

## Chapter Six: Contemplation

*On Where We Are and What We Are Doing*  
—“Trying To Get Ready”—

Over the years, as we have sought to achieve our mission and objectives, we have been constantly confronted with “unintended consequences.” These are usually regarded as unfortunate things that often occur. However, we encourage each other to view them as “unanticipated opportunities” that sometimes present themselves. And that we will usually a window of opportunity to take advantage of them. To me this means that we will need the insight to recognize them when they present themselves; the wisdom to devise plans of action to achieve envisioned objectives; and the fortitude to follow through with action plans.

Some may regard an “unanticipated opportunity” as good fortune or luck. Luck, however, is preparation meeting opportunity, as the saying goes, and if you fail to prepare—prepare to fail. But preparation requires thought, effort, discipline, and purpose-directed action. And to prepare for the road ahead, it helps to understand the road traveled. This conjures up the concept of “Sankofa.”

So let me take a little time to analyze some aspects of our historical, social and cultural reality that relates to the subject of this memoir. And then discuss how the DuBois Learning Center evaluated them and developed some strategies to address our desire to enhance the acculturation/education of our youth with an eye on how we can do even more in the future.

**In Africa there is a bird they called Sankofa** that has a neck long enough for it to tuck its head under its wing. Africans analogized this as being able to look into the past. And they used the image of the Sankofa bird doing this as being symbolic of drawing from the best of the past, of one’s experiences, and traditions to gain insight for one’s future endeavors. Interestingly, Amilcar Cabral, the leader of the liberation movement in Guinea Bissau, expressed a strikingly similar sentiment when he advised us to “return to the source.” However, in order to gain inspiration and insight from the past to guide one’s future, it requires reflection and, let me say, contemplation.



*McCoy Tyner, who was the pianist in the classic John Coltrane Quartet, wrote and recorded a tune, “Contemplation,” that features a surreal and pensive melody. Doug Carn, a pianist and lyricist, who put lyrics to several classic instrumental songs by the masters, was inspired to do so with “Contemplation,” featured on his album “Revelation.” Many of us who were caught up by “the music” were thrilled by what we witnessed in the offerings of Doug Carn. We all felt that it was truly groundbreaking. His then wife, Jean Carn, who had an angelic and melodic voice, brought the song to new heights. Some of its lyrics are as follows:*

*Soul in a restful state  
Peace when the day is ending  
I sit and I contemplate  
And search my life for its very beginning.*

*Way back — way back (refrain)*

...

*Life is what you make it  
It's up to you and how you want to take it  
True knowledge is free  
Open your eyes and see  
Have faith in yourself  
Be what you want to be*

*Contemplation, sweet meditation ...*

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An observation of a social condition that resulted from the sixties, noted in the preceding chapter, illustrates such an unanticipated opportunity as mentioned above. Little was it known how the results of the Civil Rights Movement would be played out. When one observes the blight and despair that resides in our urban cores, one is driven to think in terms of untended consequences.

But let us take a deeper look. The urban cores are densely populated with young people who are suffering academically. And we have churches virtually on “every other corner.” That means they are within walking distance for many of these youths. Now, couple that with the fact that many of our people have acquired a variety of skills and talents that can be utilized to mentor our youth and help work with their development. Every generation that followed the Civil Rights era, has had a substantial number of its members who have been able to obtain a rather comfortable standard of living because of the gains won and doors opened by it. This means that we have the wherewithal within our means to organize a system to address this pressing need in our community. This brings to mind a pertinent question put forth by the O’Jays: “Now that we’ve found love, what are we gonna do with it?” Here I’m using “love,” in this case, a metaphor for our acquired benefits, blessings, successes and good fortune.

