

## **Chapter Five: Observations**

*Of Where We've Come From and What We Have Done*  
—“We've Come This Far By Faith”—

**T**here is an old African saying that “all things move in a circle.” This very same sentiment is expressed most commonly these days as “history repeats itself.” In the African American community, it is typically enunciated as “what goes around comes around.” As we observe history, I suggest that although it may seem to repeat itself, it does not come back around full circle. Rather it is more like a helix. It may very well come back around all right, but on another level.

Let us consider education. The education of our youth takes on the form of the manner in which families usually earn their living. In the Agricultural Age, families typically had a large number of children to help out with the farm work. Women usually stayed at home doing chores. Children were educated within this framework, and given time off from school to help out with the harvesting of crops. And the schools were setup to accommodate all of this, which is why they were dismissed during the summer months.

With the onset of the Industrial Age, the families earned their living working in factories. And families moved to the cities in order to do it. The work hours were at a set schedule, commonly expressed as set from nine to five. The number of children per family became smaller in that large numbers were no longer needed. For the most part, the women’s responsibilities were still tied to the home. The schools now took on the characteristic of the factory, and set regularly scheduled hours, usually from around eight to three, however, the summer recesses were continued. Both the factory jobs and the schools started and ended with “the ring of a bell.” At the schools, children were acculturated to be able to adjust to the factory, and later the corporate, work environment.

Now we are entering into a new age—The Information Age. The structure of education may still mirror the work place, but like a helix it will be on another level as it adjusts to accomodate the requirements of the Industrial Age. As the styles and forms of work change to make the necessary adjustments, so too will the styles and forms of schooling. The W.E.B DuBois Learning Center was established to supplement the education of our youth in the style and form of the Industrial Age. I submit that the Telehub Network is a style and form needed to supplement education for the Information Age.

**In these times**, due especially to the advent of technology, more and more people are working at home. And if the “historical helix” is in play, more and more education will take place in the home. Already we see the technology being utilized in homes in a variety of ways, including:

- students doing research on the Internet,
- schools communicating with parents and students via e-mail,
- assignments being posted on school and/or teacher websites, and
- all sorts of school information being made available via websites.

Distance learning is going on with college, and even some high school, courses being offered via the Internet. A growing variety of certifications are being obtained over the Internet, and in more and more instances, college degrees are being offered that way too. Surely the high schools cannot be too far behind.

All-of-this points to the growing need for access to the technology. There is a growing concern over the residents of America's urban cores being left behind. This is especially crucial for our youth. Let me reiterate a point made in Chapter Two:

When students in about the fourth grade or higher are asked to do homework, it is expected that it be done on a word processor. However, many of the students in the urban core do not have access to the technology. Although they can avail themselves of computers in public libraries, most cities have very few in their urban cores. (Here in Kansas City there are only two.) However, I would hazard to guess that there are churches and community centers on "every other corner." So we reasoned that if we strategically locate computer centers in them, it may be possible that perhaps over half of the students could have access within walking distance.

This served as the primary driving force for our technical staffers to conceive of and develop our Telehub Network. It is another example of our people using their creativity to address our needs. All praises to those who worked, and continue to work, to make this dream a reality. They, and the other volunteers of the DLC, truly are a special breed of character.

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*Elton Gumbel is one of Kansas City's most conscientious artists and lyricist. He and bassist Keith Leathers put out an album in 1982 entitled "Observations." On it there is a song, "High On A Hill," that contains the following lines:*

*High on a hill overlooking all oppression  
I can see it all, my vision's clear.  
But I wasn't made to overlook nothing  
I was made to make the changes I can see I need.*

*I wasn't made to over look nothing  
Get off of the mountain and back to the valley. (Chorus)*

*In times like these, it's hard to resist the temptation  
To pack up all my things and leave the scene.  
But that wouldn't change none of the problems I believe in  
Running away won't bring the way things ought to be*

*(Chorus)*

*High on a hill I can escape all of my troubles  
But I still can't escape from me you see.*

*(Chorus)*

*These words reflect the expression of many of the grassroots movement activists and theorists that “You can’t lead people from the mountain top, you have to come to the valley where the people are.”*



Kenneth Clark was one of the historians whose work was influential in the outcome of the historical Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education U.S Supreme Court decision. In his book *Dark Ghetto* he pointed out (I paraphrase): “To read about a starving child is one thing—you may be moved to just talk about it. But to actually see a starving child is another thing—you will be moved to act.”

