

our children. our responsibilities



Saving the Youth
We Are Losing to Gangs

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INTRODUCTION

“The Child that Fights”

Soul binding

mind cleansing

hold on to the fight . . .

and cry for the child that cries every night

for this child knows pain and can't take it anymore

this child needs a savior to open his door

the key to enlightenment awaits this child, but

the child won't stop crying until his savior comes,

so until then the child will have to hold on to life

but who will cry for that child that cries every night?

—Caitlin A. Easley¹

Fifteen years ago, I began questioning why so many African American children were joining gangs. I was also puzzled by the level of violence that became second nature to the generation of youth I was investigating. The levels of violence that consumed our children significantly surpassed gang violence when I was growing up. Their views on community and their accountability to their community were also dramatically different: They saw no commitment to community or personal accountability. This disengagement seemed to be grounded in a variety of issues that affected the psychological stability of this

particular generation. Over the course of three years, I studied youth in gangs, with a primary focus on African American youth.

After completing my doctoral studies, I continued to research this topic and, interestingly, found that problems of gang violence and the growing numbers of youth gravitating to gangs were not just relegated to the United States. There was not one inhabited continent that did not struggle with youth gangs. As I continued to work in urban African American communities, I found layers upon layers of issues impacting our youth. These issues had deep historical roots, which made isolating their etiology very hard. Yet, I continued to investigate, often finding myself in positions where I had to challenge my own guiding praxes, despite my believing that I had an inside track to the issues because of my race.

The complexities of our global environment strongly suggest that we can no longer rely upon the constancies of our beliefs, theological discourses, philosophies, interpretative schemas, policies, and procedures to govern the constantly changing dynamics of life. Inherent in the concept of change lies the necessity to challenge prevailing belief systems as to how we see the world and individuals situated in the world (Easley & Swain, 2003). The problem of youth gravitating to gang environments and being impacted by gang violence dramatically is not a problem that is situated in a silo concept. It is significantly tied to issues within the broader African American community, which are tied to issues within the global community.

Yet, far too many people continue to view issues and, equally important, outcomes of poverty, power, domination, race, and violence through lens and interpretative schemas that have not changed for years. However, I am drawn to ask how African Americans can look at these issues through a different lens. If we are to save our children, we must view the environment they live in from a very different paradigmatic perspective with change strategies designed and developed to awaken our people and help them envision options for changing the conditions of their lives.

My lens, and theoretical sensitivities and perspectives, emerge from a multidimensional interpretive schema. When understanding the rationale behind the questions and strategies posited in this book, I have continued to privilege my being an African American woman, who comes from a collective African consciousness, a consciousness that bespeaks of a spiritual connection to *all* life and a communal responsibility to the world at large that expands beyond the physical space in which one currently inhabits. Equally important, I believe that when we openly acknowledge our personal qualities and

experiences, we concomitantly open space for another level of a consciousness of meaning to enter that can be subtle, yet of significant impact when deconstructing how we create and manage sense and meaning (Pettigrew, 1979). Consequently, when I view African American youth in gangs, I do not see them as subjects. They are children, our children, who for many reasons have lost their way. I also see that finding their way is challenging because of the mired issues that face the African American community.

Yet, I don't lose hope or find the problems overwhelming. As a PhD in organization development, my guiding praxis is to systemically assess and deconstruct situations and identify, develop, and design systemic change strategies that move those situations (e.g., organizations and systems) beyond conversation and toward a desired state. I must also factor in my being a seminarian. The combination of my experiences force me to question how we currently view our options with respect to helping our youth move past the issues that drive them to gangs, while concurrently understanding that overarching their issues is a bigger picture we must address. Are we drowning in a silent hopelessness? Are our spirits depleted to the point that the thought of taking on one more thing drains us? Or, are there options as a collective for ameliorating the conditions that are in reality draining us of our most precious resource, our youth?

We have to save our youth. The gang environment is not their answer, and the resulting violence cannot continue. But we cannot, whether it is in this country or in Australia, South Africa, or the Caribbean (to cite just a few examples), approach the problem from a silo mentality.

People want change, and they want to talk about and through their pain. Dialogue is the starting point for making a difference in our world. But we cannot afford to stop at dialogue, because eventually we only engage in episodic change with an overtone of complaining. Our actions have to be strategic and systemic, working to eradicate the root cause of the multiplicities of problems that give rise to the loss of our youth. It will take only one successful example where people work collectively to eradicate the many issues that face challenged communities across the world to ignite a fire that rapidly spreads across the globe.

