

“Why Bill Cosby Lives in a Glass House and Shouldn’t Throw Stones”

by

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During my lifetime, I have eagerly watched Bill Cosby’s television programs. As a child, I can recall early Saturday morning risings to watch “Fat Albert” along with other cartoons. As a young adult, I have fond memories of a family ritual where Thursday evenings found my household gathered around the television to watch the “Cosby Show” and “A Different World”—two programs that Dr. Cosby created. There is no question that he is a great comedian and a creative genius when it comes to developing television comedies.

Nevertheless, we, and he, might benefit from some introspection before lambasting young Black folk and their parents because of the abhorrent conditions that pervade certain Black communities. Why introspection? Because we should take care to ask what role we may have played in generating outcomes that we choose to criticize.

I fully comprehend that there is a need for individual responsibility. There will always be great persons who will lift themselves from the lowest levels by their own bootstraps. The reality is, however, that most persons don’t exhibit such strength and fortitude, and “nurture” plays a very powerful role in shaping our behavior and our outcomes.

Before he chooses to criticize Black youth, Dr. Cosby should ask, “Did I provide the perfect (or even very good) nurturing for young Black minds?” Yes, Black youth can see that Dr. Cosby pulled himself up by his own bootstraps. That’s very positive. However, what they also know, and are products of, is the fact they may love themselves less than they otherwise would because of Dr. Cosby. You see, certain Black youths were permitted to become obese because “Fat Albert” was such a lovable character and he made it acceptable to be overweight. It would be interesting to test whether obesity among children is correlated in anyway with the onset and tenure of the “Fat Albert” program.

Going further, many Black youth may have come to “love to watch” television as a result of viewing Dr. Cosby’s programs. They may have started out as casual viewers, but they may have sunk into the depths of TV addiction, which results in excessive consumption of television programs. Government administered time-use surveys and other sources reveal that Black Americans consume more television than any other group in America. Dr. Cosby must ask whether his television programs sparked television addiction among Black youth. High levels of television consumption, particularly of the adverse stereotypical image of Blacks that appear on television, is a form of negative nurturing. In fact, is it possible that the very behavior that Dr. Cosby rails against has been nurtured by high levels of television consumption or addiction--an addiction that may have been fed by his programs? Dr. Cosby asks of Black youth, “Where did you learn that?” In many cases, the answer is “Television.”

The individual responsibility argument would have Dr. Cosby respond that his programs are not responsible for individual’s behavior. Oh, but that is not true. Numerous studies show that

television has the power to shape behavior. The higher the level of television addiction, then the greater the probability that television will shape behavior. If Blacks were not addicted to television or if television provided fewer adverse stereotypical images of Blacks, then maybe Dr. Cosby would have no reason to come down so hard on Black youth.

Another view is that television viewing is wasteful. The time that Black youth spend watching television would likely be better spent engaged in more productive ventures, such as reading or studying, performing services in their community, and learning entrepreneurial and cultural skills. Can Dr. Cosby truly claim that he has played absolutely no role in influencing the amount of television that Black youth consume?

We have no perfect humans walking among us. Therefore, before we begin to criticize, we should ask, "What role did I play in creating the condition or situation that I choose to criticize." I live in a glass house, Dr. Cosby lives in a glass house, and you live in a glass house. Let's take care in deciding when and how we throw stones.

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