The View From Black America

Listening to the Untold Stories

Kenneth Hardy • 11/1/2015 • 12 Comments

Last April, like millions of other people, I sat transfixed in front of my TV, watching cars being torched and turned over, buildings being set ablaze, and crowds of young people throwing rocks at police. This was all happening in Baltimore, in the wake of the death of a young black man named Freddie Grey under suspicious circumstances after he'd been arrested for allegedly possessing an illegal switchblade. Intellectually, I understood the absurdity of a crowd of mostly black young men burning down their own community. The calm, sober part of me, the part that's a comfortably middle-class therapist who's learned to go back and forth in a racially divided society knew clearly that what was happening only makes a bad situation worse---and that's how most of white America reacted. Yet as a black person, I felt something else.

As I watched the disaffected young men on my TV screen riot in the streets, I saw an unexpressed part of myself being played out while a jumble of memories from my personal and professional life passed through my head. Over decades of working in communities like inner-city Baltimore, I've spent countless hours with the kind of young people that the CNN reporters on the scene that day described as "thugs" and the pundits that night and through the following days condemned for their lawlessness. I understood that those young people had, in essence, already given up on whites and the dream of living in a racially just society in which their lives mattered.

I've spent the last four decades of my life working with young people who see themselves as trapped behind a wall-less prison with no exits, who live their lives hidden in the shadows of invisibility as far as white society is concerned. They know all too well that their daily experience---whether it's going to lousy schools, or succumbing to drug use and abuse, or being the victims of crime, lack of employment prospects, or economic despair and hopelessness---doesn't matter unless it interferes with or disrupts the lives of the white mainstream. While

deeply rooted in the racial fabric of our country's history, life behind the wall-less prison remains a mostly untold story.

Black inner-city youth understand the terms of the contract negotiated at the time of their births---you're unseen, faceless, without value. You'll forever be defined by others, losing the freedom to define yourself, to declare for yourself who you are. Instead of a proactive declaration, you feel trapped into a reactive one, a repudiation of how the world wants to define you. Perhaps this is why we so often hear black parents describe their children in terms of what they're *not*, rather than who and what they *are*: "My son is *not* a bad child. He is *not* a criminal. He is *not* in gangs, and he *doesn't* run around with the wrong crowd."

Black kids know perfectly well how they're perceived by white society: they're threatening thugs and future criminals who need to be contained by any means necessary. Isn't this the prevailing sentiment that undergirds the shooting of countless numbers of unarmed black men by law enforcement on a regular basis? Whether in a car or walking, running toward or away from the police, unarmed or carrying a toy weapon, the narrative is always the same: *they* were dangerous and *we* feared for our lives.

Despite growing up in a middle-class, two-parent, observantly religious family, I'd gone through my own harsh training in how to ignore the injustices and humiliations that are the daily experience of black people. And I've also realized that even with the insights my therapeutic training has provided, and the fact that I've facilitated all kinds of workshops and consultations exploring the impact of race and racism on the lives of both white and black people, I've still spent a part of my life isolated in my own wall-less prison. After all these years, I still have my own untold stories.

Learning about Race

Most of my early childhood curiosity about race came from watching my parents' interactions with whites, like the encounter between my dad and Mr. Blazinski, our new insurance agent who was replacing the retiring Mr. Fred. As we entered his office, my dad casually referred to Mr. Blazinski by his first name, Harry. The response from Mr. Blazinski was terse but pointed: "Walter, the name is Mr. Blazinski." He then broke his name down phonetically to assist my dad with the pronunciation. "It's BRA-ZEN-SKEE."

I looked in my Dad's eyes and quickly shifted my gaze away before he saw me looking at him. I knew he'd just been belittled once again, but I couldn't tolerate him knowing that I noticed it. I wondered why my father, who seemed so confident and in charge within our family, seemed so small and frazzled outside it, in the presence of whites.

My great-grandmother, the granddaughter of a slave, lived with my family until I was a junior in college and was one of the few people in my early life to talk to me openly about race. With uncensored directness, she told me how her sister had been raped by the white man who'd delivered milk to the family's doorstep for years. While it was widely known in the neighborhood that he was the one who'd attacked her, formal charges were never filed because, according to my grandmother, "no one in those days thought enough of black women to believe they could ever be raped." It was as if she was saying, "Kenny, you can't trust white people, even the ones you think you know."

But even as she passed along that story with the chilling lesson about never letting down your guard around whites, I never heard her express any overt racial hostility. She was a devoutly religious person who believed in God and left it to Him to rid the world of sin and evil. Still, the world I grew up in provided plenty of reminders of the deep chasm that existed between those who were valued and those who were devalued. In my school and my neighborhood, I saw plenty of examples of what writer and activist Jonathan Kozol once called "death at an early age"---children who'd already ceased to believe in themselves as people. Early on, I could see that our schools and the services that our black neighborhood received, whether snow or trash removal, was slow, unpredictable, and blatantly inferior to that enjoyed in the neighboring white communities. The message could be distilled into a jingle I heard often in my childhood: "If you're white, you're all right. But if you're black, get back." In fact, those were the words my little sister and all her playmates recited as they jumped double-dutch rope. So young and innocent, they'd already begun to internalize demeaning racial messages.

