completely immersing myself in the genocidal-soldier mentality on the streets of Detroit’s west side, the notorious “Gang Squad” made it their business to get me off the streets at any cost, even if it meant charging me with a crime I did not commit.My prison experience was not your every-day prison experience. While there, I met my father- the man whom I only knew through images. My father immediately began to nurture, teach, and cultivate me into being a responsible and educated black man by being a Beautiful Example of What a Black Man Should Be!” (5)

All of this happened while he was in prison. Yusef’s extraordinary story shows the possibilities if one dedicates themselves to self-growth. What he, Eboni and Haki all share is an attitude that “never gives up.” What supports and assists that attitude, even though they represent three different generations and eras, different skills and pursuits and life experiences, is that they all share an early life of poverty and inner determination grounded in fortitude, commitment, and a sense of responsibility. Therefore, an investigation of these three precepts might be instructive in understanding the architecture and scaffolding of the “never give up” attitude.

Fortitude

Fortitude is key when it comes to “never giving up.” It comes from the Latin word, fortitudo, which means “bravery, strength.” The root word is fortis or “bravery, strong.” It means “mental or emotional strength that enables courage in the face of adversity.”(6) African American young men need the ability to go through life with an understanding that life has ups and downs, and that adversity shapes character.

Living in America, under at times, extremely adverse conditions and social situations filled with violence, unemployment, incarceration, illness, and death, young and old African American men and women, as well as other poor and disadvantaged people, have to be strong. When we look at this definition and particularly in an African American context, we are reminded of our enslaved ancestors and the tremendous fortitude they had. They endured the brutal inhumanity of being captured in Africa, having to march sometimes hundreds of miles to the coast and being held in damp, dark, dungeons, and then herded like cattle onto crowded, disease ridden ships to the New World. Then they were “broken” and beaten and worked like beasts on plantations. The amount of strength and will needed to survive this is not to be underestimated.

Often, while rightly celebrating our ancestors who mutinied or revolted, we neglect to praise and affirm the tremendous debt we owe our ancestors who endured, survived, and in some cases, managed to thrive under some of the most inhumane conditions in the history of humankind. That is fortitude. That is “never giving up.” In the context of African American manhood development, and especially in a classroom or workshop setting, this history is pertinent. Photographs, documentary and dramatic film representations, as well as readings, including narratives of the enslaved with later audio recordings could serve as powerful tools to create a somatic experience whereby young men (and women) can viscerally and palpably learn and feel what it took to survive. By re-creating these experiences, memory is instilled that can serve as fuel to ignite and sustain fortitude. Just as a hot air balloon needs a constant source of helium, fortitude needs a constant source of energy; and remembering the struggles of not just enslavement, but of African American struggle and the struggles of our families in general serves as consistent reminders of how important it is to maintain, and maintain at a high level.

An important aid in teaching fortitude is physical discipline, particularly martial arts training. Martial arts are more than just learning how to fight or defend oneself. It is equally about learning how ‘not to fight’ and have self-control. The intricate techniques of various martial arts styles involves learning history, geography and the unique origins of the particular art form, strategy and the psychology of combat, as well as healing techniques to rejuvenate the body after battle. The comprehensive, whole body learning aspect of martial arts training shows the student in real concrete ways how to persevere through pain and adversity. When an instructor commands the students to do 500 or 1000 punches or kicks despite being tired or exhausted, it pushes them to their physical, mental, and emotional limits. It allows students to see for themselves that there are really no limits to what they can do or at least, their capacity far exceeds their perceived limitations. That is fortitude. That teaches them to “never give up.” They realize that they can overcome their limitations because the limitations are in their minds and often time have been put there by society, family members or even teachers. They learn fortitude in a practical way.

