

FORUM

36 pounds lighter and counting down



Nigel Alston
Motivational Moments

"Sometimes, when one person is missing, the whole world seems depopulated."

—Alphonse de Lamartine

"Where's your butt?" an unsuspecting co-worker asked as I turned around to identify the source of the question.

"What did you say?" I asked, confirming what I knew.

"Where's your butt?" she repeated, smiling, while standing beside another co-worker, her accomplice.

"It's still there," I responded, laughing. "With my shirt hanging out it just looks like its gone."

That's because my stomach is shrinking in size and my pants, suits and shirts fit differently now.

It has been a long time now since a dentist/businessman friend challenged me to take better care of my

health. "We need you around," he told me after a speech one night. He challenged me to take better care of myself before it's too late.

You need people like him in your life, ones who will look you in the face and tell you the truth, like my wife. She will let me go a few months and then give me a not to subtle hint: "Do you know you are getting bigger and bigger?"

That's a question that usually produces silence on my part.

Both of them were right and I knew it. I also knew what to do about it, but chose not to. The pain of carrying extra weight (fat) was not greater than eating good food. So I kept on eating anything and everything. One day, I walked up a couple flights of stairs after a fire drill and realized I had developed "done lap" disease.

I was huffing and puffing. I couldn't catch my breath and complete a sentence at the same time. Beads of sweat were rolling down my head. That's when I thought about how my stomach "done lapped" over my waist line and how my back was killing me. That was it!

A moment of truth. "I can't take this anymore," I said. This is not fun; it's pain!

The pain of carrying extra (weight) around had now become greater than eating more and more food. I made that decision during the holiday season, and created my own accountability by making it public. That has kept me focused and disciplined, because people ask me about my progress and comment on the loss they see taking place.

That's what produced the comment about my butt. My co-workers can see me get smaller day by day. I have eaten more fruit, apples primarily, in the last 14 weeks than I have in years. Vegetables even taste better now and drinking more water has led to a well worn path to the bathroom, at home and work.

It's all because of Weight Watchers.

My coat hangs where it used to hug me tightly and I'm stepping on the cuffs of my pants. They hang a little lower now that my waist is getting smaller and that's driving me crazy. I need to visit a tailor or buy some new clothes.

I have been through all the sizes I've accumulated over the years in the closet, even fooling my wife recently. "You looked good yesterday," she told me, "Was that a new coat?" Actually, it was a sports jacket I've had for a couple of years. It looks new, because I'm smaller. Now it's a good fit.

I hate getting up early on Saturday mornings to weigh in. I want to sleep a little longer, but the thought of "done lap" disease keeps me going, another week, one day at a time. Another granola bar, another glass of water, another apple in the morning, that special pineapple dessert in the evening, and my Sunday special - Meta's baked chicken with (Texas Pete) hot sauce, collard greens, cabbage and the best muffin in town.

The routine is working. I might be able to conquer those steps now that I'm 36 pounds lighter and counting down.

Nigel Alston is a radio talk show host, columnist and motivational speaker. Visit his Web site at www.motivationalmoments.com.

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Ward's religious bigotry



Armstrong Williams
Guest Columnist

Charlie Ward, star point guard for the New York Knicks and recent recipient of the NBA's outstanding community service award, was chastised by NBA commissioner David Stern last week as an "intolerant and divisive" zealot.

Stern was responding to inflammatory remarks Ward made about Jews in a recent New York Times Magazine article. In the article, Ward classified Jews as "stubborn," and said that they had Christ's "blood on their hands." He also cryptically remarked that, "There are Christians getting persecuted by Jews every day."

Since our society tends not to confuse its athletes for its historians, let us not dwell on the fact that it was Roman Gov. Pontius Pilate who ordained the Crucifixion, or, for that

matter, that the events occurred 2,000 years ago. Likewise, since our society tends not to mistake its athletes for its philosophers, let us not dwell on the fact that Christ died for all of our sins, as opposed to the indiscretions of any one group. Get it? To blame Jews in this regard is to miss the entire point. Or, as American Jewish Congress Executive Director Phil Baum put it: "Ward...should stick to basketball, and leave the theology to those who know at least something about it."

Since our society does, however, tend to mistake its athletes for its role models, let us dwell for a moment on the cultural implications of Ward's remarks. In the simplest sense, Ward's comments represent primitive tribalism. As part of the dominant tribe - Christians - Ward places a higher value on those who worship as he does. For those who do not, Ward is comfortable distilling them into a few broad stereotypes (i.e., "stubborn") and, in effect, marginalizing them as inferior "others."

This is natural: the dominant

tribe tends not to like the other tribes very much for the simple reason that they represent competing social customs.

Traditionally, the reaction of the dominant tribe has been one of defensiveness. In such a manner, minorities have been regarded as mentally inferior, females as unable to rein in their emotions, etc. Over time, these cultural stereotypes are reinforced through social and cultural hierarchies, causing people with pointy, white hoods to stomp down our streets and people like Charlie Ward to casually deride Jews. That Ward's tribal instincts slither out from behind a glowing smile makes them no less dangerous or offensive.

Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, put it succinctly: "We were shocked to read the comments of N.Y. Knicks players...blaming the death of Jesus on Jews and accusing Jews of persecuting Christians. We had thought these destructive historic myths, which have been a source of anti-Semitism for cen-

turies, were a thing of the past."