When we saw the plight of our inner city youth, we were moved to act. Or as Elton put it, we had to “get off of the mountain and back to the valley.” And once there, you will receive a reality check. For the reality in the valley will sorely test the theories and philosophies of those who reside on the mountain top.

**There is an old saying** that “the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” Gen. Colin Powell, while serving as Chief of Staff of the U.S. armed forces, expressed this thought as “plans are good up to the point of execution.” I’m sure you get the point. And our experience with the Telehub Network bears it out.

When we first started, we only had satellites in the neighborhood of the Learning Center. It was expressed by a representative of SBC that it was good we only began with a few sites. That way we would not get too stretched out when problems occurred. We would be able to tweak the system and get the various processes down before “steppin’ out.” And, boy, was he right!

One of the first issues we had to deal with was the differences between working with computer terminals and working with Citrix and WYSE terminals. (WYSE terminals are small boxes about the size of a walkman CD player. They are the hardware that interfaces with the software applications on the servers and the keyboard, monitor and mouse. All of the processing is done on the servers. Citrix is the program or software on which these applications run.) The latter served to eliminate many of the security problems, but it was not possible to upload files from floppy disks that many people wanted to do. Computer terminals were needed for scanning and making CDs and/or copying to and from floppy disks. However, using computer terminals also made it easier, especially for enterprising kids, to transfer files which may contain viruses that could contaminate the system. The Citrix/WYSE terminal option made it easier for the network administrators to maintain security.

And clearly the expense consideration had to be taken into account. Computers could more readily be obtained via donations from corporations versus having to purchase WYSE terminals. Taking all of this into account, one can clearly see why our system and network administrators were so busy. And in addition to this, they still were responsible for assigning user-names and passwords for all of the participants.

Then there is the challenge of getting all of the site administrators and program coordinators familiar with how to use the applications on the servers. What were the advantages that the Telehub Network provided? How could they best take advantage of the infrastructure that the Telehub Network made available to them? Fortunately, in most of our churches of any size, there are members within them who are, in varying degrees, knowledgeable of the technology. The question was—How could we get them interested

in the project so that they would work with the coordinators of programs in their churches, and simultaneously with the network administrators at the Learning Center? Clearly a new type of organizing was needed.

We have had success with this in varying degrees here in Kansas City. However, we encountered more challenging experiences with our satellites in other cities. When we attempted to get set up at Alkebulan Village in Detroit we thought that we only had to send them a configured Virtual Private Network (VPN) box that they could install. Wrong! As it turned out they did not have anyone on staff with the knowledge to do it. However, they did have someone who could use the applications on our servers that would be available to them, once it was up and running. We tried conference calling and video conferences to little avail. Fred Reeder, who was in charge of their program, in desperation said to me during a long distance call, that they were just going to hire someone to install it for them. I remarked to him, “How much are you going to pay for it? If it cost more than an airline ticket, we can send someone up there.” We eventually settled on sending George Walker and Jay Williams up there to install it.

We were finally able to get them up and running and things seemed to be going well. They were particularly pleased to be able to use our application to evaluate and track their students’ reading levels. However, Murphy’s Law always seems to kick in. For some reason—an electrical storm or power outage—their system went down and the VPN box had to be re-configured and set up again. This time we sent up Harrison and Jay. And they got them up and running again.

Here in Kansas City we can more readily handle situations when the system goes down and has to be re-configured again. But in other cities we had to find the counterparts of our technical people here to be there to handle such situations. But the big question that kept haunting us was how to go about engaging local persons in the other cities with the requisite backgrounds. Clearly we could not continue to keep sending someone to them every time some problems, as they invariably do, would occur. And most of the time it only takes an hour or so to get things up and running anyway.

