

Abdicating responsibility results in moral breakdown

Lenora Fulani



We look at the front page of the newspaper or turn on the nightly news, and there it is: yet another "unimaginable" display of inhumanity. Some of us go on reading or watching with a sort of sickened fascination. Some of us may turn the channel or the page, not wanting to know anymore. All of us are bewildered; we ask ourselves and each other: "How can such things happen?"

Obviously, this moral unraveling does not have a single "cause." Some say it's located in the breakdown of the family. Others point to the skewed distribution of wealth and privilege, even though nowadays violence and brutality cross class, ethnic and racial lines.

All of these may be factors. But at a more fundamental level, the rise of violence and inhumanity has to do with the belief that we do not control our lives, our communities or, indeed, our country. Without that ownership and control, it becomes increasingly difficult to take personal responsibility. And once people stop taking

responsibility, the rest of morality begins its inevitable decline.

As a developmental psychologist, I have seen this pattern over and over. When a husband and a wife are having marital problems and each has a list of "grievances" against the other, there is no way out of the trouble unless they can find a way to take ownership of and responsibility for their relationship — rather than just for themselves. Think of parents telling a youngster who keeps a messy room or leaves dishes in the sink: "Just wait until you have your own home and you'll see what it's like." They know it takes having your own home to

want to keep it clean.

This is likewise true for a community or a nation. When people feel that they do not have a stake in their community or country and they cannot find a way to change that the conditions are ripe for moral decline.

How do we create this sense of ownership? To start with, our young people need a way to take some control over their own lives, some power and initiative — sometimes even in small ways. One such small way is the New York-based All Stars Talent Show Network.

With funds donated by private citizens, the All Stars have built over the past 12 years a perma-

nent talent show network run entirely by inner-city youth — they perform, run all the technical equipment, staff the box office and even provide security.

The results are promising; the communities where it has taken root all have seen a drop in youth crime. But it will take more. With kids you can start small, but as kids grow up they need to continue to feel power in their lives — not just in politics, but in their work and their community. We've already seen what happens when they don't.

LENORA FULANI is the first black woman to appear on the presidential ballot in all 50 states.

Letters to The Post

New arena is worth the investment

I am an attorney in Charlotte and have been practicing law in Uptown for almost ten years now. I have been following the recent developments regarding the building of an Uptown arena. I want to express to you both my support for the Uptown arena project and my concern that an incredible opportunity for Uptown may be jeopardized if this arena is not built.

It is well worth the tax dollars invested if Charlotte can retain the Hornets. While a number of people say they do not want tax dollars spent for sports-related projects, the fact remains that sports are a vital part of our community, sports have support from a great number of people all over the Carolinas (not just Charlotte), and sporting events, such as the Hornets games, bring a great deal of revenue into our City. An Uptown arena will not only bring sports and other special events to uptown, but will provide the support and growth for other businesses in this area as well. There is no better example of this than the positive economic development in the Tyvola Road area around the present coliseum.

I believe a thriving uptown is crucial to Charlotte's continued growth and success in the future. The city has put great efforts into the revitalization of Uptown in the 10 years I have been in Charlotte and must continue this progress in order to preserve what it has already accomplished. I have not heard of any other ideas for uptown that could have as great an impact on this area and the city as the arena project.

*James B. Spears Jr.
Charlotte*

Arena will liven Charlotte's center

Every year, I attend a meeting in San Jose, Calif.

Last year, I had an opportunity to go to a San Jose Sharks NHL hockey game at their new downtown arena. Downtown San Jose is very much like Charlotte at 6 PM — dead. It was quite a sight to see thousands of people walking from offices, restaurants, and parking lots to a downtown game. The restaurants in my hotel were jammed with Sharks fans, both before and after the game.

Though I have great seats currently at the Charlotte Coliseum and probably would not be able to get comparable seats in a new one, I feel it needs to be in uptown Charlotte to finally bring life to evenings, as the Panthers have done on Sunday afternoon. I also believe, this new arena will have long term economic enhancements for Charlotte.

*Charles M. Evans
Charlotte*

What's on your mind?

Send your comments to The Charlotte Post, P.O. Box 30144, Charlotte, N.C. 28230 or fax (704) 342-2160. You can also use E-mail — charpost@clt.mind-spring.com

All correspondence must include a daytime telephone number for verification.

War on young criminals or on black kids?

By Joel Shashenko
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ALBANY, N.Y. — The image of juvenile felons — strong, angry, rash and heartless — is one of the most alarming in society.

Potential victims run the gamut from their fellow school children to the elderly, meaning that no innocent person is safe.