And thus, in a classroom or workshop, one can implement a set of ‘exercises for fortitude’ that can begin with pushups, instructing by example on how to properly do a pushup, and perhaps a discussion about the specific muscles involved (the triceps in the arms, the pectoralis major in the chest, the abdominals in the stomach region with secondary support by all the muscles of the back and legs, including, multifidi, gluteals, hamstrings, and gastrocnemius in the legs.) In this way, the students learn experiential anatomy and somatics while they are doing the exercise. Next, start with sets of ten pushups, then instruct them on proper breathing as in inhaling while going down, and exhaling while doing the actual push up which teaches them that even pushups are ‘whole body’ and teaches mindfulness, which is transferrable to academic pursuits. Continuing, try to do 50-100 and utilize math skills by asking them how many sets of ten do they have to do to get to 50 or 100 (even though these are simple questions, it involves the brain and keeps them mentally sharp, and by using multiples of 12, 15, or 17 for example, the questions can be made more challenging). Ask the students to give feedback on how the swelling in the chest feels and discuss the physiology of blood flow as a result of muscle use. Also have them observe their breath rates increasing due to the physical demands of needing more oxygen. Hence, it is also important during this exercise to teach them how to take the radial pulse on the wrists to show how the heart has to beat faster to supply the demand required by the activity.

Furthermore, toward the end, when the students are getting tired and experiencing muscle fatigue, remind them of fortitude. Recite the definition and tell them that the adversity that they are presently experiencing is temporary and is more mental rather than physical. Teach them that fortitude means overcoming obstacles, large and small. Afterward, praise them on their efforts and review fortitude and engage them in discussion. If the instructor has martial arts training, this can be done progressively with punches, kicks, fighting combinations and simulations. Each time, this should involve experiential anatomy, math, affirmations, and teachings around fortitude.

There are numerous ways to teach fortitude. The key issue is that each lesson should stress the whole-body learning concept through an experiential exercise. Lecturing about fortitude is instructional, but it does not anchor the idea firmly into the life experiences of the learner. The lessons that are most remembered and retained for life, mimic real life experiences and involve the entire body. In this way, there are physical and somatic triggers that remind the student physically, emotionally, and intellectually, about the holistic meaning of fortitude. It is similar to how if one experiences a bad or traumatic experience doing a particular activity or at a particular place, each time the person revisits that activity or site, they re-experience that traumatic event as if it happened anew. Likewise, it can happen with positive experiences too, especially if they are fully integrated into bodily exercises. Moreover, fortitude can be taught such that it is never forgotten.

Commitment

Commitment means, “*the committing of oneself, pledge, promise,*” and “*an obligation, an engagement.*” It originates from the Latin root for commit which is ‘committere’, “*to unite, connect, combine; to bring together.*” It is formed by combining com, or “*together,*” + mittere or “*to put, send.*” (7) Hence, we see that by its very definition, commitment involves both a pledge to oneself and the bringing together of others. Commitment is also an act of dedicating oneself to following through on what one says they are going to do. It has the same root as community, which inherently implies togetherness. Therefore, in developing an attitude that “never gives up,” making a commitment to never give up is an important pledge to oneself, immediate family and community at the same time. This is because if one individual commits to never giving up in their quest to better themselves, make a positive contribution, and to strive for their very best in life, even if their commitment is solely in self-interest, their family benefits, and their community benefits. This means that there is one less person parents have to support, feed, clothe, and worry about, which also means they can take care and support themselves. This means the community has one less person robbing, stealing, and killing other members in the community, based on a commitment to oneself! And if the individual expands their commitment to improve their family’s situation and to help their community in practical hands-on tangible ways, everyone benefits tremendously. All this from making a pledge and a commitment to oneself to “never give up,” and to further help others essentially “never give up.”

Making a commitment takes discipline to not go back on a pledge. It takes will power and the above-mentioned fortitude to keep the commitment despite adversity, setbacks, and temporary failures. It takes a deep-rooted desire to grow as a person and to sincerely care for others. If it is said publically or voiced to others, it makes the commitment public and the community can help hold the individual accountable. People can remind one, “but you said...” and the individual is reminded of the commitment as a pact or trust made and meant to be kept. This is added fuel in “never giving up” and binds the community together, particularly if other members have made similar commitments. In this way, one person’s commitment spreads like wildfire and is infectious because others benefit, and the ‘sum becomes greater than its parts.’

When discussing commitment, one is immediately reminded of the courageous men, women and children of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. One key person in those struggles was Ella Baker; she taught that “Strong people don’t need strong leaders.” She believed in the concept of group-centered leadership and a key component of that is commitment. In this group-centered context, everyone pitches in and shares their load of leadership based on their commitment to do their part. In the classroom, this can be created by assigning a group project and allowing the students to decide who is going to do what. Their work is shared, and the grade is shared as each person must commit to complete a certain part of the assignment or the whole group suffers. Another way this can be taught is to pair the students in twos and do an exercise whereby they have to rely on their partner. Facing each other, both students hold on to the outstretched arms of the other and leans back such that they are holding each other up.

