

Killing and Dying for Respect

Written by Walter Fields

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There was some disbelief over social media when it was suggested the accused shooter of two Newark New Jersey youth was prompted by his feeling disrespected. The suspect, a 15 year-old boy, is reported to have been angry because he believed two other young men had ‘hit’ on a girl he was dating. The boy’s rage resulted in the death of a 13 year-old girl, Zainee Hailey, who was struck by a stray bullet while taking out the trash on Christmas night. Another victim, a target of the shooter and one of the boys the suspect alleged to have acted disrespectfully toward him, died of his injuries. The third victim was shot in the neck and seriously injured.

While so-called crimes of passion are not rare, many adults can’t fathom how a child could be driven to kill due to being slighted. It seems inconceivable to many people that being “dissed” could trigger such a violent response. Let alone the actions of a teenager over youthful romance.

However, to dismiss the importance of “respect” among youth, particularly Black boys, is to miss the larger issue of social disconnection. We can condemn the actions of this young man, and mourn the death of an innocent bystander, but we had better come to terms with the degree to which many young people harbor deep resentment and anger over their nothingness in our nation. Decades of indifference toward youth, and specifically young Black boys and men, has resulted in generations of young people who internalize any slight as threatening the little shred of humanity they possess. It is why the most innocuous comment can trigger the most extreme reaction. In communities where so little regard is shown for young people, they protect the only thing they have left – their dignity – at any and all cost.

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This is not just a street-level reality; it persists in homes and schools. The belligerence of many young people in family environments is the direct result of their feeling belittled and abandoned. So many of our youth are raising themselves and forced to go it alone, that any suggestion of behavior modification is taken as a personal affront. The same goes on in the classroom. Stories of student rage and violence directed at teachers is often rooted in the young person's sense of being disrespected by an authority figure; the same tension that often surfaces during interactions with police. It could be the tone that is used by the adult, the body language or words spoken in a way that conveys the message that the young person is viewed as inferior.

It is why youth to youth interactions turn deadly. If you are not being respected by adults who are expected to demonstrate civility, you damn sure are not going to let a peer put you down. The alternative, perhaps walking away, is viewed as an act of submission, of cowardice that buys you nothing on the street except more abuse. If you can't protect your personal "space" you begin to question your very existence. And in a day and age when life is viewed through the shortest lens by many young people, the learning curve is irrelevant since there is no sense of the possibility of a tomorrow or adulthood.

To grasp the magnitude of what took the life of Zainee Hailey in Newark you must first acknowledge the message we have sent to young people. We don't care if they are living in decent housing or have a place to call home. We herd them in school buildings that reek of indifference and then label them failures when we fail to live up to our moral and legal obligation to provide a quality education. Young people are easy prey for the drug trade when the adults in their lives are permanently severed from economic opportunity. And when our youth are pushed out of school and pushed into the underground and illegal economy, they become prey for an increasingly corporate criminal justice system driven by profit and little concerned with justice or rehabilitation. Respect? There is none shown young people so our youth will claim it by any means necessary.

Elected officials can call for all the police city and state budgets can muster and it will not matter. Preachers can evoke scripture and shout from their pulpits and it will not matter. Hell, at this point the tears of victims' families don't even matter much. It seems to me that unless we fundamentally alter our relationship with young people, make children and teenagers our priority, we stand little chance at stopping the bloodshed in our communities. Our only hope is in a radical restructuring of how we engage children from early childhood to young adulthood, and how we simultaneously support families and reform institutions that exist in theory to facilitate the transition to adult life.

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