Gov. George Pataki, the Republican-controlled state Senate, Attorney General Dennis Vacco and even Democratic state Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver have declared a war, of sorts, on young criminals by advocating stringent, adult-type penalties for teens as young as 13 who are caught doing adult-type crimes.

Yet Albany's offensive against the juvenile offender has a very different connotation to many blacks and Hispanics in New York.

"When Pataki or anyone else is talking about 'crime and juveniles,' they are basically talking about black kids," said Alice Green of the Center for Law and Justice in Albany. "What they are really looking at and what they are really developing policies for are kids of color."

Late last month, Democratic Sen. Alton Waldon Jr. of Queens argued vigorously on the floor of the Senate against a tough juvenile crime bill because he said it would chiefly penalize minority youths. The measure was formulated by Republican senators and stands no chance of being approved in its current form by the

Democratic-led Assembly.

Waldon said he becomes "super-driven to help correct these evils" because he feels the all-white GOP delegation which controls the Senate cannot appreciate what most urban minority youths face.

"I am reacting to the racism evidenced here by my colleagues," Waldon told The Associated Press last week. "The tragedy of all this is I don't believe that they are consciously functioning from a racist base. It's just that their whole maturation process, now that they're age 60 or 65, views the world differently. If you would look at it analytically, you would see it is racist."

The state Division of Criminal Justice Services reported last month that in New York City, young blacks are 19 times more likely to be arrested than whites. Hispanics are nine times as likely to be arrested.

Blacks accounted for 20 percent of 10- to 15-year-olds in the state's population, 42 percent of juveniles arrested for offenses and 62 percent of juveniles placed in the custody of the Division for Youth. About 90 percent of the residents in prison-like "secure" facilities operated by the state Division for Youth are black or Hispanic.

State researchers cautioned, however, that those proportions do not necessarily show that the "juvenile justice system discriminates against minorities."

The head of the NAACP in New York said the fact that kids from minority communities are committing more crimes than their white counterparts reflects the absence of hope and opportunities they see in their neighbor-

hoods.

"This crackdown on juvenile justice, what they need to be cracking up on is excellence in education," Hazel Dukes said. "They have to improve education programs so urban schools will not be teaching children in bathrooms."

No one, least of all those in minority communities who tend to be the victims of most violent crime in the state, is "condoning antisocial behavior," Dukes said.

The only nonwhite ever elected to statewide office in New York, Comptroller H. Carl McCall, said the state's system for dealing with juvenile offenders is flawed, whether those wayward youths are white, black, Hispanic or otherwise.

"I'm prepared to look at it without the racial overtones, but simply to say, 'This is a system that does not work,'" McCall said. "There is no rehabilitation or education component in it and kids come out of it and it seems to be a sort of prep school for long-term involvement in the adult system."

Finding a way to slice through poverty, illiteracy and one-family households in nonwhite communities is the ultimate answer, McCall said.

"We've got to put more money into the front-end in terms of our school system and the supportive system for schools," he said. "That seems to me to be a better expenditure."

JOEL SHASHENKO is Capitol Editor for The Associated Press in Albany, N.Y.

There's still satisfaction in doing a job right

D.G. Martin



"When I started practicing law in 1967, things were different."

James Ferguson, one of the state's most respected trial lawyers, is talking to me from a movie-sized TV screen at the N.C. Bar Center in Cary.

Each year I have to go back to school. Twelve hours each year — at a minimum — is what it takes to keep my license to practice law.

Ferguson and three other distinguished North Carolina lawyers — senior members of the bar — are sharing their videotaped thoughts on the changes in the law profession during their times of practice. I know what they are talking about: The movement to specialization, the loss of contact and friendships with clients and other lawyers, billing by the minute, making more money, and longing for by-gone days when law practice was more professional.

I grimace as I think about it, but I am a "senior member" of the bar, too. These folks are my age. They are taking me back in

time.

Today, Ferguson is a well known leader of the civil rights and civil liberties movements in North Carolina. But things were different when I first visited his "walk-up" law office in a seedy section of Charlotte in 1968. A few people had taken note that he and two or three others had established the first racially integrated law firm in the state. Our state was just beginning the reordering of its social system, so an integrated law firm was news. Otherwise, Ferguson was unknown.



Ferguson

What was I doing at his office back then? I was looking for a job. It was the winter of my last year in a northern law school and I wanted to come back home. I wasn't sure I could get a job, though. Earlier, I had visited the state bar's executive to introduce myself and prepare the way for my admission. (Things were a little more personal then — more like getting into a fraternity.) He had greeted me warmly and sat me down across from the Confederate flag

behind his desk and asked, "Now where are you in law school?"