This works best with students about the same size and weight. The physical aspect of this exercise shows commitment because each student must be committed (pledge) not to let go of the other person. Commitment can also be taught by having a line of students with eyes closed being led by a student with eyes open. The students with the eyes closed are making a commitment to trust the one to lead them properly around the room or yard, and the student with eyes open is making a commitment to lead them safely. In both instances, commitment is combined with trust to create an experiential exercise that is easily remembered.

Commitment is the bedrock of relationships whether it involves being a child, parent, sibling, marriage partner, friend, or comrade in struggle. If one is able to commit and make a commitment, they can commit themselves to “never giving up” on themselves and others. And moreover, it is the training ground for faith, and faith holds a community together.

Responsibility

Responsibility comes from the French, *responsible* and the Latin *respondere*, which means, “to respond.” It also means, “answerable (to another, for something),” and “morally accountable for one’s actions.” (8) In a community where more than half of our children are raised in single parent homes, almost as many of our young men are in prison as are in college, and young African American men’s chances of being murdered are fifteen times greater than a young White man’s, responsibility is a principle and idea of paramount importance. (9) And notwithstanding the incredible social forces of capitalist control and political oppression faced by African American people in general and men in particular, many of the serious issues facing us could be tempered by us, particularly African American men, by taking more responsibility.

This is not just an issue of jobs, economics, and money, although those are very vital and important issues. The issue of responsibility is more of an issue of consciousness. We are talking about Black consciousness, political, global, and environmental consciousness, spiritual consciousness, and in short, consciousness around all of our responsibilities. In the context of “never giving up,” having a sense of responsibility is literally responding to and caring for those that are depending on us with commitment and fortitude. They all come together in responsibility because by definition it involves others, even though one must be responsible for oneself. But what African American people need are men to act responsibly and take our responsibilities seriously. Many of us do, yet there are enough of us that are absent, unaccountable, and generally not being responsible to our children, parents, siblings, and community to the point that we are in a crisis. Therefore, any African American manhood development class or workshop that exists has to discuss the issue of responsibility.

In terms of African American history and struggle, Frederick Douglass took responsibility for his brethren by speaking out against the injustices of slavery and women's oppression. When Harriet Tubman risked her life by going back into the South to rescue the enslaved over thirteen times, she was taking responsibility. Part of taking and having a sense of responsibility is the "taking on the burdens of others." (10) Those of us who can are obliged to make the burden of those who are younger, weaker, or infirm, lighter and easier to carry. That is responsibility. Responsibility is caring. When the young people in the Black Power and Black Arts movements gave up money, careers, and material comforts to risk their lives by standing up to the most powerful and violent nation in the history of humankind, that was taking responsibility. They were not doing it just for themselves, as many were college educated and could have easily taken cushiony jobs and kept their mouths shut. Instead, some of them gave up their lives, and some have spent nearly forty years in prison. Many are sick and debilitated today, without insurance or 401k retirement pensions. All of this was done because they took responsibility for their entire people, and made tremendous sacrifices. Therefore, everyone today, particularly African American men, have to step up, and do their part.

In articulating classroom and workshop exercises for responsibility, and considering that we are experiencing exponential change around technology, one way to teach responsibility is to have students be responsible for taking care of an instructional technology area. A rotating crew of students can be assigned and trained to be responsible for charging, maintaining, troubleshooting and protecting this equipment. It is a tremendous task whereby corporations pay huge sums for information technology personnel. Thus, in this exercise students are learning responsibility and a marketable skill involving hands-on-skill, problem solving, and technical know-how, all combined. Additionally, other classroom tasks that are non-technical but still needed can be assigned to instill a sense of responsibility. Erasing the board, picking up paper, arranging the seats neatly, grading each other's papers, handing back papers, picking up homework all can be viewed as tasks of responsibility. In conjunction with parents or guardians, students can be given chores at home for classroom credit to increase student incentive. Another excellent way to teach responsibility is to take the class on a field trip to an animal shelter where they have to care for and work with abandoned and homeless pets. It is probably one of the best ways to teach responsibility because it involves a living animal that can reciprocate love and affection. Here students get to see firsthand the positive effect they can have, and at the same time gain compassion along with responsibility and witness the strong life force within all of creation and realize the "never give up attitude" that all living creatures innately possess. There are many other ways students can be taught responsibility, for example, visiting sick children in the hospital, homeless shelters, and retirement homes. These situations can help them understand how good they have it, even just to have their health. Hopefully, it will also help them want to make things just a little easier for someone else which will prepare them to become responsible parents and fathers that will never neglect their children. This is the kind of responsibility we need, a responsibility that does not give up on our people or our community.