The Learning Center and its Telehub Network, I submit, is an example touched on in preceding chapters, of what we can “do with it.” But there are so many more, and even deeper, possibilities. Let us contemplate on a musing of Franz Fanon. He analyzes how the revolutionary movements in Africa took off in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. He states that they always begin with grassroots people. However, they do not take off, he points out, until what he calls the “national bourgeoisie” joins the movement. Actually he says until they betray their “class” interest and join the movement. The point is that they bring the organizational skills and other requisite and pertinent knowledge to bear, that the grassroots people lack. It’s among the grassroots where you find so many with the “fire in their bellies.” They are the ones known to bring a lot of energy, enthusiasm and “traditional” creativity to be developed and organized. When both come together with their respective contributions, order out of chaos develops, and the odds of their mutual success greatly improve. But again, for this to happen, the “middle classes” have to identify with the “masses,” with the realization that they are in the same boat, that it is to their mutual benefit that they come together and work together, and that their mutual success depends on them doing so. Fanon states that it cannot occur otherwise.

Let us contemplate on this concept, while being mindful of the “historical helix,” to analyze the times we now are in. I wouldn’t argue so much that we have to *betray* our

class interest, but rather it *is in* our class interest. It is commonly said that the most preferred popular culture throughout the world, is that of young Black America. Look at the creativity (an attribute necessary for our survival)—which includes much more than that exhibited in the arts, athletics and entertainment—that exudes there from. But who is mostly benefiting from it. It is mostly this country’s ruling classes, and those aligned with them, who own and/or run the corporations and institutions that control just about everything. Consequently, our communities are not benefiting from the fruits of our cultural orchard anywhere near as much as we should. Yes there are some individuals from our community that do well, but not our cultural group as a whole.

Power flows to the organized. What is needed is networking and organization between our “managerial classes” and our “creative classes.” It is imperative, as Fanon alluded to, that these two complementary aspects of our cultural community come together for our mutual benefit, not to only survive, but to thrive as well. There are all of those possibilities for entrepreneurial activity, for control of the development of our acculturation. And this is due in no small part to the advances in technology. The onset of the Information Age has made the playing field somewhat more level, at least for awhile—that window of opportunity mentioned above. When these two wings of ours come together, I’m convinced we will fly!

**Let us contemplate on our acculturation** for a moment. Culture is key. As Amilcar Cabral has pointed out, “Liberation is an act of culture.” More to the point, culture influences our motivation for, and methods of, education. It is necessary to educate our youth so that they can lead a quality of life. But “quality of life” should be defined so as to incorporate the needs of our communities. Think about what we say to our youth to encourage them to get a good education. It goes something like this: You need a good education; so that you can get a good job; so that you can make some good money; so that you will be able to live a good life. We hardly ever encourage them with concepts of developing their creative, imaginative and analytical abilities to benefit our families and neighborhoods, and to build up our community. In fact we even heap praise on those from our community who do well in the larger society. And except in extreme cases, like the Civil Rights Movement, we frequently praise them much more than we do the ones who work to benefit our own community.

Tupac Shakur commented in a documentary shown on TV about how it was difficult for him to enjoy his success when his “hommies” are left behind. He lamented the fact that he had few of his friends along with him to share it with.

Speaking of TV: I recall a soft drink commercial wherein it showed an African American man who had just obtained a contract to play professional ball. It showed him celebrating with his friends. One of them remarked that he knew that he would make it. They then proceeded to pop the cans, toast him and drink the soda.

I thought to myself, what if they showed them in a setting where they were holding a meeting to discuss some plans they had made in case one of them “made it”? They were discussing how one of them had majored in business and was to manage his affairs; another in law and was to become his lawyer; etc.; and they were now in a good position to bring into reality some business arrangements that had previously agreed on. Think of the subliminal message *that* would send to our youth versus the simplistic commercial that was aired!

Culture is like the air we breathe and the water we drink. It is the ground in which our cultural orchard is to grow and develop. The acculturation in general and the education in particular of our youth is likened unto planting a seed and cultivating it to full flower. No matter what its genetic quality or the expertise of the gardener, the quality of the air, water and soil in which it is nurtured will greatly impact its outcome.