One of the few refuges from the disempowerment I saw all around me was Earl's barbershop, which doubled as a community gathering place for the men and boys in the neighborhood. My visits there with my friends would often take at least six hours, and getting our hair cut was the least of it. The barbershop was the place where black males bonded across several generational divides and felt free to talk openly about the shared pain and indignity of being black in America. It was its own kind of group therapy. It was here---walls draped with poster-sized pictures of iconic black figures such as Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks--- that we felt free to express loudly and without fear or caution our anger about "whitey."

School was the antithesis of the barber shop. Most of the students at the various schools I attended growing up were black, while most of the teachers and virtually all of the administrators were white. Although well intentioned, the teachers had no curiosity about the conditions and complexities of their black students' lives. While students saw issues of race played out every day and felt the sting, the teachers and administration denied that race mattered at all. Instead, they accused students of using race as a crutch or excuse for their academic ineptitude and lack of ambition. School offered no space for common ground, no plausible possibilities for traversing the divide. The larger society clearly accepted the teachers' colorblind view of the

world: only the black students had any "problem" with color.

Rather than being a place to nourish hopes and dreams, our schools routinely discouraged black students from pursuing any kind of higher education. We were told quite directly that we were not "college material." Many decades later, I still recall my guidance counselor responding to my desire to get a degree in psychology by telling me that I should instead pursue a career where I could "use my hands"---in spite of the fact that I had no demonstrated skills or interest in using my hands.

At an early age, I'd learned that it could even be dangerous to use your hands around white people. When my friend Julius and I would go shopping with our parents, we were sternly told, "Now, be sure to keep your hands in your pockets while we're in the store. Do you understand me?" Even writing this now brings tears to my eyes. Keeping our hands in our pockets was an accommodation that we had to make for white people because our parents were worried that we'd otherwise be presumed criminals---even at age 5. Julius, now a respected physician, recently mentioned that he still finds himself jamming his hands into his pockets when walking through a department store.

This is what black parents refer to when they mention "having the talk" with their children. "The talk" is a toolkit for racial survival designed to remind black children that they're living in a white world, where they'll often be prejudged and presumed guilty until proven innocent—and the latter is no easy task. This was what happened to Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old black boy shot to death by police in Cleveland, Ohio, for playing with a toy gun. Black kids don't have the luxury of playing with toys guns in public spaces.

As a kid, I knew which movie theaters were "okay" to attend, how loud or how soft-spoken we should be in certain neighborhoods, what clothes and hair styles—do-rags, hoodies, and braided hair—we should avoid. We had messages of empowerment, too, designed to imbue us with a sense of racial pride. My dad would often say, "Kenny, make sure you walk with your head up. Don't let white people think they're better than you." And my mother continually reminded me, "Make sure you always look white people in the eyes when you talk to them. Otherwise, they'll think of you as inferior." But the messages of pride always had to be reconciled with the reminders that we lived in a white world, and if we forgot it, the world would let us know for sure.

That's exactly what happened to Julius and me in 1973 as undergraduates at Pennsylvania State. Early in our freshman year, we naively entered a Howard Johnson's restaurant offering a weekly all-you-can-eat fish fry, a smorgasbord of food not available in our college cafeteria. Right away, we attracted the wide-eyed gaze of a young white girl, about 9- or 10-years-old, sitting with her parents. As we walked by, she loudly exclaimed, "Mommy! Mommy! Do you see what I see?

It's two niggers!" There was scattered laughter in the background from other tables as her mother quietly shushed her and resumed eating. But the mother said nothing to Julius or me, nor did anyone else.

Away from the comfort and safety of home for the first time in our lives, we didn't know whether to stay or leave the restaurant. Should we speak up to protect our dignity and risk our safety? Or should we remain silent and swallow our humiliation and outrage? As the fidgety hostess escorted us to our table, the short walk past the little girl's table to ours seemed like it took an eternity. By the time we arrived at our booth, everyone was looking at us, except for the couple at the next table over, who studiously ignored us. When Julius and I finally summoned enough composure to look directly at each other, we knew immediately that we couldn't stay. Full of rage and a sense of being defeated and unmanned, we made our escape.

Perhaps that's why the burning of the CVS store in Baltimore this summer triggered so much turmoil in me. Along with my disapproval of the indefensible destruction and violence, I couldn't deny that I felt a surge of empowerment watching the black youth pushing back against the massive injustice they encountered every day. In some way, they were doing what I felt unable to do that day at Howard Johnson's.

Becoming a Therapist

My great-grandmother once implored me, "Kenny, please do something with your life. Make a difference in the world, even if it's a small one. Too many black people have died for us just to have you squander your precious life." These words helped shape how I practice as a therapist.