The time for deep and systemic change is now. I am optimistic that the change will result in a positive, enriched environment where our youth will not want to gravitate to alternative environments. So I encourage your readership, irrespective of what part of the world you live. The issues of marginalization, dehumanization, dominance, and gang violence have no ethnic, race, or religious limitations. While I use my African American context to drive home

critical points and frame our options for change, we have to remember that we are not alone in this world. As we engage in our challenges on a daily basis, we must remember that there are many parents across the globe losing their children to gang violence and gang involvement. This is a global problem in which we all have a critical stake. The children are our future, and without their ability to successfully navigate through the tumultuous water of life, our future will be quite dim.

Last, there is a story within the story. As I carry my own personal sensitivities and lens into the analysis of these issues, they are contextually framed by my own experiences—those that occurred while conducting the research and my experiences after I completed my doctoral degree. I suggest as you read this book to not be afraid to challenge your praxis and ways in which you think about change. This book brings into focus an integrated modality for invoking critical change to challenging issues. I have learned over the years that when we look to make a difference in our world, we have to use multiple lenses to see people on many different levels. But, equally important, the change must begin internally.

Through every step of the journey I have taken that has led me to write this book, I have had to come face-to-face with critical lessons. I have also had to make the choice as to whether or not I wanted to learn those lessons. Despite my having several initials behind my name, the place where I now sit has not been a direct result of just having matriculated through those degree programs. Life, if we choose to allow it, is our greatest teacher, as well as the dealer of very challenging hands. Yet it's a personal choice as to how we play this hand.

Yes, our children are dying at record rates due to violence that does not need to occur. And, yes, as parents, educators, and community leaders, we often sit in frustration. But have you ever looked into the eyes of a parent that lost a child? Violence in concert with loss of hope impact our youth to the point that far too many of them do not see a future in which they will be active participants.

The physical or spiritual death of a child is beyond the concept of overwhelming. Parents lose a major part of their souls when their children are lost. I have never lost a child to gang violence, but I had a close call. My son, while home from college one summer experienced a carjacking where fifteen or more members of a gang shot at him attempting to take my truck. It was only through God's grace and mercy that my son experienced minimal injuries and was able to get away with his life intact. The number of bullets in that vehicle brought my husband and I face-to-face with what could have been another outcome.

To this day I will never forget the call I received notifying us he had been shot. My husband, daughter, and I were waiting for him to pick us up at the airport. Ironically, we were returning from a short vacation before I had to leave for England a couple of days later to present my research on gang violence! Never in my life did I expect to conduct a presentation that had such a realistic perspective attached to what was a traditional academic paper.

When I received the call notifying us our son was shot, I started screaming at the top of my lungs. The reflections I had on that plane ride to London a few days later were more than I could even begin to write about. This situation brought me face-to-face with the realization that no one is safe from the violence that surrounds our communities. It does not matter if you live in an urban, suburban, or rural community. People's lives are being touched by gang violence at levels that have surpassed historical records.

The issues that impact the African American community also cause us to lose our children in other ways as well. As a result, when we address the loss of our children to gang violence, we must concurrently address the issues that reside within our community and, most important, address the concept of community.

At many levels, our children are facing voids in their lives that challenge parents. Parents need the support of their community. We talk about taking a village to raise a child, but I don't see many villages. Yet, collectively we need each other, particularly if you are a single parent raising a child or children.

My understanding the dark hopeless feelings that touch the depth of our souls when we begin to lose our children and the issues that go along with being a single parent began with the death of my husband several years after I finished my doctoral program. I will talk more about my own personal journey throughout the book as I try to tie together my experiences with the issues I see so that others can relate, but for now, I want to set the context of one of the more critical journeys I have embarked upon that impacts my lens.

My husband's death from a massive heart attack was sudden and was not precipitated by a history of illness or disorders. So, needless to say, the shock was more than intense. We had always worked as a team in parenting our two children. However, on the flip side we were only children, which in many ways caused us to cling to each other even more so than a family with siblings. While we had a strong extended family network, they had their own lives. My daughter was entering high school when he died. In fact, she was scheduled to begin a week after his funeral services. She was Daddy's little girl, and the loss of her father took her to levels of grief that I am sure few can relate to. That