When I told him, he shouted, "Yale, Yale, why in the world did you go to that hellhole?"

None of the lawyers and law firms that I had contacted were that negative. In fact, they could not have been more cordial. But there wasn't a lot of enthusiasm for me or my law school in my home state. And there were no job offers. I was not going to panic. But my wife and I had a baby on the way.

My father, whose character, wisdom, and goodness, had always been the cornerstone of my strength, had just learned that he had a disease whose name I had never heard before — Alzheimer's. I thought some "face to face" visits to lawyers might help get the job offer I needed.

In Raleigh, at the first firm I visited, one of the partners introduced me to a friend who had come to plot politics — a TV personality named Jesse Helms. In the next firm, the senior partner was running for governor.

Even in Charlotte, when I visited its largest firm, one of the senior partners kept me waiting at his desk while he gave telephone advice to one of the Republican candidates for governor. Lots of nice people. Lots of politics. No job offers. No

prospects for one.

So, I walked down East Trade Street in Charlotte to Ferguson's firm. His senior partner, Julius Chambers (now Chancellor at North Carolina Central University) had agreed to see me. But he was counseling Reginald Hawkins, another candidate for governor. More politics! But another lawyer explained what their firm was all about.

Some of what he said is what Ferguson is saying now up there on the TV scene.

He is telling us what it was like in the late 1960's to charge into our state's courts to fight for changes that so many of us opposed. He explains that he and his partners resolved that they would conduct their law practice with utmost professionalism. Their hostility to the ideas of their opponents would not carry over into their professional relations with them. They would, they hoped, gradually earn the respect of their adversaries.

Their strategy paid off. When Ferguson's law offices burned to the ground a few years later, lawyers from all over North Carolina called to offer help. Even those on the other side in pending cases shared their files and gave office space and clerical assistance.

Our fascination with death and destruction makes us less caring

By Ad Crable
THE LANCASTER NEW ERA

LANCASTER, Pa. — "Watch as AFRICAN hunting dogs — unwilling to wait for their victim to die and take a chance on losing it to a larger predator — will consume it while it's alive ... EVEN WHILE IT'S STANDING."

By the time you see the grisly photos accompanying this slick brochure, Time-Life Video hopes you will be sufficiently foaming at the mouth to purchase the complete one-a-month "Nature's Assassins" series.

There are lions running down terrified deer, crocodiles clamping down on the noses of wildebeest at the water hole. Shot by "fearless cinematographers," we are reminded.

Who could resist this invitation for a ringside seat at "nature's killing fields"?

We've come a long way, baby, from "Wild Kingdom."

Let's see, what could be a little more voyeuristic? How about adding humans to the equation? Find the remote and step into the living room, where FOX Broadcasting Co. airs its third "When Animals Attack" special.

Watch host Robert Ulrich carry an appropriately somber demeanor as he introduces us to people being bitten, stomped, squeezed, stung and clawed by one animal or another. The show comes on the heels of "Close Call: Cheating Death II."

Never mind that the victims are sometimes severely injured, and likely traumatized. They survived, so we don't have to feel guilty about watching this stuff, right? Unfortunately, dangerously, we are fast shedding our uneasiness at turning violence, tragedy and misery into a vulgar form of entertainment.

I first became uneasy when "Cops" hit the air. It's compelling, it's real. I watch it occasionally. But it's still making entertainment and dollars out of drug addiction, crime, violence, and misfortune.

Not long after, cable stations began airing extreme fighting, in which combatants are thrown into cages to pummel each other into unconsciousness.

Acceptance of violence as amusement is becoming alarmingly mainstream. As part of their 11 p.m. news recently, a Harrisonburg, Va., television station showed a motorcycle

stunt rider falling 60 feet to his death, landing squarely on his head. There wasn't a word of caution before the footage, and immediately afterward, the anchor donned a smile as he segued into a fluff feature about a basket of 30-year-old eggs being found unbroken in a barn.

How far will we go?

For decades, the "Faces of Death" films have been underground tests of squeamishness. But just two weeks ago I saw a commercial for a mail-order video with a collection of people being killed in various accidents. All captured live on film.

Yes, death and violence, whether in nature or civilization, is a fact of life. Yes, I'm a hunter and killing is violent. But when we reduce violence to a blood sport it becomes obscene.

When we fail to be shocked by it, we chip away at the sanctity of life. When we find it easier to think of people and animals as mere objects, our capacity for compassion and concern for both is diluted. It becomes easier not to feel or care.

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