But over the course of my training---which included attending three large universities in three different regions of the country, as well as two postdoctoral training institutes, one on the west coast and the other on the east coast---I had only one instructor who was a person of color, and no black classmates. Sitting in a sea of whiteness, whenever a self-proclaimed liberal, white professor made a disparaging comment, however veiled, about the pathology of black families, it felt like my task was to endure the indignity and find the inner fortitude to cope. I felt that any reaction, no matter how measured or couched in the most abstract language would've rendered me the "angry black male." Like the brothers on the streets of Baltimore and Ferguson, I felt trapped within a wall-less prison. Unlike theirs, mine was in the ivory towers of academia.

Alongside the formal curriculum, my graduate training required me to master the unspoken dynamics of race that permeated my experience. If I had a penny for every white client I approached in the waiting room of our training clinic who was startled---and in some cases, momentarily paralyzed---when I introduced myself as the therapist, I'd have been a wealthy student. But if I attempted to raise these issues in supervision, the conversation quickly died from

a lack of mutual interest. The recurrent message was that race wasn't an issue unless I made it one---and the best way to ensure that it wasn't an issue was for *me* not to make it one.

My first full-time permanent position as a clinician was in an outpatient mental health facility in Brooklyn, where I served as director of group and family treatment. My clients were largely lower-income and poor African Americans and Latinos. Their referral sheets typically showed presenting problems similar to what we'd expect to find in any behavioral-health treatment center: anxiety and other affective disorders, psychoses, and a myriad of child-centered family dysfunctions, all compounded by trauma. However, in treatment, clients routinely discussed problems that were never taught in my graduate training or treated in the university-based clinics where I'd worked. These problems often centered on social issues that seemed beyond the reach of the psychological solutions that constituted our preferred treatment protocol. Efforts to uncover the roots of depression, rage, or other serious mental-health issues repeatedly focused on the clients' biology, psychology, and family-of-origin experiences, but almost never on their ecology and the impact of their social environment.

I'd never treated clients of color before accepting this position, but their experiences felt familiar. For the first time as a practicing clinician, I could breathe freely. Gone was the anxiety about greeting clients in the waiting room and the sudden paralysis they'd exhibit when discovering that "their doctor" wasn't white. I relished being able to practice in a context where my race didn't seem to matter. I felt that this job was a godsend. It's what I believed I was called to do.

I soon learned that my starry-eyed dream and the reality didn't quite match. Early on, I felt a barrier to connecting with my clients that I found hard to name. Eventually, my clients and colleagues began to name it for me. The first was my Latino client, Luis, who one day at an awkward juncture in a session announced, "I don't really get you, man. You look black, but everything else about you tells me you're white. I really can't trust someone like you, who has the complexion but not the connection. Even though technically I'm not black, I feel blacker than you."

As much as I didn't want to hear it, Luis was doing me a favor by making it impossible to ignore something I'd begun to suspect: I'd become whitewashed, the kind of therapist my academic training was designed to produce. I was distant, emotionally inscrutable, and compulsively unspontaneous. I'd been taught that any markers that denoted a sense of brotherhood---or as Luis coined it "connection"---such as speaking in the vernacular of the 'hood or displaying any sense of street cred, would be therapeutically inappropriate. For Luis, I was hidden behind my shield of professionalism.

Luis wasn't the only one who had doubts about me. One day, my secretary, Janie, African American and a single parent, asked to talk about a psychosocial assessment she'd typed up for

me about a single-parent black family. She was upset by the pejorative diagnostic language and the judgmental tone of the report, which seemed to imply that all black families headed by a single black woman---like her---were inevitably dysfunctional. Even as she tried to restrain herself, she essentially accused me of being a mouthpiece for whites' dismissal of blacks: "I read your notes, and if I didn't see your name attached to them, I would've just assumed they were written by another clueless, book-smart, white person," she said, shaking her head disapprovingly with a tinge of disgust. "I don't know what they're teaching in schools these days, but it sure ain't helping us black folks." These were the same notes that my supervisor found so well-written and clinically astute. *Obviously, Janie's biased*, I thought to myself. What did she really know about me? But having already heard something similar from Luis, I couldn't dismiss what she was saying. I was thrown into an existential crisis.

I began to wonder how I'd gone from being the model of a racially sensitive grad student to a deracinated surrogate white therapist. In my relentless efforts to prove to professors and classmates that I belonged, had I lost myself? Maybe I should've been more suspicious of a professional training process dominated by whites and designed to serve the interests of whites. In gaining my professional credentials, had I lost my soul as a black person?

I began to see that my entry into the world of work mirrored my experience in grad school, except the stakes were even higher. At work, it wasn't only whites who judged me, as had been the case in school, but now I was under the close scrutiny of other blacks and people of color. Most of the minority staff at the clinic had seen my being hired as a program director as a sign of hope, an indication that maybe racial barriers were being dismantled. Before me, the clinic had never had black doctoral-level director. I felt the unspoken but nevertheless visceral pressure of being *the first*. I knew that the black and Latino staff were expecting me to voice matters that they felt powerless to talk about, to advocate for them, and above all to represent our people well. As Willie, the black, middle-aged janitor, said to me my second day on the job, "Brother, I'm so glad you're here. I'm so proud of you. I'm sure our ancestors are looking down on you with a big grin on their faces."

