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My Father's Dreams

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Pinkett: My Father's Dreams

what's important and valuable among all this, and this is certainly the most priceless ingredient of education today. For there are all too many of us who think it's more important to know all the latest Michael Jackson songs than it is to *live by and strive for* the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. . . .

Let me reminisce a little about those early days when I was attending Howard and working in my father's business—the time between the two world wars, the time of the Great Depression of the thirties. As a registered Democrat and one time national committee-woman, I'm tempted to mention that that same Great Depression came after 12 years of Republican presidents!

Back then, there were two kinds of careers open to Blacks: The professions, and

Speaking of jumping off skyscrapers, Dick Gregory once observed that the reason suicide rate is so low among Blacks is that it's very difficult to kill oneself by jumping out of a basement window!

I mention the basement because my father's office was a single basement room. But for us it was a great deal more. For my father had his dreams, too. Years later, he restated his dreams in his typically thoughtful and slightly formal language:

"I decided to organize a business which would draw upon my experience in real estate and insurance to the end that I could support my family and build a business that would give employment to others, as it had opportunities to serve more and more people."

Let me reemphasize one key phrase in what he said: ". . . build a business *which would give employment to others* as it had opportunities to serve more and more people." For even back then my father saw his fledgling one-room business as sort of "seedbed"—a place where Blacks could get employment and training at a time when most doors were closed to them, and that some would move on to start businesses of their own, in a seeding-and-reseeding process which would repeat itself many times over. . . .

My father's dreams have been fulfilled many times over. The business which began in that basement office with one employee and no customers, 52 years ago, now occupies its own modern two-story office building and employs more than 30 persons. Its clients number in the thousands, its Property Management Department services residential rental, commercial and investment units numbering in the thousands. The Real Estate Sales Department handles transactions ranging from single-family homes to estates and diplomatic properties, as well as industrial and multi-unit apartment buildings. The Insurance Department is a full-service, policy writing agency representing major old-line firms like Aetna and the Hartford, and is recognized for having one of the lowest claim ratios in the country.

My father's dreams have come true, particularly in respect to the process of reseeding. Over the years we've given employment to many people—many people on the way up, on the way up and into the mainstream. In many instances we have given them scholarships for specialized training. Many of our employees have moved on to professional careers or to businesses of their own, some even as direct competitors.

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By Flaxie M. Pinkett

I was fairly young when I entered Howard University, younger than most of my classmates. I lived with my family in Washington, just a few blocks from Howard on V Street. My parents were very progressive people, for their time, and both had careers. But they were also very strict, and they took a dim view of the social life on The Hill. They were heavily invested with the work ethic. My father solved the problem of "temptation on The Hill" by hiring me as a part-time clerk in his struggling new business on New Jersey Avenue. That way he could keep track of me on a time clock as well as by personal observation.

You're probably thinking that this is a lead-in to a discourse on how tough things were for us then, compared to how easy they are for today's students. Quite the opposite. In many ways, life was a lot easier for us then than it is for today's undergraduates. The same is true for teaching then versus teaching now. Today's professors have a much tougher job simply because there is so much more to *teach*. Consider this: More than 80% of the scientists born since the dawn of civilization are alive today.

And that's just one aspect of the information explosion. One little story that I find particularly appealing concerns what I consider the humility of the true academic—*not* all the academics that I've known are humble! Anyway, a few years ago a publisher invited 60 of the leading scientists of our time to write articles about what they didn't know but wanted to. The result was a book 450 pages in length, "The Encyclopedia of Ignorance," detailing what these great minds didn't know. When you get right down to it, it's one of the great paradoxes of the information explosion that it takes a great deal of education just to know what you don't know!

I should also add that it takes education plus experience to be able to discern



domestic service. There were jobs in Civil Service, of course, but they were mainly menial with few promotions.

In industry, job opportunities for Blacks were virtually zero. Except for A. Phillip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the trade and craft unions were virtually lily-white. In business, you could forget it. White collar jobs for blacks just didn't exist.

My father knew all this, of course. But it was 1932, at the depth of the Great Depression, and he had a wife and six children to support. And he was unemployed.

So he did something that you might say was completely irrational, given the times and the conditions, given the economy, given the going failure rate of all businesses, given a skyrocketing suicide rate amongst once successful business executives and investors jumping off skyscrapers. Given almost 99.99% assurance of failure, he started his own business, and with great pride he gave it his own name: John R. Pinkett, Incorporated.

The process continues, and it does not diminish us in the least. It is good for our people, it is good for our community, and it is good for each one of us in the business to know that we are giving back something of what we have received.

Over these years we have had an extremely long and most pleasant business relationship with Howard University, one that continues to this day. For Howard was one of my father's first major clients, and indeed it was this very fact that enabled him to negotiate contracts with major stock insurance companies at a time when there were no Black agencies representing them anywhere in the world. We have never forgotten *our roots!*

By now you've probably done some mental arithmetic and decided that my own business career spans something like 50 years. You're pretty close: And I'm going to draw on those 50 plus years to share a few thoughts with you.

