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OPINIONS

Celebrating Kwanzaa, celebrating community

During the last week of December, many black families and communities observe Kwanzaa. Kwanzaa is a unique celebration because it's not a religious or national holiday but a cultural one. It doesn't celebrate a person or an event but a set of ideas. In a year when Americans have heard a lot about "values," values are what Kwanzaa is all about.

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Maulana Karenga, the originator of Kwanzaa, explains, "There is no way to understand and appreciate the meaning and message of Kwanzaa without understanding and appreciating its profound and pervasive concern with values. In fact, Kwanzaa's reason for existence, its length of seven days, its core focus and its foundation are all rooted in its concern with values." And the values Kwanzaa celebrates and asks people to live up to aren't about individual private behavior but the values a community needs to be strong and thrive.

The Nguzo Saba, or seven principles, are the framework of a Kwanzaa celebration. Dr. Karenga explains that they are the key building blocks of community in general. Each day during Kwanzaa focuses on one of these principles and reminds celebrants to recommit to that value: "Umoja (unity), to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race. Kujichagulia (self-determination), to define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves.

Ujima (collective work and responsibility), to build and maintain our community together and make our brothers and sisters' problems our problems and to solve them together.

Ujamaa (cooperative economics), to build and maintain our own stores, shops and other businesses and to profit from them together.

Nia (purpose), to make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.

Kuumba (creativity), to do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

And imani (faith), to believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the righteousness and victory of our struggle."

Not everyone celebrates Kwanzaa but these values contain many universal principles for building strong communities. Kwanzaa ends on New Year's Day in the Kwanzaa celebration, the Day of Meditation. Many people already spend New Year's Day thinking about how they can resolve to improve themselves during the next year.

But imagine if this year we all resolved to take steps to improve our communities instead. Imagine if every child in this nation were being raised in a community resolved to seeing any member's problems as everyone's problems and solving them together, or to making sure that all community members live together harmoniously and support each other in their common goals, or that every community decision would leave the community healthier and more beautiful tomorrow than it is today. What kinds of places would these communities be for our children and, by extension, for all of us?

During a traditional Kwanzaa celebration muhindi, ears of corn, are laid on a mkeke, a straw mat. The mat symbolizes African peoples' history and traditions, and the corn symbolizes children and the future. Families place one ear of corn on the mkeke for each child in the household, but they're instructed to put at least two ears down even if they don't have children, because in African tradition every adult is considered a parent to every child in the community.

Many people talk about this belief, but imagine if every one of us really put it into action. And then imagine what kind of a world we could build for our children if our local, national, and global communities all committed to making it our most important community value.

During that final Day of Meditation in Kwanzaa, people are supposed to ask themselves three questions: "Who am I? Am I really who I say I am? And am I all I ought to be?" Everyone answers these questions as an individual, but their answers should reflect how well they are playing their part in making their community function as a whole and with justice. A person's success is deeply connected to how much value they are giving to others. At a time when our children desperately need adults to reweave the fabric of family and community for them, all of us need to think and ask ourselves these questions.

Are we all that we ought to be?

Bennettsville, S.C., native MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN is president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund.

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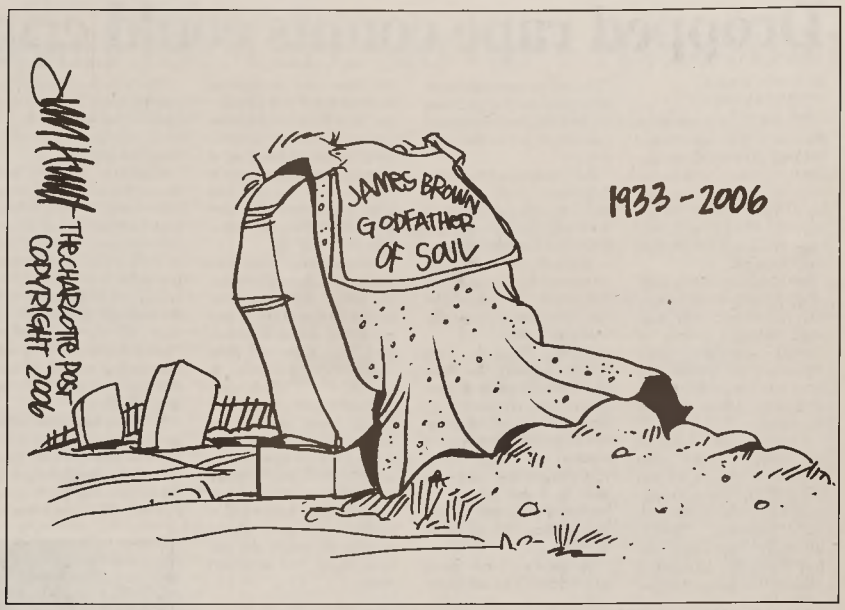

