

Introduction

Ten men. On the surface, they have little in common. They include schoolteachers and community activists, a professional storyteller and a journalist. They live in cities as far separated as Philadelphia and Los Angeles, San Francisco and Atlanta. Some dropped out of high school; others graduated from prestigious universities. Some grew up in stable, supportive homes; some were abandoned as children. Some have been in trouble with the law; one works in law enforcement.

But these ten men share a bond that transcends their differences: Each is a Black man in America. Each in his own way has given careful thought to what it *means* to be a Black man in America. Each feels a deep concern for and obligation to the younger Black men growing up in America. And as a result, each enthusiastically agreed to contribute an essay to the book you are holding in your hands.

What we asked of these men was something like this: “Imagine a young Black man, probably in his mid-teens, living in Camden or Compton or Detroit or East St. Louis. He’s a good kid, a smart kid. But you’re worried about him. You can see that he’s getting hit with a lot of the temptations and pressures that can pull

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a young man down. Maybe he doesn't have the kind of older men in his life that a young guy needs—old heads who can help him get some perspective on life. If you had a chance to talk to that young man, what would you say to him?" These ten essays are their responses.

In discussing their contributions to *Brother to Brother*, many of these men talked frankly about their desire to become part of a new kind of conversation about race in America—a conversation that would acknowledge past injustices, but not get bogged down in them; one that would recognize self-destructive behavior, but not let that become an excuse for despair. Many of them worry about a fatalistic attitude held by some of their younger Black brothers—an attitude that says that to be Black means to be poor, underemployed, and without hope. One contributor mentioned the pain he felt when a child he works with scornfully told him, "*You* aren't Black." "What that child meant," he said sadly, "is that I speak like an educated man, and that I dress like a professional man." Another contributor remarked that when he mentions his two children, he is often asked where the children live. "When I say, 'They live in my house with my wife and me,' that's considered surprising. Because, you know," he added sarcastically, "a Black man isn't supposed to

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be married to the mother of his children.” Countless young people struggle with the fear that they will be accused of “acting white” if they take school seriously. In the words of one contributor, “We badly need a new definition of what it is to be authentically Black—a definition that isn’t based on negative, self-destructive beliefs.”

As this book went to print, a Black man, Senator Barack Obama, had been nominated as a major political party’s candidate for president of the United States. However the election turns out, this is a historic moment for our country. Millions of Americans of every race have been uplifted by the story of a Black man who both is proud of his race and refuses to be limited by any notion about what it means to be “really Black.” In the same way, each of the ten proudly Black authors of this book has refused to limit his potential, hide his talents, or otherwise live his life according to anyone else’s idea of what it meant to be authentically Black. Just as the story of Barack Obama has challenged and inspired a country, may the words of these ten men challenge and inspire you.



Kenyon Whittington

About Kenyon Whittington

Abandoned as a newborn, then briefly reclaimed by his abusive father and stepmother, Kenyon Whittington grew up in an atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and neglect. His earliest memories are of moving between the homes of his violent father, his abusive and mentally unstable mother, and various foster families. Salvation arrived in the form of his grandmother and aunt, who eventually gained custody of the traumatized little boy and raised him as their own.

As he gradually overcame the horrors of his past, Kenyon became an outstanding student and the determined architect of his own path in life. He has consistently sought out positive opportunities, getting involved in activities ranging from debate and chess clubs to Upward Bound, Operation Understanding, and Philadelphia Futures. He is a graduate of Hampton University and is completing his master's degree in education at Holy Family University in Philadelphia. As a direct services coordinator of the Pennsylvania GEAR UP program, Kenyon helps middle-school and high-school students prepare for and succeed in college.

Kenyon Whittington Speaks

Hey young world, young world,
The future is in the palm of your hands.
Hey young world, young world,
Your destiny is at your command.
Believe what you want and achieve what you will,
But if it wasn't for you, tomorrow's day would
stand still.
To be ignored is to lose your space,
So stand up, young world, and claim your place.
Don't just push yourselves to as far as you can see,
But strive towards your dreams, hopes, and most
of all, victory.
Hey young world, young world,
Trouble will intervene with you.
But remember—young world, young world—
It is you that will bring you through.
Just like seeds from plants and trees,
That grow roots and sprout leaves,
You are the roots that hold things together,
While past generations like leaves fall in the weather.
Hey young world, young world, it's all on you,
You're like the hundredths of a second, seconds of a
minute, minutes of an hour, that bring the days through.
Hey young world, young world,
Older generations are looking at you!
Please don't let them down, because life gives no rebounds.
You will fail not only them but most of all yourselves.
Hey young world, young world,
You mean the World,
Young World.

Hey there, my brothers. I want to talk with you about success—your success, and how you are going to achieve it.

Your vision of success may be different from mine. It's up to you to define it in your own way. But I'd like to argue that some things often seen as success are not it at all. Success cannot be measured by material things like cash, cars, and jewelry. Those are all things that can be ours one day and lost the next. True success can't be bought and can't be sold. Neither can its close relatives, integrity and respect. In my mind, success is about investing fully in the best part of yourself. It's about the values that you choose, live by, and pass on to future generations.