In his publicly issued apology, Ward did vow to learn more about Judaism. He also insisted that he meant no offense by his remarks. Having met with Ward in the past, I know that his life is suffused with the ideas of Christian charity and acts of love. Therefore, I do not doubt that he intended his apology as a sincere expression of regret. At the same time, though, the latter statement is telling insofar as it indicates that his religious bigotry is so deeply ingrained that he is not even aware that it exists.

This point was also noted by Foxman: "In his attempt to clarify his comments, it is clear that Mr. Ward just doesn't get it. Sadly, he doesn't understand the impact of his comments and that they constitute anti-Semitism and religious bigotry."

Even more frightening is the fact that, as a public figure, Ward's remarks are worse than ignorant or inexcusable - they are influential.

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Downey, drugs and dangerous double standards



Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Guest Columnist

Within hours after ill-fated actor Robert Downey Jr. was busted on suspicion of drugs in Culver City, Calif., Robert E. Kelley, the producer of "Ally McBeal," the TV series Downey stars in, summarily fired him. This seemed the signal that Downey's entertainment industry pals had finally had it with his misdeeds. But had they? A spokesperson for 20th Century Fox hedged its bets when he said that some of the "Ally" footage in which Downey appears might still be used. And there was no indication that the new "Ally McBeal" disc, "For Once in My Life," in which Downey does a duet with "Ally" songstress Vonda Shepard, would not be released as scheduled.

The circle-the-wagons protective attitude of many in the entertainment industry toward Downey is hardly surprising. Despite Downey's highly publicized busts on drugs and weapons possession charges during the past five years, Downey's stock in the entertainment business soared. He was released on several occasions from L.A. jails to complete movie shoots, and a few weeks after his major drug bust in Palm Springs last November he bagged a Golden Globe

Award for best supporting actor on "Ally."

There's nothing wrong with Downey's entertainment industry friends, and a star-struck public, pleading for empathy for him and urging the courts to spare him a long prison sentence, and give him the help that he desperately needs. But there are thousands of drug offenders that need the same compassion and help as Downey. The big difference is that these drug abusers aren't high-profile, bankable screen commodities. They are mostly poor blacks and Latinos. The estimate is that nearly one-fourth of the more than 1 million blacks that pack America's prisons are there for non-violent, drug-related crimes. It costs an estimated \$6 billion to keep them there.

Putting them behind bars has had staggering consequences. It has torn apart families and communities. It has been the single biggest reason for the bloat in federal and state spending on prison construction, maintenance and the escalation in the number of prosecutors needed to handle the flood of drug cases. It has effectively barred thousands of blacks and Latinos from the polls in more than a dozen states that ban ex-felons from voting. Many of them were slapped with felonies for minor drug crimes.

Also, few poor, black and Latino drug offenders will be immediately released by police, as Downey was, sent to a detox center, and from there referred

to a drug treatment center. They won't hear a prosecutor publicly concede, as Downey's prosecutor did in the Palm Springs case, that if convicted of a felony drug offense which carries a sentence of nearly five years in prison they could serve their time in a court-approved year-long outpatient program.

The pampered treatment of celebrities such as Downey carries another grave danger. It could fuel a public backlash to the mounting efforts by many drug reform advocates and public officials to push Congress to eliminate the gaping, racially-warped disparity in the drug-sentencing laws. These laws mandate minimum sentences for petty drug offenses for those tried in federal court. Far more black and Latino drug offenders than whites are tried there. Former President Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno twice gave halfhearted approval to the U.S. Sentencing Commission's recommendation that the drug sentencing laws be softened. Twice Congress refused to act.

President Bush and Attorney General John Ashcroft have made passing reference to the need to re-examine the effectiveness of the drug sentencing laws.

Downey's repeated busts could render that a pipe dream. They could also cripple efforts by drug reform advocates to win wider public support for statewide initiatives such as Proposition 36 passed overwhelmingly by California voters last November. The law mandates treatment, not jail, for nonviolent, first-time drug

offenders. Drug warriors loathe these initiatives. They claim that treatment, rather than severe jail sentences, encourages drug abusers to laugh at the courts and the law and puts the public at greater peril.

Many health professionals and law enforcement officials admit that the nation's current drug policy that relies exclusively on jails, and not treatment, is in shambles. They also agree that making more arrests, building more prisons, passing even more draconian drug laws are the wrong ways to repair the damage. The right ways are to dump the mandatory drug-sentencing laws, target high-level dealers for prosecution, end drug profiling and random stops of black and Latino motorists and spend billions on counseling, treatment and prevention programs, not jails.

A spokesperson for the California Department of Corrections confirmed that authorities are leaning toward placing Downey in a residential treatment facility. Said the spokesperson, "We don't want to just lock them up."

By "them" he meant the well-to-do and famous, such as Downey, not the thousands of poor and unknown. There's no such qualm about locking "them" up.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the president of the National Alliance for Positive Action (Web site: www.natalliance.org) and the author of "The Disappearance of Black Leadership."

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The Chronicle was established by Ernest Pitt and Ndubisi Egemonye in 1974, and is published every Thursday by Winston-Salem Chronicle Publishing Co., Inc.

The Chronicle is a proud member of National Newspapers Publishers Association • North Carolina Press Association • North Carolina Black Publishers Association • Inland Press Association

National Advertising Representative:
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CONTACT US:

phone number: **336 / 722-8624**
fax: **336 / 723-9173**
Web site address: www.netunlimited.net/~wschron
email address: wschron@netunlimited.net

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