

Guys: What we do with our lives is always a function of a dialectical interaction between structure (that which we can't control *on our own as individuals*) and it's obverse, *agency* (that which is within our control *as individuals*). This article deals with the issue of agency after we have dealt with the issue of structure (in this case historical structure: specifically, juridical racism). Do you agree with Bill Cosby? If so, why? And if not, why?

Cosby won't let up, and neither should we

By

Laura Washington/*Chicago Sun-Times*/ July 5, 2004

I had never seen the Rev. Jesse Louis Jackson cry in public. And he's seldom upstaged. Until Bill Cosby came to town.

Last week Jackson invited Cosby to the annual Rainbow/PUSH conference for a conversation about controversial remarks the entertainer offered May 17 at an NAACP dinner in Washington, D.C.

That's when America's Jell-O Man shook things up by arguing that African Americans were betraying the legacy of civil rights victories. "The lower economic people," he said, "are not holding up their end in this deal. These people are not parenting. They are buying things for their kids -- \$500 sneakers for what? And won't spend \$200 for Hooked on Phonics!"

Thursday morning, Cosby showed no signs of repenting as he strode across the stage at the Sheraton Hotel ballroom before a standing-room-only crowd. Sporting a natty gold sports coat and dark glasses, he proceeded to unload a laundry list of black America's self-imposed ills.

The iconic actor and comedian kidded that he couldn't compete with the oratory of the Rev. But he preached circles around Jackson in their nearly hourlong conversation, delivering brutally frank one-liners and the toughest of love.

The enemy, he argues, is us: "There is a time, ladies and gentlemen, when we have to turn the mirror around."

Cosby acknowledged he wasn't critiquing all blacks -- just "the 50 percent of African Americans in the lower economic neighborhood who drop out of school," and the alarming proportions of black men in prison and black teenage mothers. The mostly black crowd seconded him with choruses of "Amen."

To critics who posit it's unproductive to air our dirty laundry in public, he responds, "Your dirty laundry gets out of school at 2:30 every day. It's cursing" on the way home, on the bus, train, in the candy store. "They are cursing and grabbing each other and going nowhere. And the book bag is very, very thin, because there's nothing in it."

Don't worry about the white man, he adds. "I could care less about what white people think about me. . . . Let 'em talk. What are they saying that is different from what their grandfathers said and did to us? What is different is what we are doing to ourselves."

For those who say Cosby is just an elitist who's "got his" but doesn't understand the plight of the black poor, he reminds that "We're going to turn that mirror around. . . . It's not just the poor -- everybody's guilty."

Cosby and Jackson lamented that in the 50th year of Brown vs. Board of Education, our failings betray our legacy. Jackson dabbed away tears as he recalled the financial struggles at Fisk University, a historically black college and Jackson's alma mater.

When Cosby was done, the 1,000 people in the room all jumped to their feet in ovation. Long after Cosby had departed, I could not find a dissenter in the crowd. But in the hotel corridor I encountered a vintage poster for sale that said volumes. The poster, which advertised the Million Man March, was "discounted" to \$5. Remember the Million Man March? In 1995 Nation of Islam Minister Louis Farrakhan exhorted "a million sober, disciplined, committed, dedicated, inspired black men to meet in Washington on a day of atonement." In 2004, perhaps all that's left of that call is a \$5 poster.

We have shed tears too many times, at too many watershed moments before. While the hopes they inspired have fallen by the wayside.

Not this time. Cosby's plea to parents: "Before you get to the point where you say 'I can't do nothing with them' -- do something with them."

Like:

- Teach our children to speak English.
- When the teacher calls, show up at the school.
- When the idiot box starts spewing profane rap videos, turn it off.
- Refrain from cursing around the kids.
- Teach our boys that women should be cherished, not raped and demeaned.
- Tell them that education is a prize we won with blood and tears, not a dishonor.
- Stop making excuses for the agents and abettors of black-on-black crime.
- It costs us nothing to do these things. But if we don't, it will cost us infinitely more tears.