Dr. Stevenson, the white chief psychologist and my immediate supervisor, also welcomed me with high expectations. He wanted to develop a strong family therapy program and repeatedly emphasized the importance of rooting it in a solid clinical foundation, nothing way out or radical. Whenever I brought up the possibility of addressing issues of race in therapy, he either saw it as a distraction from the real clinical issues that needed to be considered or intimated that I was allowing my personal views to obscure good therapeutic judgment. In the same way that I'd watched my parents defer to whites in a position of authority, I found myself taking the same role with Stevenson. I gradually realized that the more dismissive and disrespectful he was toward me, the more deferential I was becoming.

It all came to a head one day when he pulled me aside and said, "Dr. Hardy, I'm going to remind you again, since you seem to suffer from some short-term memory, that we're a psychiatric outpatient clinic, not the NAACP or Amnesty International. I suggest you take time during this forthcoming weekend to decide if this is the place for you. We're a mental health facility. Do you understand?"

I was stunned and infuriated by his sarcasm and his condescension. After sitting in silence for a few minutes, overcome with emotion that I was trying desperately to ward off, I turned to him and began to angrily lecture him in return. "Who do you think you are?" I spat. "Do you think you can talk to me anyway you want because you're white? I know you don't want to acknowledge race, but for me thisis racial. I do not wish to be in a relationship with you or anyone else where I'm disrespected, talked down to, and treated as if I'm nonhuman. I'm sick of this!"

As Stevenson listened with a look of cool disdain on his face, he calmly said, "Dr. Hardy you're quite an interesting character. Once again you're inappropriately introducing race into our discussion. I've had enough of this. Our meeting is over."

The weekend following my encounter with Stevenson was one of the longest of my life. Not only did I brood about the status of my job, but I knew that getting enraged was the worst possible way to handle the situation. I realized that for me, Stevenson had become indistinguishable from the long line of white people over the course of my life who'd assaulted me, both directly and vicariously.

When I returned to work the next Monday, I was barely through the door before the receptionist told me that the executive director, Stevenson's boss, wanted to see me. I feared this was the beginning of the end, and indeed it was. He asked me to resign. I was devastated and immediately worried that my career was over. To make things worse, I felt humiliated and ashamed that I'd let down Willie and all of the other people of color who worked at the clinic. For months afterward, I was haunted by what had happened.

Between Two Worlds

It took me a little over a year to find another clinical job, but that gave me an opportunity to sort out what had happened. I was too white for the black people I worked with, and too black for people like Stevenson. I'd tried to play the game of belonging and fitting in, but instead I'd become an unwelcomed foreigner without a home.

Slowly, out of my endless self-reflection, came a kind of personal epiphany. I began to see that what was missing from my therapy with clients like Luis and the clinical notes Janie had

objected to and my way of interacting with colleagues was a full embrace of who I was as a black person. I was so worried about fitting in that I was constantly adjusting who I was to fit the situation. I was playing the role of the stoically detached professional, trying to be as impenetrable as possible. I was trying to be what I'd learned a good white clinician should be. Janie and Luis knew this and had done me an enormous service by calling me on it. In a strange way, it was my jailbreak moment with Stevenson that allowed the parts of me that had anxiously hidden inside my personal wall-less prison to break out.

I found a nonclinical job at a youth-service program in an impoverished black community with an all-black staff, and it was an entirely different experience. It gave me an opportunity to reconnect every day with other blacks and experience a deeper, fuller sense of home. I felt part of a community where it was okay to give voice to the role of race in our clients' day-to-day struggles. Sure, we felt the pressures of budget constraints, in-fighting, and the usual agency politics, but in the program's open atmosphere, I felt like I was back in Earl's barbershop.

I now had a chance to observe life in a poor community and see how much barely suppressed rage provided the backdrop for the lives of the program's clients. Every day, I saw how the intensity of built-up racial resentment led so many people to make impulsive, feel-good-in-the moment decisions that wound up being self-destructive. I learned to appreciate the larger forces that shaped people's lives but remained unnamed in the *DSM*---conditions that I learned to call *psychological homelessness*, *devaluation*, and *voicelessness*. And I learned the power of giving language to something that previously had been unnamable, and how hard it is to heal from conditions that have no name.

As my awareness of the challenge of helping poor people deal with having the odds so stacked against them by their social circumstances grew, I embraced a new identity as both an activist and a therapist. I learned to see my role as helping community members "name it and claim it"--- to see beyond themselves to understand how factors like racism and poverty were part of the problems they were struggling with. I saw my role as helping them take ownership of their rage, while recognizing that it's a larger problem they share with people in the same circumstances. It's like changing a negative to a positive. Rather than just being a passive victim, "naming it and claiming it" meant doing something proactive: it meant taking personal responsibility for one's life while giving language to a wider unfairness, which would otherwise be disregarded as a mysteriously invisible force.

