

Alford Young, Jr.
Associate Director, Center for Social Solutions

In the summer of 2018 I participated in a workshop for University of Michigan faculty who wanted to enhance the public impact of their scholarship. At one moment during the workshop I explained to the coordinator, a journalist, that my motivation for pursuing scholarship on urban-based, low-income African-American men rested in wanting to help construct a different cultural portrait of them. I was intent on elucidating how such men framed understandings of and interpretations about different dimensions of their social realities (i.e., fatherhood, work and work opportunity, peer relations, and other phenomena). I informed this journalist about how I hoped that my work would allow for more thorough considerations of Black men as contemplative individuals, thus offering more than a traditional and rigid portrait of them as aggressive, hostile, shortsighted in their abilities to imagine the future, and irrational in their everyday decision making. My quest, therefore, was to explore the extent to which they operated as theorists of their own lives. The underlying point, I concluded, was to demonstrate how my research uncovered the degree to which these men functioned in the social world like others; as people who are not solely reactive, but contemplative about their everyday realities and how they might move toward and through the future.

A colleague of mine in attendance at the workshop happened to hear my remarks. He pulled me aside after I completed them and said to me, "That sounds like exactly what you explained as your purpose for research over 20 years ago when we both joined the faculty at the University of Michigan."

At that moment I realized that whatever else I had achieved in what is over a two-decade career at Michigan, I also spent all of that time trying to convince the public of the same point. Since first making that claim at doing so again in 2018 I had constructed field research projects involving interviewing nearly 500 African-American men. Although I have been largely satisfied with my career as a scholar, at that time I also began to wonder whether delivering a public message amounted to no more than being like a hamster running on a wheel. New research occurred over time, but the message to the public stayed the same.

As I take stock of what is going on in America today, I have similar feelings about the situation and fate of black Americans. In the past two months I have been called into various public conversations – on the radio, in print media, and on television – to address the case of African-Americans and COVID-19, African-Americans and protests in response to police brutality, and the relationships between the two. When asked about what I think must be done as America moves forward I often simply refer to what America did not do in years past. We did not take matters seriously enough when Rosa Parks defiantly sat down on a bus seat as an effort to demand equal access to public resources for black Americans. America did not do enough when peaceful protest unfolded throughout the American south and other parts of the country, led by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and other people and organizations dedicated to social justice in America.

Today America has not done enough, and indeed many responded in the wrong way, when professional football player Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the playing of the national anthem prior to National Football League games. America did not do enough when Rodney King was viciously assaulted by a team of police officers, or when Trayvon Martin was shot by George Zimmerman on a street corner in Florida. America did not do enough when so many other Black men and women were subjected to violent assaults and deaths at the hands of police officers who were in no way threatened, physically or otherwise, when they inflicted suffering and death upon these bodies. Whatever the case may have been at different points in time, the same kinds of calls for racial justice were made. Therefore, I cannot help but feel that those of us seeking a healthier and more thorough commitment to racial justice in America are like hamsters on a wheel.

To be sure, unlike decades ago, I know that in so many ways many black Americans are in a better place today. The life I lead as an African-American man is so much better than the life my father, the first in my family line to graduate from college, led. His life was so much better than the life led by the Black men and women in the generations prior to his. Indeed, I am quite hopeful that the two African-American boys who are my sons will lead much better lives than mine. Yet I remain at a standstill in thinking about why calls for racial justice appear to be the same calls made over time. I struggle with how much these calls are remade only because America does not pay full attention, or even a minimally appropriate kind of attention, to the earlier calls.

My frustration with the present moment, whether it concerns the prospects of African-American men or with race relations in America, is not rooted in a lack of understanding about what needs to be done. It is rooted in the fact that there has been so consistently a lack of willingness to do the right thing before such that so much pain and anguish has to surface again later on. The frustration of today, then, is not really due to what is happening now, but to what did not happen before. This is especially frustrating because the call had been so clearly made back then about what needed to be done.