John Henrik Clarke illustrates this point in one of his tapes wherein he analyzes the conditions in our urban cores by comparing it to the human body and the substances it consumes. If it consumes substances that are agreeable to it, then its organs will process them appropriately. If they are foreign to the body, the organs will reject them and regurgitate them out. He argued that this is what is happening in our urban cores. It is being force-fed an acculturation that is foreign to it, one that is not agreeable to it, and it is in heavens.

**Given these conditions, these realities**, what kind of strategies should we put forth in order to address them? Clearly we need to concern ourselves with issues regarding, both the formal and informal, acculturation and education processes. And in both cases we need to ask (and answer) the question: Education for what? As mentioned previously, what we really need to do is strive for a quality of life for our entire community, not just as individuals. Our educational processes should address this objective. The big question is: Who determines what it should be? This is where conflict arises, both with formal education within schools and with the after school programs.

Keep in mind that Bill Grace and I both started out trying to work with people in the Kansas City, Missouri School District. And they accommodated and utilized our efforts for a while. But there seemed to be forces within the KCMSD that imposed conditions and restrictions as to what could be done and priorities on what to do. What we independently realized was that in subtle ways (and sometimes not so subtle) our youth were receiving an education/acculturation that did not fully address their needs for the world in which they had to live. And subsequently, we independently set out to set up after school programs to supplement the education/acculturation of our kids. Later we merged our efforts into what became the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center.

We recognized that what many, if not most, of our children needed was to shore up their fundamental skills, in reading and math especially. They had been exposed to the materials, but their understanding of the fundamentals needed tightening up. The concept of using area professionals to volunteer to tutor them in our churches enabled us to do whatever we thought was best, and to employ the approaches and techniques we felt necessary to use.

In most schools the material used for education is heavily laced with Eurocentric content. The people who designed the system regard that as a natural thing to do. They seemed to think that the goal is merely to get our youth to become assimilated into their culture. We have observed that the examples and explanations they use, though perhaps well intentioned, often fail to achieve the desired results of clarifying concepts and motivating students. And although it is proper for us to be able to work with persons from other cultural milieus, it is imperative for us to be grounded in our own culture. And we set out to operate with that thought in mind. Many of the examples, explanations and motivational dialogue that we use at the Learning Center contain analogies that resonate better with our students, hence enabling them to draw better comparisons for

clarifying concepts and leading them to better understanding. Perhaps more importantly, we try to help them realize that, although it is perfectly legitimate for them to use their dialect in their everyday speech, they need to be able to translate between it and Standard English. And that their ability to do so will have a major impact on their future success.

**Back in our early days** we realized that we had to go about doing things in ways that others outside of our community probably would not understand. We also realized that it may impede some possible funding sources, because they naturally wanted to understand how their funds were being utilized. But we had to proceed with our way of doing things anyway because we felt that that is what our kids needed. We had to do what we had to do! And by us donating our time and the churches donating their space we were able to keep our expenses next to nil. In fact, we often joke about how in our early years we were able to operate with a \$100 per year budget.

Over time we grew to have a deeper appreciation for what we had initiated, confident in the validity of our approach. The testimonies of parents and students encouraged us as well as the progress of our students that we personally witnessed. And the results of the survey mentioned in the Interlude gives further verification of our approach.

“Soul in a restful state,” writes Doug Carn, “peace when the day is ending.” Those lines of “Contemplation” seem to capture the ambiance of the folks of the Learning Center who have dedicated their time and talents in the service of our community. Working in the Learning Center over the years and noticing how members of our community have come together and have given of themselves to benefit our youth cannot help but infuse the participants with a measure of inner contentment. This is especially true when the progress of our youth is observed, as mention above, and the community itself seems to appreciate our efforts. The mere act of working on objectives such as these makes it easy for us to rise above whatever petty differences we may have to achieve our overall objective which is much larger than ourselves. It is interesting to note how so many of the people who have visited the Learning Center have commented on this ambiance that they witnessed. However, of the many persons who have graced us with their presence, there was one that had a special significance for us.