James Brown the superstars' superstar

AUGUSTA, Ga. — I was headed here to spend several days with my mother over the holidays when I heard the news that James Brown had died of congestive heart failure caused by pneumonia early Christmas morning at an Atlanta hospital.

My first reaction was one of disbelief: "Please, Please, Please," I kept singing. "Don't go, I love you so." Yes, I love me some J-a-m-e-s B-r-o-w-n. Since recording "Please, Please, Please" in 1956, he has been at the top of my hit list.

GEORGE E. CURRY

He sang, "Try Me," and now, 800 hits later, I am still doing just that.

At the improvised home talent shows in the early 1960s with my three younger sisters — Charlotte, Chris and Sue — we would try to make one another laugh by imitating famous entertainers. Chris could always crack me up with her rendition of Ray Charles.

Between the sunglasses, broom stick and side-to-side rocking, Chris could always make me laugh until I cried. When it was my turn, Big Brother No. 1 had to, in classic James Brown fashion, put on a show. With my right foot firmly planted, my left one slightly off the floor, I would suddenly drop the left one and glide across the floor. I would slide to the right, glide backward on the "Good Foot" and then drop to my knees and burst into, "Please, Please, Please." By then, I would have broken into a "Cold Sweat" and one of my sisters, playing the part of Bobby Byrd, would drape a shirt, towel or whatever was nearby that could serve as a cape and comfort me until I could rise to my feet.

By the time I stood upright, I would throw the cape off and resume my James Brown routine. In short, we had a "Funky Good Time."

In the late 1960s, while spending a few months with Hiram Crawford, a cousin in New York City, I went to the Apollo Theater almost every week. Whenever "the Hardest Working Man in Showbusiness" appeared at the Apollo, lines would extend along 125th Street in Harlem and wrap around the block. One night it was raining and I, like hundreds of others, stood in the rain in order to see JB.

Waiting in line, I developed a friendship with Steve Woods and his sister. We talked about how insane it was for us to be standing in the rain, but neither of us left our place in line. We laughed and joked until the long line finally inched up to the ticket window.

We eagerly moved inside, took our seats, and waited for the star of the show to make his grand entrance. After the warm-up acts, Danny Ray, the announcer would say, "It's Star Time" and then tick off a list of James Brown hits: Please, Please, Please; Try Me; Night Train; Prisoner of Love; Papa's Got A Brand New Bag; I Got The Feeling; Cold Sweat; It's a Man's World; Say It Loud — I'm Black and I'm Proud; Give It Up Or Turn It Lose; Popcorn; Hot Pants; The Big Payback..." After the big buildup, Ray would say, "Ladies and Gentlemen, J-a-a-a-a-a-a-m-e-s Brownnnnnnnnnnnn, James Brown, James Brown." By then, we'd all be mesmerized, standing, yelling and screaming to the top of our voices.

James Brown was energy in motion, the ultimate showman. He was a singer, dancer, songwriter, and bandleader, all rolled into one. It was hard to determine where one role began and the other ended. His official biography in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame notes, "This much is certain: what became known as soul music in the '60s, funk music in the '70s and rap music in the '80s is directly attributable to James Brown."

He was the superstars' superstar. Elvis Presley, Mick Jagger, David Bowie and Michael Jackson all mimicked James Brown, some more successful than others. Even his various run-ins with police were entertaining.

