



“Anyone Can Do Anything”

African-American History Month is an ideal time to assess Black America’s progress. This is particularly true in 2010 because we are beginning the second decade of the 21st century. We have tracked Black America’s progress on three fronts since the beginning of the century: i.e., catching up with white America’s earning of income, educational attainment, and political participation.¹ We found that, for the latter two categories, Blacks have made marginal progress. However, Blacks have not progressed on the income front this century.

One can register sound arguments that the most important of the three categories is income, and that the remaining two categories are affected significantly by the income that is available to achieve them. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that, under normal circumstances, it is essentially impossible for the average (median) Black American to achieve income equality with the average White American. Therefore, we stand corrected and so the goal of catching up with White America’s income earning should be revised.

While we can spend the remainder of the century discussing why overall income inequality between Blacks and Whites is likely to persist, a better use of our time would be to focus on what Black Americans can do individually to increase their earnings. Basic action that Black Americans can take to increase their income include: Becoming prepared to work in financial, mathematical, and scientific fields; and/or becoming entrepreneurs who grow businesses that become large enough to function as employers.

You’ll note that our suggestions do not call for increasing education. Education alone is not sufficient to earn higher levels of income. Today, too many Black Americans have doctoral degrees with no jobs or with low earnings because the degrees that they hold are not in growing or in lucrative fields.

As we study African American History this month, we might consider deviating from the traditional practice of focusing on great Black scholars and focus more on Black Americans who achieved high earnings. What you will find is that most Black Americans who became very wealthy did not have a string of letters behind their last name. Rather, they were thinkers who brought new wealth-generating ideas. That is not to say that they were not highly educated. They were; but not in a formal sense.

¹ See our February 2001 and February 2007 New Vision Commentaries entitled, “African-Americans Reaching Their Goals in the 21st Century” and “Have Blacks Advanced in the 21 Century,” respectively.

As a logic check, think about how many professors in universities are very wealthy. Not many. Therefore, if they are not very wealthy, then how can they teach you to become wealthy?

The best and easiest way to become a medical doctor, a lawyer, or an investment banker (high earning professions) is to have a close relative in these positions. The cultural capital that these professionals create in their environment is sufficient to prepare their relatives to follow in their footsteps. It is not necessary that these relatives have a very high level of intelligence, just that they are able to absorb what they are taught—mouth to ear. In other words, it is common knowledge that “anyone can do anything” when given the opportunity to train.

Black Americans too must come to understand that anyone can do anything—from plumbing to nuclear physics—given the proper training. Again, we did not say education, we said training. Put a young mind that is willing to learn with a nuclear physicist for a long-enough period of time, and that young mind will master the job. The problem is that we have all bought into the idea that one must first obtain a doctoral degree in nuclear physics before one can work with a nuclear physicist. Those who know will tell you that, the first day on the job, the newly minted Ph.D. will be told by the experienced nuclear physicist, “forget most of what you learned at the university.”

Let us use African American History Month to identify wealthy Black American historical personalities, learn how they became wealthy, and commit ourselves to replicating that model. Admittedly, wealth is not the key to happiness. However, if we use self-study, mentor those interested in learning, and commit ourselves to supporting each other (especially Black businesses), then we may not catch up with White America in earning income, but we can certainly produce considerably more wealthy Black Americans. In turn, those wealthy Blacks can help other Blacks become wealthy; thereby increasing and enhancing Black America’s well-being. This African American History Month, if we do nothing else, let us grasp the reality that “anyone can do anything.”

B.B. Robinson, Ph.D.
01/31/10