Another observation: At the Learning Center we eventually evolved to the point where we had some paid staffers to see after these things, but in our initial stages we relied on volunteers. At Alkebulan Village they had an all paid staff, and had not relied on using volunteers, especially those with these kinds of technological skills. We tried several approaches. We were working with their chapter of Black Data Processors Association to find someone to help. And for a while that concept looked promising. However, when Alkebulan Village lost the person in charge of operating their program that made use of the Telehub Network, we were all back at ground zero again. You need both: a person (or people) in charge of using the applications and a person (or people) who can provide the technical support for the infrastructure.

At the time of this writing we are still working to solve this dilemma. For if we are to use the Telehub Network as a model of how to deliver technology access to America’s urban core, we have no choice but to master this challenge.

In Chicago the situation was somewhat different. There, at the NBUF headquarters where the system had been set up, they had Toriono Granger, a mechanical engineer, who had stronger technological background, and Vincent Johnson who worked in IT to help out. They are in the process of familiarizing themselves with the Telehub

Network so that the youth programs they plan to establish there, and in other locations, can utilize it.

By the way, once when George Walker was in Chicago on a business trip, he was able to go to their site and check out their operation. This is another type of occurrence that we can take advantage of as we develop this network. From time to time, corporations send people on trips, and we can take advantage of these situations to enable us to become better familiar with each other's operations as well as to have face-to-face dialogues. We have also taken advantage of these business trips whenever one of our folks are in a city where some people may be interested becoming a part of the Telehub Network, to arrange a meeting where they can have a discussion of the concept with them in more detail. We did this again on another occasion when George Walker went on a business trip to San Francisco. We arranged for him to have a meeting with Oba T'Shaka, NBUF's vice president over organizing and training, who is engaged in block-by-block organizing with the thought of setting up Learning Centers based on the DLC here in KC. While there, they engaged in discussions of the possibility of setting up an extension of our Telehub Network in the Bay Area.

As word of the Telehub Network spread, we began to receive inquiries from several other cities. We have also held talks with the possibility of setting up satellites in countries outside of the United States. We have held talks with persons expressing interest in setting up satellites in Haiti, Soweto and Liberia. And there have been others that have suggested that they were interested in making contacts with people in other countries who may be want to get involved with the network. Then there are the regular inquiries we get from persons who are seeking ways to take advantage of the network to help them accomplish a variety of projects of interest.

Our people's imagination seems to be kicking in. Our task is to stay on top of things and not get overwhelmed. But at the same time, we have to be wise enough to take advantage of the opportunities that arise that will enable us to reach higher heights in our overall objective to uplift our communities.

**But we have to keep our priorities in order.** It has become clear to us that the interest is there. As stated previously, there are over twenty churches here in the Greater Kansas City Area that have expressed a desire to participate in our Telehub Network. And the list is constantly growing. Organizations other than churches are also expressing interest: senior citizen homes and centers, community centers of various kinds, civic organizations, businesses, etc. The biggest hold up is resources.

Again we are primarily a volunteer organization. We had started the Learning Center with a simple mission. We just wanted to tutor our kids. Bill Grace and Leon Clanton just wanted to help some high school boys improve their reading skills. Vern Glover and I just wanted to set up a program to help get elementary students prepared for high school algebra. Once we came together, things just kept on evolving. And now we find ourselves with an institution that has its own building sitting on four and a half acres. We continued to attract students and volunteers to help tutor them. But the volunteers we attracted had some ideas of their own in terms of what we could do to help our community.

We have set up a science program and a bookstore. But with the advent of our Telehub Network things really began to take off. All of a sudden we were growing to the

point where we found ourselves having to continuously upgrade and expand our computer labs and server rooms. Now we have actually outgrown our facility. It is not big enough to house and satisfy the need for the hardware requirements to meet our growing demands.

One of our biggest challenges is to upgrade our capability to attract enough resources to meet our growing demands. That means we have to attract the type of people to become a part of the Learning Center who have the knowledge and wherewithal to be able to attract the resources to DLC that will be needed for us to keep up with the growing demands placed on us. Shall “Harrison’s Hypothesis” continue to prevail? That is the big question now facing us. In our formative years, we concentrated on attracting persons with strong academic skills with emphasis on math, reading and science. And when we acquired our building, we were fortunate to be able to attract persons with the building craft skills to help us maintain our facility. (Most gave us good price breaks for their work.)