Conclusion

These three precepts of fortitude, commitment and a sense of responsibility all exhibit the characteristics needed to build the foundation for an attitude that “never gives up.” Furthermore, this attitude is essential in developing will power and will power is necessary in developing mastery. The great Sufi sage, Hazrat Inayat Khan, who is credited with bringing Sufism to America, spoke a great deal about *Mastery Through Accomplishment*. He taught that accomplishing one’s goal allows one to attain mastery and that the ultimate goal is self-mastery. In the process, he also believed that serving humanity, finding and achieving one’s purpose of life, and conquering fear and failure were worthy goals. And in my assessment, an attitude of never giving up is integral.

African American men have to continue to cultivate this attitude and create new teaching technologies that assist in that process. This is vital to the survival of African American people, and therefore, our ability to exhibit fortitude, commitment and a sense of responsibility are essential in educating African American boys on how to become men. But it must be done by example so they can see the principles that are being discussed enacted in real time and within real people. Theoretical constructs and non-experiential philosophy can be helpful, but they are not enough in contrast to practical lessons that can take philosophical principles and make them tangible. Life lessons must be easy to comprehend, fun to enact, and involve the whole body so that memory and retention are enhanced. In this way, the never give up attitude is embodied and remembered for life.

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Appendix

Review Questions

- What does “Never Give Up” mean to you? Can you think of situations where you never gave up? How did you feel? Are there any instances where you gave up and not finished or completed something important? How did that make you feel? Did anyone ask you why you gave up in that particular instance?
- What is “Personal power?” How does “Never Give Up” relate to “Personal Power?” Do we gain or lose “Personal Power” by giving up?
- What does fortitude mean to you? Can you describe some instances where you exhibited fortitude? Can you describe some instances where members of your family exhibited fortitude?
- What does commitment mean to you? Can you describe some instances where you have exhibited commitment? How did that make you feel? What about family members?
- What does responsibility mean to you? Can you describe some instances where you exhibited responsibility? How did that make you feel? Have you been at times irresponsible? Did it feel different than being responsible? In what way did it feel different? Can you think of instances where your friends have been irresponsible? What were the consequences?

- What other ideas or qualities would you add to comprise the “Never Give Up” attitude? Is it something that can be immediately learned and put into practice or does it take a long time? How long?
- Think about this scenario. An African American man is unemployed, but actively looking for a job, married, with four children. He and his wife, who is working, get into continuous arguments, mostly about the fact that he is not working. After months of the situation remaining the same, the man leaves his family and moves in with his parents. He feels that the “system” is unfair, racist, and unjust and that is why he cannot find a job. His wife feels he is lazy, lacks initiative, and has given up on her and their family. Who is right? The husband? The wife? Are they both correct? What do the children think and feel in this situation (hypothetically, of course)? How does this impact his parents? What if the situation is complicated by the fact that the husband/father is a felon and has served four years in prison prior to getting married and starting a family? Has the husband/father given up? Is he showing fortitude, commitment, and responsibility? How much of this situation is his fault, 50%, 100%, somewhere in between? How much of this situation is society’s fault, 50%, 100%, somewhere in between? Is the wife at fault here? His parents? Who suffers the most in this situation, the husband, wife, children, or parents? Does the larger society suffer? Are there any solutions to this situation if he is unable to find a job? If he finds a job, are his problems solved?
- Think about your life and present situation. Are there any areas of your life where you could use more fortitude, commitment, and sense of responsibility? Are there any areas of your life where you could use more of a “Never Give Up” attitude? Write down those areas and describe how those particular situations would be different if you implemented those qualities. What kind of support structures around you do you need to implement fortitude, commitment, responsibility, and a never give up attitude in your life? How soon can you begin to implement these qualities or characteristics? What are some of the obstacles preventing you from implementing them immediately? How can those obstacles be removed?