Dr. Du Bois Williams, granddaughter of W.E.B Du Bois, once came to Kansas City for a speaking engagement, and we were honored to be able to hold a reception for her at the Learning Center. During a dialogue session she asked me, as I reflect on the instance, if we taught Black history. I answered that we didn’t per se, because only a handful of parents would send their children to the Learning Center to learn it. But many of them would send their kids to the Center to learn reading and math. I went on to explain how we use materials from, and relevant to, the Black experience and culture to teach them as a matter of course. And that the parents loved it, just as long as we were teaching them reading, writing and arithmetic.

**It has been said that more harm is done through ignorance than evil.** Many people want to do the right thing. The problem is that people operate out of their own world view. It not enough to simply want to do the right thing, you have to be aware of what is the right thing to do. One of the natural things that the members of the Learning Center do, as mentioned previously, is to use examples that are culturally relevant, examples that

our youth can readily identify with, to give them insight into educational concepts and even life itself, especially life in the world of the future that awaits them.

Working within the school systems, it is often advisable to be diplomatic in using culturally related materials and approaches, or else there might be repercussions. Sometimes it's even necessary to resort to using Brer Rabbit techniques. But in after-school programs like the Learning Center you can be bold and up front with it. Or as Kool and the Gang encouraged: "Git down with it."

I can recall an instance in my youth that happened when I was at a Boy Scouts camp. That was in the early fifties when segregation was still the order of the day. The camp was owned and operated by the white Boy Scout leaders, but they were "nice enough" to set aside some time for us to use it. However, they had one of their leaders to run the camp for us. Now he meant well, he really tried to run the camp so that we could enjoy ourselves. I remember that he had us singing folk songs and the like in the evenings after chow. And we all went along with it as children are prone to do.

One day some kind of emergency came up and he had to leave. So he turned the operation of the camp over to Mr. Marshall, the main Boy Scout leader in our community. After the white leader left, the very next evening after chow, Mr. Marshall let us have a talent show, ala live at the Apollo. Man did the atmosphere change. We dipped off into our "ism" and came up with all kinds of stuff and really had some wholesome fun! The point here is that we were able to do the things that we enjoyed and felt like doing. It was like our micro version of Congo Square!

And this speaks to one of the telling points of the Learning Center. We are able to dip off into our "ism," whenever we deem it necessary, and without fear of repercussion, to help drive home certain concepts and truisms—academically, culturally, or otherwise.

But even more important, the only way to move forward, to make progress, is to be true to oneself. If we deny being true to ourselves we will not be able to offer the world the blessings that flow from our culture and traditions. "We have a song to play," LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) wrote in his book "Raise, Race, Rays, Raze." And only by playing our song will we be able to fashion a "world of our dreams." It is as Doug Carn advises: "Life is what you make it, it's up to you and how you want to take it." But in addition to being well grounded, it is necessary to be self confident. And we have to motivate and help guide our youth into believing in themselves and their abilities. Again, as Doug's song says: "True knowledge is free. Open your eyes and see. Have faith in yourself. Be what you want to be."

Having talent though, is not enough. It may be necessary, but it is hardly sufficient. It must be nurtured, developed and honed. So it is not just about "academic" tutoring. Our youth need to see on a regular basis, persons from whom they can draw inspiration; persons whose mere presence can fire their imagination as to their future possibilities; persons from whom they can receive a sense of validation; persons who will mentor them as they master the academic concepts and their self esteem blossoms.