The therapeutic value of this way of looking at things came into focus for me through a struggle my agency was having with a volatile man named Mr. Jordan, the father of four children and well-known in the community as an especially tough character. He'd gone ballistic at the suggestion that he should give us permission to enroll his two youngest sons, Jason and Jarod, in a mentoring program. In a meeting with an agency team, he'd begun yelling, "My sons don't

need no goddamn program like that. They got a mentor---me!" In the face of his diatribe, the team had backed down. Afterward, the majority view was that we should have hung tough and challenged Mr. Jordan more directly. But as far as I could see, his confrontational skills were far beyond anything we could muster, even as team. Something in the way I was beginning to see things compelled me to stick my neck out, and I volunteered to meet with Mr. Jordan alone.

After some subtle begging on my part, he agreed to give me no more than 15 minutes if I came out to see him. Standing in his doorway, I began by saying how much I appreciated his standing up for kids, and as I said that, I thought I saw his shoulders drop an inch. "When I was a kid," I continued, "I always wanted my dad to stand up for me, but I knew that if he did that with white people, he'd be called an angry black man. Sometimes, I think black fathers can't win. They're either not involved enough, or they're too controlling."

At this point, Mr. Jordan looked directly at me for the first time and said, "Man, it's a bitch out there. If the white man ain't got his foot up your ass, he's trying to keep you down some other way. I got to deal with that shit at work every day. If it ain't the snooty white customers treating me like shit, it's the boss acting like I'm his property. One of these days, I'm gonna snap."

"I know what you mean," I found myself saying. "I snapped at my boss once, and it cost me my job. That's why black people have to think twice about taking that route. And brother, you especially have to be cool about it, because you have four little ones looking up to you. Goodness knows they need their dad to get through this world."

For the first time, Mr. Jordan smiled faintly. He then said, "Yeah, that's why I couldn't go along with that mentoring bullshit. It's like saying I can't be a father to my own boys."

"Look, your kids are lucky to have you as a father," I told him. "But the program isn't about dissing you as a father. It's just the opposite: it's about brothers coming together to help other brothers. Dads like you who have to work a lot of hours need someone available to pinch-hit when you're not around, to keep the gangbangers and drug dealers away from Jason and Jarrod while you're at work."

Our 15 minutes stretched into an hour. By the end, Mr. Jordan assured me, "I'll give it some serious thought. Maybe it could be good for them."

Virtually everything I did during my encounter with Mr. Jordan was counter to how I'd been trained and how I was supposed to conduct therapy at the clinic. I not only used my personal experiences with my dad to enter into Mr. Jordan's world as a black father, but openly shared my personal story about being fired, not to mention freely introducing the forbidden topic of race into the conversation, realizing that much of Mr. Jordan's determination to be a super dad was

driven by his need to refute the largely pejorative social narrative about black fathers. Underneath the anger and the profanity, he was making a powerful statement that needed to be validated: "I am *not* a bad father!"

During our conversation, I made myself present in a way that I hadn't with Luis. I was finding a voice that had been dormant in my formal training, with its narrow focus on diagnostic thinking and psychological functioning. I needed to learn to trust myself and my own experience to go beyond that limiting lens, to take into account the forces that molded the battle-hardened outlook of clients like Mr. Jordan. I'd reached a turning point in my development as a therapist: I was finally recognizing that to connect deeply with black people, I had to give the invisible wounds of racial trauma their due.

Finding a Voice

As I moved in and out of several positions in the following years, I continued to develop the willingness---and the deep need---to deal with a topic that made many people around me deeply uncomfortable. But early on, I recognized that being a self-righteous crusader for social justice didn't advance the process. To become a true agent of change, I couldn't afford to see the world as either black or white, us or them. I had to recognize how easily I myself could become "the other." As my life experience expanded, I began to let in something that white women and gay white men kept reminding me of. To them, I was a heterosexual male relating to them from a position of privilege. I needed to see that there may be a piece of an oppressor in many victims---and a piece of victim in many oppressors. Over the years, I've had a lot to learn about the complexities of conversations about race, both what triggers me and how I trigger others.

Today, I spend much of my time working as a consultant on improving racial relationships within large healthcare and social service systems. Increasingly, my work has become centered on issues like the anatomy of racial rage, learned voicelessness, and an array of other invisible wounds of racial oppression. At the same time, I continue to maintain a practice where I see how easy it is to lose perspective on the social issues that shape our clients' lives. To address the powerful role oppression played in my clients' lives, I've come to see my mission as being not only a therapeutic healer doling out help in doses of one-hour appointment slots, but also an activist and a bridge builder. Nothing more fully embodies both the frustration and the hope of playing all those roles than working with hardened young clients, like 13-year-old Omar, someone most therapists would agree isn't a promising candidate for psychotherapy.

