



July 27, 2016

Coates' Between the World and Me

Called “required reading” by Toni Morrison and winner of the 2015 National Book Award for Nonfiction, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ book Between the World and Me has become a touchstone for our times. Coates writes this book as a letter to his 15 year old son in the year Eric Garner was choked to death for selling loose cigarettes in New York City and when the person who killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri would not even face charges for his actions. Growing up in urban Baltimore and marrying a woman from Chicago, Coates includes several references to Chicago, including the “caged neighborhoods on the Westside” and the redlining in real estate which caused housing segregation and contributed to the current desperate situation in North Lawndale. He emphasizes to his son that progress of America has been built with the labor of slaves, and that the current power structure in the United States aims “to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies”.

Coates details common occurrences such as his fear for his life when he is pulled over by the police, and the death of a college friend at the hands of a policeman in a case of mistaken identity.

These stories really are common, they create no surprise, and they also describe our lives on the West Side of Chicago. My initial reaction to the book was that this is what we talk about at the barbershop every week. At Herb’s Barbershop on Chicago Avenue just east of Laramie, we talk about the latest news in the neighborhood. We talk about the shootings, our schools, and how we can develop our community. The guys at Herb’s could write chapters in a book like Coates’. We know that being on guard all the time and the stress that results affects our health. We talk about those who are trying to make changes and improve our communities.

Coates’ book is an important contribution especially during this political season when some claim, as Coates notes, that “safety [law and order] is a higher value than justice”. Non-violent movements which point out injustice have always been demonized as being too radical for the status quo, just as the Black Lives Matter movement has been unjustly blamed for violence taken against police.

I agree with Coates that our “police reflect America in all of its will and fear”. Though individuals need to be held accountable for their actions, individual law enforcement officers only reflect the society in which they live and in which they have been brought up. Trainings, policies and societal relations as a whole all need to be improved, rather than just placing the blame on a few bad apples.

Progress takes a long time. Coates notes that people of African descent had been “enslaved in America longer than we have been free.” He also notes that “no people have ever liberated themselves strictly through their own efforts”. We see this as people of all backgrounds, races, ethnicities and religions have joined the Black Lives Matter movement in the struggle for justice. Coates says we are “called to struggle, not because it assures victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life.”

Maybe I am a bit more optimistic than Coates, though - perhaps because of my belief and hope in God, which is not shared by Coates. Coates notes a “moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box”. I still believe in the words of our great leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said ‘the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”. Coates’ book eloquently paints an accurate picture of what life is like in America right now. Our common challenge is how we can join together and move forward toward what our founders called a more perfect union.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LSK', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District