

FORUM

Wisdom in unexpected places



Nigel Alston
Motivational Moments

"The highest reward for man's toil is not what he gets for it but what he becomes by it."
- John Ruskin

The title was tempting and caught my attention - "Men in Black Dresses: A Quest for the Future Among Wisdom Makers of the Middle East." Interesting, I thought. I wonder what it is about. Reading further I soon found out: "Getting past the dogma - Middle Eastern spiritual leaders invite us to a future beyond politics, full of meaning."

While the title was intriguing, I thought the book might be a bit academic and not an interesting one to read. I have started books like this before, with interesting titles that draw me in, only to put them on the shelf, unfinished, in favor of a more interesting one that holds my attention.

It would later prove to have been well worth my time to have read the book. I am glad I did. It was a spiritual and cultural adventure deep into the heart of Egypt and Syria written like a best-selling novel. And it led to a conversation, interview with the author.

Imagine being on a journey, traveling on the Nile train to Upper Egypt. Sitting next to you is a stranger, an old holy man. He has looked deep into your eyes to your soul during the hours you were companions on the train. You talk about life, death and the future. You promise him you will return to Egypt one day to see the future.

Yvonne Seng, Ph.D., was the passenger on that train and made that promise to the old holy man, the Catholic Coptic bishop of the Upper Nile in Egypt. The Copts are the Christians of Egypt who have descended from the Pharaohs. Seng writes about the journey of her return to fulfill it in her recent book, "Men in Black Dresses."

The book is described as part crash course in sociology, part adventure saga, and part holy discourse. Having read it, I agree with all of the above. The reader is taken on an exciting adventure and experiences it in vivid detail.

Seng can write. That's quite an accomplishment for a self-described scrappy Australian country girl who left home, as a young girl, to see the world. She has been on a quest for knowledge ever since.

Seng is a cultural historian and Middle East specialist. Furthermore, she is a professor of peace and Middle Eastern studies at Georgetown and American universities.

I asked her, in a recent tele-

phone interview what it was like to interview these powerful men. "It was wonderful," she told me as she reminisced, "It really felt like sitting on the front porch."

They included The Grand Sheikh of Islam, a scholar, mystic, and spiritual leader to the world's billion Sunni Muslims of Islam - the planet's fastest growing religion; His Holiness Pope Zakka, supreme head of the world's second oldest church, founded by the Apostles; the famed mystic of Mount Sinai; the Bishop of Youth of the Coptic Orthodox Church; a legendary Sufi poet; and a Muslim mystic who is a psychiatrist by day and popular television commentator by night.

Interviews were very tight. Seng told me, 30 to 45 minutes to an hour. Often, after conversations had begun, however, spiritual leaders would throw away their next appointments and really start talking. "They would start talking about things that really impact all of us, like the environment, children, etc.," Seng said.

In one conversation, she recalls asking the patriarch, the pope in Syria, "How do you seek peace? What does peace look like to you?"

"Ahhhh, peace is a tired old man," he replied.

The conversations cover a wide range of topics and issues like technology, scientific advancement, globalization,

birth control, the coming century and intergalactic life. I was surprised at some of their responses; they were practical, reasonable and liberal, reflecting an open-mindedness I didn't expect.

You can't argue with logic, like that of the Grand Sheikh of Islam, who believes the world will weaken if it remains as it is today. He offers a solution: "...If we increase the number of reasonable people - people who think and are educated, people who are involved in their culture, good moral people - virtue will increase."

"What has become clearer to you on this journey?" I asked Seng as we ended our interview. "What has become clearer?" she repeated the question, while thinking about her answer.

"Yes."
"The need to step forward," she said thoughtfully, "not only for myself, but mostly young people, but also older people; the need to step forward into the unknown, not to be afraid; and to step forward for what you believe in."

According to Seng, "There is wisdom in unexpected places."

Enjoy the journey of a new year.

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



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Kwanzaa - What do you have to celebrate?



James Clingman
Blackonomics

For nearly 40 years, black people in the United States have celebrated the seven principles of Kwanzaa. Established by Maulana Karenga in 1966, Kwanzaa is an African-American and Pan-African holiday celebrated by millions throughout the world African community. Kwanzaa brings a cultural message that speaks to the best of what it means to be African and human in the fullest sense.

Our obvious support and celebration of this occasion suggests our commitment, not only to the seven principles of the Nguzo Saba, but also to their fruition. Thus, we ask you: What Kwanzaa success will you celebrate this year? What have you done during the year that qualifies as a celebratory event during Kwanzaa?

Have you achieved unity among the people in your locale? Are you unified to the point that you love one another more and support one another more? Do you have proof that you have unified around some pertinent issue or cause? If so, then let the celebration begin.

How about self-determination? That's one of my favorites. What have you done in your city to demonstrate your commitment to determining the future of your children? Are others still controlling your destiny? Or have you taken it upon yourself to build and support your own institutions, open and grow new businesses, and create your own jobs? Maybe you have done other things to determine your future. Congratulations!

A few years ago I worked on the design and execution of an event in Cincinnati called Ujima-Cincibration, which some of you probably attended. The intent of the affair, conducted each year, was to celebrate what we had accomplished during the year vis-à-vis our collective work and our responsibility toward one another. The event survived for four years and failed primarily because the premise upon which it was founded was ignored by those who subsequently managed it. If we work collectively on community projects such as neighborhood cleanup, elderly assistance, and tutoring, imagine the things we could celebrate every Dec. 28 for Ujima.

Now, here's my favorite: cooperative economics: Have you done anything cooperatively in 2003 to increase the economic viability and stability of your community? Have you pooled any of your money to finance a project or to form an investment group to assist micro businesses? Nuff said on that one.

What have you done to build and develop your community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness? In other words, what is your purpose, and have you actualized that purpose? If you have, then you definitely have something to celebrate.

Created anything lately? What has been the level of your creativity this past year? Is there anything, not necessarily some-

thing material, that you developed in your community? Maybe it was a new financial institution, or maybe it was a new resolve and commitment to do better than you did the previous year.



Creativity covers a multitude of endeavors. What did you create?

Finally, how much faith do you have in the things you are celebrating? How much faith do you have in yourself? How much faith do you have in the Creator's ability to carry you through in times of struggle? Are you one of "little faith," or is your faith sufficient to support you in your quest to fulfill the other six principles of Kwanzaa?

On Dec. 26 of every year, after 40 years of celebrating, we should be able to look back and revel in the things we have accomplished through our celebration of Kwanzaa. What will you see when you look back this year? If nothing is there but a mere celebration, then you have work to do so that this time next

year you will have some tangible accomplishment to celebrate.

Aren't you tired of mere spoken words? Aren't you just a little weary of empty rhetoric, events based on words followed by little or no action? Wouldn't you like to see us, after 40 years of celebrating Kwanzaa, be able to point to something we built and sustained because of our celebration of values we hold so dear? I know you would.

Here in Cincinnati, we have the Sankofa Educational Development Program, headed by Sister Kimya Moyo. Each year they celebrate the principles of Kwanzaa by recognizing seven individuals who best represent each principle. In 2004, at the organization's annual event, Kenya James, Black Enterprise Magazine's Teenpreneur of the Year, will be the keynote speaker. They also "look back" every New Year's Eve at what they accomplished in relationship to Kwanzaa, and they look forward and plan activities for the coming year.

Please get started now on what you will celebrate during the 2004 Kwanzaa period. And let's celebrate!

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