Most of the time, Omar aspires to sound as much as he can like a dead-eyed, profanity-spouting convict. The closest he comes to becoming animated is when he's repeatedly reminding me, "I don't give a fuck about nothing, Doc." And when I try to get a little tricky and ask, "So what do you make of that?" He's quick to cut me off with "You know what? I don't really give a fuck

enough to figure out why I don't give a fuck." And to be sure, he has a lot not to think about---his crack-addicted teen mom, the young father he's never met, the 20 foster placements he's already had, the succession of teachers and caretakers who've tried and failed to provide any meaningful guidance in his tumultuous life.

Omar was a throwaway child, always dangling by a thread above disaster. His father was in and out of prison regularly for drug use and a variety of nonviolent drug-related crimes; his mother, battling drug addiction and serving prison time for prostitution, had only sporadic custody of him. He spent one period of time as a child sleeping in abandoned cars. Today, he reads at only a fourth-grade level, but he's built up an impressive résumé---a well-documented history of encounters with the police and the juvenile justice system. He's been charged with a long list of offenses, ranging from drug possession with intent to distribute to aggravated battery. As a result, on the streets he's very much seen, known, and *respected* as a criminal-in-training.

Brother Lorenzo, affiliated with a local Lasallian school working with impoverished inner-city children, referred Omar to me. Bro Zo, as he's affectionately called by the kids and many of us who work with him, had high hopes that I, as a black man who was "making it" and doing positive things in the world, could make a difference in Omar's life. I knew my work would be cut out for me. After all, Omar is Respectable White America's nightmare, an embodiment of the scary kids we saw on our TV screens the night of the Baltimore uprising. Some of the colleagues with whom I share a midtown Manhattan office have even expressed concern about his presence in our waiting room. A black therapist in the office recently took me aside and said, "I admire your commitment, but I'm trying to build my practice with high-end clients. When they find out that they have to sit in the waiting room with that dude . . . well, he looks a little off-putting."

So why do I see Omar at this stage in my career? What makes me think that an hour or so of periodic conversation with me whenever he makes it down to my office from the Bronx where he lives can possibly make any difference? While I can't identify with the bleakness of his early life, I can relate to what it means to be a young black male bombarded by devaluing messages that lacerate the sense of self.

With kids like Omar, it's important to recognize the central role that toughness and respect plays in their life. Growing up fast in a harsh, unforgiving world, they've learned that "being soft" is an unpardonable mistake on the streets. As Omar puts it, "If you let some mofo know your weak spots, you're dead." Whatever the cost to his heart and soul, the code of being strong is the basic survival strategy of his life---even if it doesn't leave any breathing room to honor the pain and childlike longing that also live in him.

One of my goals with Omar, as with most youth of color, is to provide a space where he can let his guard down and not have to worry about being judged or disrespected. I understand his deep

need to hide behind a mask of invincibility, and my focus is to work around it with the specific aim of awakening his vulnerabilities. I almost always start this process by talking about race because it's rarely talked about openly, and clients like Omar have a lot to say about it. I either introduce it in direct relationship to the client's story, or as it relates to a current event. Either way, the results are usually full and animated participation.

Once we have a bit of therapeutic traction, I gingerly expand the conversation to explore other topics. For example, as Omar began to talk with shameless bravado about not giving a fuck even about why he didn't give a fuck, I applauded him for being strong enough to not allow things to affect him, telling him this was part of finding the "hero within." Then, in a quiet voice, I asked a few questions designed to evoke his emotions: "Do you ever think about your mom? Do you miss her? What was the pain you think her using drugs covered?" Of course, the questions I ask are always much more important than the answers I receive. The goal is to pierce Omar's wall of invincibility while allowing him to cling to it, like a familiar home.

During Omar's second session, I casually mentioned the possibility that he might visit an aunt in Portsmouth, Virginia, who's spoken of getting him out of New York and giving him a fresh start in a new place. He assured me that he had no intentions of leaving the Bronx. "Why I gotta leave the Bronx?" he asked incredulously. "Even coming here to see you, I'm thinking, *Goddamn, I can't wait to get the fuck outta here and back to the Bronx*."

Where others may see crime, destitution, lost opportunity, Omar sees home---a place where he doesn't have to contend with looks of dismissal or disdain, or with the pain of not being seen at all. He knows what's expected of him and what's appropriate for him to expect. Though foreign to the outside world at large, the norms, the rules of engagement, and the healthy mistrust necessary to surviving in this world are all familiar to him. The *other* New York is a place nobody cares about until it encroaches upon the lives of mainstream whites.

In effect, Omar's journey to my office in midtown Manhattan is part of our treatment. It has nothing to do with some elitist notion about what Manhattan has to offer in glitter, affluence, and proximity to power, or about what's lacking in the Bronx. Instead, it's a disturbing reminder of the reality of the worlds that he's trapped between, whether he wishes to be or not. At some level, he sees me as semi-white, and my office as a white place, yet I know he knows that I genuinely *see* him, even *get* him. My hope is that coming here and being in relationship with me is slowly redefining his world. It's a paradox: seeing a therapist is the ultimate expression of being soft---yet he still comes.