But again, once the IT people became involved things began to take off. Before then, we only needed administrative skills and talents on a limited, although growing, basis. But now, the need for those skills was growing tremendously. We needed accountants, business executives and planners, databases planners and managers, fundraisers, corresponding and recording secretaries, attendance and file clerks and managers, etc. Fortunately, little-by-little we were attracting them. And as they began to work with the Learning Center, they became more acclimated to the DLC’s culture. As we often say, however, it takes about three to five years before a person reaches that desired comfort level. But with the rapid and accelerated growth of the Telehub Network, we had to speed up this process. What this required more than anything, on the part of all of us, was what John Henrik Clarke would often acknowledge and advise—PATIENCE.

**Patience with each other is one thing**, but patience with the plight of our youth in our urban core is another thing. For as Kenneth Clark intimated: when you see a “starving” child, you will be moved to act. Recall: When Bill Grace and Leon Clanton saw the need to help those young men in Central High School, they were moved to act and started a reading program. When Vern Glover stated flat out to me, “Dick, we have to do something with our kids,” we acted on that realization by setting up a program to help prepare elementary students for high school algebra.

But that was around the mid seventies. Things and conditions change. Given what they now are, what is needed is an upgrade to our approach. The cultural milieu and relative academic and economic status of the urban core have changed substantially. And the advances in technology have had a significant impact in that. Seeing that, some members of the DLC have been compelled to act. Again, the concept of the Telehub Network is part of our efforts to address that concern.

In our formative years, we had a larger percentage of students who sought enrichment. In these times, many students like those seem to seek other outlets for their interests. Looking back over the years, one realizes that it is the extra-curricula activities that attract the interest of such students, whether in the schools or in the community. This suggests that perhaps we should look into developing programs of this type in order to attract a wider cross-section of students. For it is also observed that students often learn a

lot from, and are influenced a lot by, their peers. And when this is done in an environment with caring and positive adults working with them, our youth can receive the guidance and a sense of direction that they both need and seek.

The Telehub Network permits this kind of environment to take place. Especially when we network with our churches and community centers where these kinds of programs can be developed, maintained and supported. The key seems to be setting up such programs in institutions where positive and caring adults of good character can contribute their time and talent. Many people seem perplexed as to how to attract such “high quality” volunteers. I submit that the Learning Center is an example, or model, of how to attract such master souls.

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*On the album “Observations” Elton Gumbel has penned another song, “My Cup of Tea,” with lyrics that speak of such “master souls.” Among its lines are the following:*

*Sometime in your life the desire must be real  
To reject what has been done, and just go for what you feel.*

*Songs of new beginnings feel just right for me.  
So music for the people is my cup of tea.*

*“Music for the people” he writes. But for me that can be taken as a metaphor for any kind of activity that is beneficial to your fellow man. And the “songs of new beginnings” are, again for me, a metaphor for the adjustments necessary for the current times.*

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**In these times** the educational systems that our children have to rely on are in dire straits, especially when it comes to reading, math, science and technology. When the Black Family Technology Awareness Association (BFTAA) held its kickoff program for its 2006 activities, Tyrone Taborn, its national founder gave the keynote address. In it he relayed some startling statistics:

- Two-thirds of the public school teachers of math, science and technology do not have a major or minor in those subjects.
- And the schools serving the urban core have the majority of such teachers.
- India is producing around 250,000 technology graduates annually.
- China is expected to produce around 500,000 of them.
- The United States is only producing around 75,000 engineering graduates annually.
- And around 3% of them are African American.

As a consequence of this reality, this country is losing its technological edge in scientific and technological innovations and in manufacturing. Our children of tomorrow will have to compete for jobs with children of the world, not just those in the United States. And a vast majority of them will be ill prepared for the future that awaits them. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “We have some difficult days ahead.” However, James Cleveland left us with the following musing: “No Cross, No Crown.” The big question is “Are we up to the challenge?”

It has become obvious to me that we African Americans who have acquired skills, talents, and any other kind of benefits or blessings have an indispensable role to play. Who else—what other group understands the youth of our urban cores, can relate to them, and can encourage, inspire, motivate, and help instruct and prepare them for their future better than we? In addition to that, we are the ones who have been able to achieve our success and acquire said benefits due largely to the efforts, struggles and work of those who have gone before us. We owe them! They paid the price for our successes!