First, let's start with the "Black is Beautiful" theme. You don't hear it as much today as you used to. It was an important statement at the time, an important reminder that there was no need for Blacks to emulate white standards of beauty. It was—and is—also a statement of racial pride, a reaction to the centuries of second-class citizenship, another way of saying "we are *not* inferior, we are *not* second class citizens, we are as good as you are—*whoever you are!*"

Coming as it did at the time of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the billions of dollars earmarked for eradicating poverty and wiping out the centuries-old inequities between whites and Blacks, the "Black is Beautiful" slogan unfortunately made a lot of people think getting into the mainstream was going to be easy.

Dick Gregory used to tell the story of a young Black man who filed a complaint with his EEO office. [Equal Employment Opportunity], claiming he'd been turned down for a job because he was Black. He was called in by the EEO Board and asked what type of job he had applied for. "It was a j-j-j-job as a r-r-r-radio a-a-a-announcer!" he proclaimed proudly.

Dick Gregory was telling it like it is. There were a lot of people then who assumed, mistakenly, that simply *being* Black was a automatic ticket into the mainstream, into the Great Society. Well, of course it's not, any more than being white is an automatic ticket into anything more significant than the Tuesday afternoon whist club in Phil Harris' famed Doo-Wah-Ditty (awful small but awful pretty).

The Great Society created opportunities to get into the mainstream that hadn't existed before, but many of us misread those opportunities. In the early days of our business, during the days of rigid segregation and virtually 100% inequality, we learned one important lesson: When you are Black in a white man's world, when you are a Black business competing with white businesses, you are disadvantaged not only by blatant prejudice but also by lack of resources, lack of credit, lack of viable market. . . . and your competitors have an abundance of almost everything you do not. I say "almost" . . . the one thing you have in as great or greater abundance is the *need to excel*. In short, you've got to be not just as good as but *better than* your competitors. This is not fair, but it's true.

You see, there was another side to this issue. Black businesses have been around for a long time. They have been tolerated as long as they were second-rate and were willing to accept only the crumbs. The problems began to arise, as any Black businessperson will tell you, when we (and others like us) decided to compete as businesses rather than being content to sit in the wings eating crumbs.

In short, in business or in personal life, there are two stages to entering the mainstream:

1. You must make a conscientious decision to enter it. It will not come and sweep you up. In all the discussion about de facto segregation, we pay far too little attention to people who voluntarily segregate themselves from the mainstream by waiting for it to come and embrace them.

2. You must also make a conscientious decision to *excel*. We are sometimes too concerned with the symbols of success—the Mercedes and BMWs—and not enough with the excellence itself that they are supposed to reflect, and which most of would say, "In the old fashioned way," "By working for it!"

Let me tack on another thought which may be even more important. As you take these momentous steps, and as you begin to achieve your success, it might be a pretty good idea to remember your brothers and sisters—and I am using the term generically to mean everybody, every race and every color—who has not yet made it. Help them along, make their road a little easier than yours was. Repay some of the investment in yourself by investing in the community. Equally important, invest in your university!

This [day] is a milestone in the history of

Howard University. Within the hour, you will formally dedicate the new School of Business and Public Administration building. You are now formally in the mainstream of educating and being educated in two of the most important pursuits of our day: business management, and public service. This is an exciting time for Howard, a challenge to do something significant where other schools—including the revered Harvard Business School—have not been so successful.

In short, it is a challenge to managers—not bureaucrats.

Writing in *"Inc. Magazine"* several years ago, Albert Shapero—himself an academic—put it very bluntly:

"There are virtually no colleges of business in the United States today; there are only academies of bureaucratic middle management. The 1,180 institutions granting degrees in business and management teach how to fit into and serve the 5,000 largest corporations. The concepts and the values taught are those of the corporate bureaucrat or staff professional."

And here's the clincher: "Although the typical M.B.A. might vote for a conservative political ticket," Shapero says, "his training has prepared him to work equally well in the Department of Energy, General Motors, or a Soviet Commissariat."

Shapero then goes on to point out that in all these institutions virtually nothing is taught about a central subject that is virtually the heart and soul of commercial success among Blacks: small business and entrepreneurship. Here's what he says:

"Small business and entrepreneurship are practically invisible in the curriculum and textbooks of so-called schools of business administration. Most schools offer one or two courses on small business, but they are never required and are usually taught by outsiders or professors who have given up hope of promotion."

Historically, Black success has been closely linked to entrepreneurship in small business and in the professions. . . .

We're entrepreneurs because we *have to be*.

And that's good! ☐

The above was excerpted from the address of realtor/businesswoman Flaxie M. Pinkett at Howard University's annual Opening Convocation, September 28.