The values you choose don't have to be determined by your circumstances. Let me give you an example. I'll call him Person A. Person A shows up to school sometimes. He's usually late. He comes into class with a Zune or an iPod and his cell phone turned on. He's never prepared for class; he doesn't even have a pen or paper. Person A doesn't follow the school dress code; his pants sag below his waistline to display his underwear to the world. Sometimes Person A is rude to teachers. He intimidates and even fights other students.

Meanwhile, there's Person B. Person B is studious;

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he shows up for class on time. He has the supplies he needs to be a successful student: pen, paper, books, and completed assignments. Person B helps build the community by being part of school activities. He shows self-respect through his appearance, and he shows respect for others through his behavior.

Person A and Person B are neighbors. They come from the same crime-infested housing project. They are both being raised by guardians who are not their biological parents. But Person B has decided to take charge of his future. Because his commitment to success is obvious, people around him want to help him along. They are drawn to investing in that young man's future. Person A, however, shows disregard for himself and those around him. He doesn't seem invested in his own future. Seeing that, fewer people invest in him. Unlike Person B, he has not developed credibility with those around him. All he has built is a negative reputation.

The good news is that someone like Person A can choose a new path to travel. Despite what all the other Person A's around him are doing, he can make different choices for his own life. Like Person B, he can choose to be an individual making positive choices for his future.

It's hard to choose a pathway in life until you have a value system in place. Do *you*? What do *you* value? Question yourself. Does your value system lift you and

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the world up, or bring you down? Your list of values can be short or long. Mine, for instance, includes love, peace, and respect. The important thing is that you know them and are loyal to them. They will guide you as you find your own destiny.

But to succeed in any terms, you must value learning. More than any single thing, learning is essential to your progress through life's journey. To deny a person—to deny yourself—a proper education is to deny that person pride, self-esteem, and self-reliance. An uneducated person is, in a sense, crippled to the level of a slave. While people are surely going to fail you in life, you can rise above anything if you refuse to fail yourself.

Besides defining success and establishing your values, a third thing I'd like to encourage you to do is to work hard to build community. The concerns and issues you face are not yours alone. They are shared by your brothers. Together you have far greater strength than you do individually; together you can face the enemies that are waiting to bring you down. And the greatest enemy of all is ignorance. Ignorance thrives on fear and isolation. Ignorance can be any aspect of your life—yourself, your family, your friends—that prevents you from being the absolute best that you can be. Ignorance is any individual, institution, or code of behavior that

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prevents you from moving forward. But ignorance has power only if you choose to embrace it and refuse to proclaim a brighter future. By joining together with other young brothers, with your neighbors, with your larger community, you can uplift yourself and everyone around you. You can build a community that works in unison and thrives on positivity. Everyone can be a leader in this kind of community, because it's not about who can think the fastest, but how collectively you can think the furthest. Collectively, you can create a vision of your common future.

You might be asking, "So why should I listen to what you have to say? You don't know what kind of obstacles I face in my life. You're talking about a fantasy world. In the real world, with real problems, dreams don't come true."

I hear you. You deserve to know where I'm coming from with all this. In response, I want to tell you about a young man who is a living example of everything I have said. He's a man who, according to every indicator, should be another sad statistic. Instead, his life illustrates the possibility of success.

Strike one—as a baby, this young man was first abused, then abandoned, by his biological parents. In consequence, he spent the most delicate years of his life traveling from foster home to foster home. A brief

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reunion with his parents was punctuated by emotional, psychological, and physical torture before he was rescued by his grandmother and aunt.

Strike two—his grandmother died. Without the woman he most loved and depended upon, he was once again adrift, with no anchor in his life. Looking around him for direction, he saw negative peer pressure, drugs and gangs, and all the other daily realities of life in the projects.

Strike three—he was a Black man in America. Like many of his brothers, he felt the pressures of racism bearing down on him, the negative expectations that society held for him. He would fail, that society said. He would not live to see 21.

Three strikes and the world said, “You’re out.”

“No, I am not!” he replied. “My life is no ballgame. In God’s eyes, I am never out.”

Yes, he was born a victim of grim circumstances. He faced great adversity and many obstacles in the pursuit of his dreams. But he held fast to those dreams and never wavered. He chose to be a victor and never a victim. He refused to use adversity as an excuse for failure.

I know this man well. He is me. I have dreamed what some might call the impossible dream, but to me there is no impossibility. I chose, and continue to choose, to

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put forth my best effort and reap the consequences of my actions.

As long as it is done from the heart, it is worth doing.

It's not about cars or cash or jewelry.

It's not about being #1 or #100.

It's not about scoring 2400 or 400 on the SAT.

It's not about being in the elite honors class or in a remedial course.

Because none of these things can show who you are inside your heart.

Whether you move on to a trade school, the working world, the military, a community college, or a university, what matters is what you do while you are there. No two of us have identical strengths and weaknesses. What is important is that we know ourselves, using our strengths and striving to improve ourselves. When we need encouragement, we can look at inspiring historical figures like W.E.B. DuBois and Malcolm X. One was a scholar, one was a convict; but both became prominent, positive role models in the African American community.

Me? Today I am working full time for the Philadelphia School District's GEAR UP program. There I help guide young people to become college-aware and prepared for college success. I'm also close to completing course

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work at Holy Family University for my master's degree in elementary education.

The statistics say none of this should be true.

I say statistics are only numbers.

We have the power to create lives we can be proud of. We can take life's roadblocks and turn them into stepping stones.

What will you do to stay true to your dreams and to make them a magnificent reality?