

Mo' Interviews

Dr. Cornel West

By Mo'Nique

When it comes to social and political real talk about the black community, you're not going to find too many people more knowledgeable on the subjects than veteran Princeton University professor Dr. Cornel West.



Mo'Nique: With everything in the media being so negative about our men, how do we as black women talk to our black men to let them know that they're still worthy, still valuable, still the king of the castle.

Dr. Cornel West: Well one is you say that the negative images of you are lies if people think that says something about all of you. There are some black male thugs out there but there are a lot of white and brown male thugs too. And we know there's a lot of good, decent, compassionate black brothers and the sister's say we know you all exist it's just not projected in public.

Dr. West what has happened with us to where we feel as if we can't be each other's keeper? Where did we lose the feeling of our community?

I think what has happened is that in the age of Reagan, greed has become popular, selfishness has become pervasive and fear has become ubiquitous. And in the face of the greed we need justice. That's why brother Barack is so very important. In the face of indifference you need compassion. A we consciousness, not just an I consciousness. And in the face of the fear, hope embodied in concrete. Examples, cause see what young people need are examples.

But how did we let that happen?

What happened was the whole society shifted to the lives of the rich and famous. It shifted to the world of luxury and extravagance. It was all bling, bling on the surface.

Here's a question I've wanted to ask you for a long time. Women's lib and black women, do they both go hand in hand or is it something we should have never gotten involved in?

Go back to Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper wrote a book in 1892 called A Voice from the South saying that there was gonna be overlap with woman's lib because woman's lib ought to be about woman's dignity and equality. But at the same time, a black woman who's already had to bare such a burden, not simply the racism of the white women but also the sexism of the black men, had to carve out their own spaces. That's why there's a difference between feminist and womanist. And when Alice Walker came up with womanist, she said it's like lavender to purple. Purple is the way of trying to show the black woman both betwixt and between but holding both together because the best of the woman's movement in America have been black women. And the best of the black movement has been black women.

Do you ever get scared when you know there is something that has to be said but you know there's gonna be backlash?

The greeks have a word called parrhesia. It means fearless speech. Plain speech. Unintimidated speech. It's usually associated with artists and often comic artists like Aristophanes in Greece, Richard Pryor in the 60s, Chris Rock and Mo'Nique in 2008-09 which means you have to say things against convention, against common opinion that can get you in trouble but you do that in order to unsettle people to get people to think about things they wouldn't ordinarily think about and in the end they are for the better. The great comics always laugh with people rather than at people because you're always partly laughing at yourself because all of us are cracked vessels and we're all trying to love our crooked neighbors with our own crooked hearts. Which means we all are inadequate but we're incomplete and the great artist's like yourself and the others are saying, 'You know what? I'm gonna say it anyway. I'm gonna muster the courage to cut against the grain but in saying it I'm gonna include myself as a part of the critique.'