Sometimes it is a daunting task to dig out, discover and develop their innate abilities. However, we must be mindful of the fact that in seeking gold, the nuggets are found by searching in soil. And let us keep in mind that diamonds form from coal as a result of the pressure it undergoes. Even deep within our urban cores, diamonds in the rough are regularly found. It goes without saying that we are constantly on the lookout for our children's interest and talents. And once determined, we offer guidance as to

what courses they should take, help them find mentors when possible (often from persons we know or contacts we have), make them aware of other programs out there to be taken advantage of, etc. Sometimes it may even inspire us to establish programs within the Learning Center itself. And our Telehub Network, in particular, has provided us open-ended possibilities for such offerings.

**It is often said that the only constant is change.** It is also said that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center and its Telehub Network are continuously evolving. When we obtained our building, it was like taking a quantum leap. It meant we had to step up from being a loosely organized group, to taking on some serious responsibility. It was the assuring words of Vern Glover that allayed my anxieties when he said to me: “Dick, it’s going to be like building a church, just like we did back in Arkansas.” (Glover had a grandfather and grand-uncle who were pastors who had built churches.)

Let us look “way back” as in the concept of Sankofa. Ever since we were brought here, we have built, informally at first, and formally later, spiritual institutions. And aspects of our cultural memory from Africa have been retained in most, if not all, of them. Ironically, many people have commented about the sense of spirituality they felt upon visiting the Learning Center. They have noticed the variety of personalities, with their diversity of skills and talents, all working together for our common good. It was often reiterated in the sixties: The way to organize people is around a project. And our objective of working to benefit our youth and community is such a project around which our people can be organized. It is like the gospel song says: “Its something bigger than you and I.”

In working with each other, given the faith we have in our mission and abilities to carry it out, over time we have grown to have faith in each other. Even when times got tough and our faith was tested, deep inside we felt that somehow somehow we would prevail. I guess this is what led Harrison to make the comment that has been dubbed his hypothesis. (Recall, from Chapter Three, that he once said to me when I observed that we were short on resources to accomplish some things we had wanted to do: “I noticed that ever since I been up here, that whenever we really needed something, something always seems to comes through.”)

**The Telehub Network** has presented us with as many challenges, it seems, as it has opportunities. It is heartening to us that we have over twenty churches and community centers expressing a desire to participate with our Telehub Network as of this writing. It is somewhat disheartening to know that the only thing preventing us from going full steam ahead is the financial resources to proceed. It is as though Harrison’s Hypothesis is about to receive an “acid test.” But we are continuously “Trying To Get Ready” for what the future holds in store for us. Luck is preparation meeting opportunity, as pointed out at the beginning of this chapter. And the staffers of the Telehub Network, as well as the other DLC staffers, have been diligently preparing for the next wave of expansion. And already we are receiving suggestions and proposals for a variety of possibilities for the use of the infrastructure that we have in place.

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*Back in the mid twentieth century there was an a-cappella gospel choir called Wings Over Jordan. They were renowned for their versions of classical Negro spirituals and gospel songs. On their album "Amen" they have a song entitled "Trying To Get Ready." According to folklore and legend: there was a slave girl that greatly admired a gorgeous white gown that her mistress had worn to a gala affair. When her mistress left for a long journey, she saw this as an opportunity to try on the gorgeous gown. While she was admiring herself in the mirror, she was startled when she saw the image of her mistress appear along side that of hers.*

*Her mistress had returned unexpectedly for an item she had forgotten. The slave girl, realizing the trouble she was in, started singing: "I'se jest trying to get ready to put on my long white robe."*



The "long white robe" is symbolic of entrance into heaven. For us here on earth, those words can be taken as a metaphor for a desired sought for state of being or existence. For us at the DuBois Learning Center, one such desire, striving to attain The "world of our dreams," is to be able to see the expansion of our Telehub Network to all those willing to make "the hook up," as Master P would put it. In the "meantime" (as B.B. & C.C. Winans sang it), we'll continue "trying to get ready," as we "contemplate" from whence we've come and where we have yet to go.