In 1988, Brown, armed with a shotgun and said to be high on drugs, entered an insurance seminar next to his Augusta office and accused some of the participants of using his private restroom. Police chased James Brown for 30 minutes from Augusta, across the South Carolina line, and back into Georgia. The drama ended when cops shot out the tires on JB's truck. That escapade cost him 15 months in prison and 10 months in a work release program.

My favorite James Brown story involves not the entertainer, but Adrienne, his third wife. Fighting several traffic tickets, her lawyer filed a petition in court claiming she should be extended diplomatic immunity because her husband was the official ambassador of soul. The petition was later withdrawn before a judge could rule against it. Because diplomatic immunity shields only visiting diplomats from criminal prosecution in a host country — and James Brown was in his native land — if a judge had considered the petition, he would have been left, "Bewildered."

I won't get a chance to see him perform live anymore, but at least I'll have his music as a reliable travel companion. And as long as I can have that, "I Feel Good."

GEORGE CURRY is editor in chief of the National Newapaper Publishers Association News Service.

Can America handle breakthrough candidates?

By Eugene Robinson
THE WASHINGTON POST

For the moment let's assume that we've come far enough to seriously consider electing the first U.S. president who can be described without using both the adjectives "white" and "male." Who has the better chance of breaking through, Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama?

Obviously, the leading contenders for the Democratic nomination have plenty of qualifications other than race and gender — Clinton's unique experience and tremendous political savvy, Obama's ability to move people with his stunning eloquence. I think the old rule of thumb still applies: Women and minorities don't reach the top just by being as good as anybody else; they have to be better.

Still, you almost want to feel sorry for someone like John Edwards, who's both experienced and eloquent — but isn't being splashed all over magazine covers. He has the misfortune to be running in an election cycle when his major rivals are already making history, at least for now.

It makes sense that Clinton is still leading the polls. She has been competing in politics at the highest level since before Obama became an Illinois state legislator.

With one exception, she has done everything right. The way she gained power and influence in the Senate was remarkable, given how skeptical her colleagues were when she arrived. She knew when to defer and when to assert herself, as women in corporate America have had to learn. She has enough campaign money in the bank to weather any imaginable storm, and enough pledges of fealty from Democratic Party grandees to make her still the odds-on favorite. And she has the cleverest politician in the country — that would be her husband, Bill — as an unpaid adviser.

Also going for Hillary Clinton is the fact that other Western democracies have become accustomed to seeing women in charge — Margaret Thatcher, Angela Merkel — but not racial minorities.

Clinton has two big problems, though. First is that "one exception" I mentioned earlier — Iraq. Her support of the war neutralized the issue of whether a female president could be sufficiently martial, but that turned out to be the wrong position, and she's still struggling to get unstuck.

The other problem is that many Democrats are certain that if she gets the nomination, she'll lose in the general election. Democrats want badly to win in 2008, and Clinton has to be concerned at how much support Obama has attracted in such a short time.

Obama, meanwhile, has the advantage of perfect timing — he has streaked to national prominence at a moment when his party and perhaps his country are desperately in search of something new.

The fact that he has been in the Senate only a couple of years means that he hardly has a voting record for opponents to pick apart. From the beginning, he was consistently against the war in Iraq — not that he was in a position to do anything about it. Unless there's more to come out, his questionable real estate deal in Chicago doesn't rise to anywhere near the level of Whitewater.

And his oratorical gifts are truly remarkable, at least equal to Bill Clinton's and perhaps on a par with the skills of Ronald Reagan, the Great Communicator. Yes, he can talk.

He has a couple of big problems, too, even if you figure that his name alone — Barack Hussein Obama — isn't enough to turn some people off. First is the fact that at 45, the senator looks barely 30. A president needs gravitas, not boyishness. Isn't there some sort of reverse Grecian Formula on the market that can give Obama some gray hair?

The other issue, of course, is his race. He is at present the only black U.S. senator. There have been only two black governors elected. Contrast that with the relative profusion of female senators and governors, and you have to conclude that Obama's election would be more of a miracle than Clinton's.

Still, I'm not counting either of them out. I hope they both formally get into the race and stay for the long haul.

And I hereby pledge never to liken either one to a political "rock star" unless he or she is actually holding an electric guitar.

EUGENE ROBINSON is a Washington Post columnist.