A Wise Warrior

A lot of my time with Omar is spent talking about what it means to be a warrior, trying to

validate the part of him that wants to be "fighting tough" and standing up for himself, but he needs to learn about other ways to defend himself. I often remind him that not everyone is levelheaded and streetwise enough to be a *wise* warrior, which can involve fighting without physically fighting. I'm helping him practice becoming this kind of verbal warrior, developing his ability to express himself effectively, becoming a better advocate for himself, and thus overcoming his "learned voicelessness"---a hidden trauma wound, intermixed with feelings of rage, hopelessness, and disrespect for himself and others.

Again and again, I have Omar cite the first two rules of becoming a smart warrior: "You've got to be mentally tough. It's not about how many pounds you can bench press: it's how tough and tactical your mind is." This is important because many youth of color have it permanently etched in their minds, by both school and society, that they're not intelligent. Many think of themselves as less smart than whites, though few will openly say so. The shift to becoming a warrior allows black youth to find their voices.

I often make use of an axiom borrowed from NBA coach Doc Rivers: "Those who control your anger own you." As is often the case with people who've been traumatized, emotional regulation is a major undertaking. Omar is a hypervigilant kid, who can explode at the slightest signs of rejection or disrespect. He's a talented basketball player, but he's been barred from playing for the team sponsored by the group home where he lives because of his excessive fighting. Most of his on-court clashes have stemmed from what he considers incidents of disrespect, times when another player fouled him in a way that he thought was intentional.

I often use basketball as a therapeutic teaching tool. During one of our sessions, I suggested that players less talented than Omar could still defeat him in other ways. As warriors, I reminded him, they'll figure out they can "fight" him without fighting him and win by pissing him off. I stress the importance of taking charge of his anger while on the court, finding ways to channel it that don't take him out of the game emotionally or physically. The same rule applies to the game of life.

One day on Omar's way to my office, a cop walking down the middle of the street started shouting, "Get to the other side of the street! Get to the other side of street now!" It wasn't clear from Omar's telling whether the cop ever spoke directly to him, but it didn't seem to matter; he felt dissed. This story led to a broader discussion about the relationship between the police and black males. Once again, I returned to my themes of using his voice, becoming a warrior, and not allowing his rage to push him into self-destructive reactions. To make my point and show that I knew what it means to be a public spectacle, I told him about my own experience, many years ago, of being beaten by a cop in broad daylight after I was pulled over for failure to come to a complete stop at a stop sign. My driver's license indicated that I should wear glasses while driving, and the cop didn't believe me when I told him I was wearing contacts. He began shining

his flashlight directly in my eyes. After claiming to not see the lens, he demanded that I remove one to show him. Concerned about sticking my unwashed finger in my eye, I tried to reason with him, which angered him. Before I knew it, I was handcuffed, thrown face down on the hood of his car, and beaten with his night stick. I was arrested and spent years fighting the matter in court.

But what Omar extracted from my story was that I'd been too soft with the cop and was beaten because of it. He stated with clear resolve, "I'm telling you now, if that was me being beaten like that, I ain't about to go down alone." His words were chilling, not the typical bravado that usually rolls effortlessly off his lips. "Doc," he said to me, "this is where you and me differ. You believe in that MLK shit about turning the other cheek. What did that get us? We're still being beaten up, called niggers, and treated like shit. You think white people give a shit about Obama? We're all niggers to them. The police still shooting us down like fucking animals. I ain't trying to dis you or anything. I give you props for being a doctor and all, but bottom line, to the white man, you ain't no better than me. To him, you're just Doctor Nigger."

As they often do, his words stung, but this time I could see his hurt and vulnerability poking through his anger. He was on the verge of tears. I sat quietly reflecting on his comments, realizing to some extent, he was right. Without a word, I got up and slowly walked toward him. I put my right hand on his right shoulder and then said, "You make a lot of sense. You're very insightful, and I'm impressed with you. But this is why we need you to live—to help change things. You can't just continue to waste your life away on the streets."

He sat still but said nothing.

"You feel me?" I nudged.

He looked slightly bewildered, then slowly and reluctantly, he nodded his head. Unknowingly, Omar had just violated his own code and offered a rare glimpse into his inner world. His fury with President Obama, the cops, and me, effectively hid his sense of powerlessness, hopelessness, and despair. Behind the stony expression, I could finally see the scared, overwhelmed child whose life had been hijacked by losses, rejections, insults, and disappointments. For him, the ever-increasing list of unarmed young black men killed by the police represented a vicarious trauma---almost as if he'd taken a bullet to his soul with each one. The only choice he saw was between remaining imprisoned in a cauldron of rage or occasionally finding some way, however self-destructive, to let the world feel the fury he can no longer contain.