I am reminded of a conversation that I had with one of my high school classmates, Don Holt who heads Computer Village in St. Louis, shortly after I had returned home from college and had begun working. He was waxing sentimentally on how his mother, Mrs. Gladys Holt, had helped him through Lincoln University in Missouri. He was expressing how he felt gratitude and debt for her support, without which he could not have made it. He was talking about how he wanted to “pay her back.”

I had similar feeling about my grandmother, Mrs. Beatrice “Big mama” Williams. She had raised me when my parents, Leon, Sr. and Beatrice Dixon, made their transition when I was six months and fourteen years old, respectively. I recall telling Don that there is no way you can pay your mother back. The best way to pay her back is to do a good job of raising your kids. Similarly, the best way for the current generation to honor and pay tribute to their elders and ancestors is to do a good job of preparing their youth and laying the ground work for their future.

That same thing can be said for each of our generations as a whole. But I would hasten to say, especially for those of us that grew up in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, and beyond.

I often compare the historic “Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education” decision with the cosmic “Big Bang.” Ever since that era, successful African Americans who have reaped benefits from it have been steadily moving away from the urban core, just as matter has been dispersing as a result of the Big Bang . As a consequence, by the turn of the millennium, the urban core has become less and less populated by persons like these for the youth there to know, look up to, model themselves after, and form bonds with.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point*, discusses the effect on neighborhoods and environments of what the Census Bureau calls “High Status” workers (professionals, teachers, lawyers, doctors, etc.). He points out that for African American’s, when their number in that group falls below five percent, the high school drop out rate more than doubles and teenage pregnancies nearly double.

**Although we were not aware of it at the time**, over the years it has become more and more obvious to us that the primary benefit the Learning Center has provided for our youth is not so much the tutoring, although that certainly helps. It is the establishment of an institution that provides an environment, where African American “High Status” adults are available for our youth to be around on a regular basis, and not simply on a “drive-by” basis.

In addition to this, there is another salient, but subtle, aspect of the Learning Center that needs to be emphasized. It springs from the observation that the students who remain involved with the Learning Center get to form bonds and relationships with “High Status” role models who remain engaged with them throughout their entire involvement

with the Learning Center. In other words, long-lasting relationships are formed, somewhat like the ones formed in our churches.

This is especially significant for the elementary years. In a typical school, the students are engaged with a separate “High Status” person (teacher) for each school year. At the Learning Center, there are some “High Status” persons that the students, and their families, get to know and relate to for their entire involvement here—thereby causing the Learning Center to become somewhat of an extension of extended family. As the students grow and mature over the years, these persons, as a natural consequence, continuously monitor and encourage their protégés. They help guide their course selection in their middle and high school years. And they encourage the students to take subjects to help them maximize their talents and interests.

This could help alleviate, at least somewhat, the situation mentioned above—brought on by the diminishing numbers of “High Status” African Americans in our urban cores—that was highlighted by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *The Tipping Point*. The middle and high school years can be particularly trying for our youth. And the more positive guidance they can receive from the mere presence of positive “High Status” adults can help them as they struggle to navigate these trying and crucial years. The children in our urban cores should not be left to suffer academically or otherwise.



*In “Search the Skies,” another song on “Observation,” Elton wrote the following lines that very poignantly expresses this thought.*

*When I suffer, I know, though it hurts me so,  
That when I suffer, I don’t suffer alone.*

*So I search the skies  
And pull down another reason to try  
Looking for a better way*



Trying to stay abreast of the times, and to come up with programs and projects to address the needs of our community, continues to be both a challenge and a necessity. However, we continue to remain hopeful that we can find ways, somehow, to devise methods to address these needs. An observation of the progress that the Learning Center has made thus far illustrates how “we’ve come this far by faith.”

Throughout the existence of the Learning Center we have been fortunate to have people who regularly “search the skies and pull down another reason to try,” and who are constantly “looking for a better way.” We all realize that in order to support our youth as we need to do, we have to create “songs of new beginnings” as we play “music for the people” which, by-the-way, is our “cup of tea.”