It was lucky that Omar's encounter with the police happened on his way to therapy. He used our session to discharge and rechannel his rage. I was encouraged to see that he remained engaged in

our tense conversation and could sense the early signs of a new, emerging voice, the glimmerings of an awakening warrior. He's not quite there yet, but he's on a promising path.

Parallel Lives

With our stark differences in age, education, class, and family background, Omar and I couldn't be any more different. Yet as black males, we're living parallel lives. I understand his rage and his pain, his thirst for revenge, and the anesthesia it provides to numb the pain. I understand that it's impossible to live on the receiving end of degradation and domination without feeling deep anger taking over your inner being. As Omar's therapist, healer, and bridge-builder, I have to stretch the traditional rules and boundaries of therapy to let him know that I know him---and even that, in some ways, I *am* him.

I also let him know that I worry about his premature death and how it would affect me. I may be breaking a few sacred rules of psychotherapy, but it's important to me for him not only to see my complexion, but feel our connection, for him to appreciate the ways that race is a connective tissue aligning our lives together. I want him to know that I see him and all his complexities and that, without a doubt, his life matters. I focus on trying to help him "name it and claim it," move him toward understanding that the heavy, unnamed sensation he walks around with every day has a name---rage. I continually remind him that he's not an "angry black youth" as defined by the outside world. Instead, I tell him, he's an "enraged black youth," because becoming enraged is something that happens *inside* you when hurtful and harmful things happen to you from *outside*. I remind him over and over again that *enrage* must be converted to *outrage*, and that he has to develop the mental toughness to manage it because "those who control your anger own you."

When Omar and I get together, in some ways I'm passing on to him what I got from being in Earl's barber shop---creating for him a zone of safety, where the expressions of his rage can be life liberating, rather than life threatening. Just as Earl's gave black males like me a safe space to exercise our voices, I see therapy as that place for black youth like Omar. Finding his voice is critical to the liberation of his soul. It's the key that turns inchoate rage into meaningful action.

Omar's "voice lessons" involve learning how to identify his feelings. Since not acknowledging or experiencing feelings is associated with strength and survival, he's often clueless about what he's feeling unless it is anger---the only feeling, in fact, that he recognizes. I know that an emerging voice, one shifting from suppression to expression, is raw, unregulated, arbitrary, often lacking in civility. So at this point in therapy, how he speaks is not nearly as important as the fact that he's actually speaking. Whether it's an outburst about the cop, a dude from a game of basketball that he wants to punch in the face, or my old-school MLK ideas regarding race, I let him vent as loudly and forcefully as he needs to.

During our time together, Omar has shown some sporadic flashes of change. He's been allowed to resume playing basketball, though he still has some out-of-control moments that threaten his place on the team. He shows up fairly regularly for therapy---noteworthy itself---and in session, he can be open, participatory, and fully engaged. He may adamantly refuse to talk during the next session, but he still comes.

I know my work with Omar is tenuous and fragile, that I'm in a fierce competition with the streets for his soul and survival. The only way he's found so far to win respect and status is by being a criminal---and ultimately, that's the only career many kids like Omar are being prepared to follow. White America pays close attention to the crimes that already fill the rap sheets of Omar and others like him, but fails to see the untold story in their lives of family dysfunction and breakdown, poverty, and racial oppression.

But Omar and many in his generation don't see these connections either. Even worse, neither do many of the therapists and other professionals charged with helping them. Beneath Omar's rage and bravado is a desperate plea---the same plea and desire that all children have---to know that he's important, valued, worth fighting for. I know that feeling. I remember having it as a young boy, and it now fuels my work as a therapist.

My time with Omar and others like him is often grueling and disheartening, but the work has long since ceased to be just a matter of professional interest. It's personal. I know that Omar's life and mine are intertwined. It's of little significance that I speak the King's English, possess three degrees, and am neatly attired---at least during office hours. To many segments of our society, I am Omar. Like many men of color, I've been arrested and presumed to be dangerous. I see and feel the fear in the eyes of some whites as I walk near them on the street at night. During these encounters, words are seldom spoken, but we both understand what just happened, and we implicitly agree to continue on as if it never happened. These relentless micro-assaults on dignity are part of what it means to be black. They fuel the hurt, rage, and hopelessness that have become a way of life. For many whites, in contrast, the explanation is simple: blacks are just overly sensitive whiners, quick to play the race card. It's difficult for many whites to acknowledge that racism, racial oppression, and whiteness have anything to do with the suffering that black people endure. At times, bridging the racial gulf that divides us seems insurmountable, yet our mutual survival depends on it.

As I sat stupefied in front of my TV witnessing the uprising in Baltimore, I saw the face of Omar . . . and Jamar and Ameer and Corey and Brandon and many others. My heart was heavy as I fended off feelings of sadness, anger, and despair. I knew there was so much more to report, especially the untold stories of black life. And I knew that no real conversation about race can begin until, as a society, we're willing to listen to those stories.