

## Knocking on Wood?

As a youth, when I'd express my desire to get something done by tomorrow, my Dad would lament, "Knock on wood." Then, he'd walk to the nearest doorframe, cupboard, couch leg, or sometimes even the back end of a hairbrush, and rap his knuckles on a wooden surface. He'd follow this act with, "If tomorrow's light graces my doorway, I'll be a grateful soul."

After hearing this overture countless times, a one-note samba to the ears of my youth, I became tone deaf. I took these providential words - often seen by me as superstition - for granted. I'd reflect without commentary, "Of course tomorrow's sun would rise in the East. And you can bet the handful of marbles in your pocket, that we'd be here come mornin'."

I thought, Dad is just being superstitious, but superstition was not what motivated him! In his eyes, these gestures were personal reminders to express his gratitude for this precious, irreproducible life. And he wasn't alone. I'd often observe other black neighbors knocking on wood, expressing gratitude after some good fortune had graced their doorstep. Life offers no guarantees.

Me, a New York City skeptic at heart, I assumed the music of my life would be with me forever. Once thought of as Pollyannaish, today these words sound melodic to my soul.

With age, I've become less presumptuous about life and more circumspect about lifetime warranties. Even seemingly small things, I've become grateful for. The free lessons from hindsight, mother wit, and father time, are offered whether one is ready to receive them or not. Even if I miss them the first time around, life's instructions seem to reappear until I hear their natural pitch.

To know gratitude gives you access to experience a life filled with abundance. Instead of living from scarcity, my life shows up as bounty. To experience gratitude makes you feel like you're living a complete life. Instead of expecting something, my natural childlike rhythm - an enthusiasm - uplifts my spirit. To live with gratitude invites others into your heart. Instead of seeing the holidays as a big commercial, my heart gives over what's needed.

The holidays offer major and minor opportunities to express gratitude. I can be grateful for the hands preparing food set before me each day. I can be thankful for the blessing of sharing my life with a loving spouse. I can be gratified for a daughter, sister, brother-in-law, nephews and cousins enriching my life. I can be appreciative for the family, friends and community valuing our relationship. I can be appreciative for clients sharing the intimacies of their lives. If I just look around, with an open heart, there are more than enough opportunities for me to practice gratitude.

Gratitude isn't pretense. Nor is it something we invoice others for, expecting something in return. Neither is it done to create

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a revolving account of credits. And it certainly isn't a fancy, gift-wrapped box tucked under a decorated tree in an illuminated window of a major department store. No, the quality, tone and distinction of gratitude say much more.

An act of kindness on your behalf, given freely by another without them being asked to do so, is a selfless act. Yet it happens everyday.

Somebody does something, on your behalf, and never so much as requests a thank you. This is your cue to light up their lives with the timbre of your gratitude.

As I consider it, I can practice the quality of gratitude everyday. It can be invigorating to experience gratitude through a fresh set of eyes. I now have a freedom from the familiar to a new experience of myself and of others.

For starters, I can let go of the expectation that someone owes me something. That way I can respond to anything in life as a gift, a blessing. I can release old grudges. That way I can reinvent a new way of being in relationship. I can be with anything off-key - predictable or unpredictable - along life's path. That way I can be an empty vessel, freeing me for and being open to the possibilities of gratitude.

Gratitude grants us a passageway to the sound of our own compassion. We experience a harmony with our true selves. So, when it is time to express gratitude, for all you that you have and all you have been given -- and you're not near a doorframe cupboard, couch legs or hairbrush -- buy a wooden desk. Even if you're not superstitious, why take the chance? It'll be a powerful reminder.

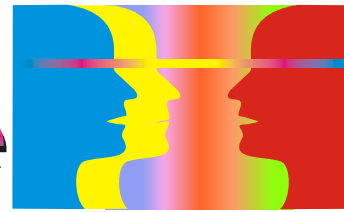
The gift of gratitude rings in during this holiday and throughout the year. For me, I'll be seeking out place to knock on wood. If you don't believe me, check my knuckles.

### **Knock on Wood**

Dad practiced expressing his gratitude for life by routinely knocking on wood. Where in life are you expressing your gratitude? What does your expression available? If knocking on wood presences you to the power of heartfelt gratitude, make it so.

#### **30 - Day Observation Practices - Heartfelt Gratitude**

1. Where are you seeing opportunities to be grateful today?
2. Carefully look at where people provide you support today without consideration?
3. Take a look to see how much is actually given to you freely today?
4. Start looking for chances to express gratitude. Permit your heart to open in experiencing heartfelt gratitude.



# The Rules of Ain't

In the brightly-lit Manhattan Port Authority terminal of the 1950s, I could still feel the heat and smell fumes from the Greyhound buses' diesel engines. Moments before, these same motor carriages had rolled in from faraway places south of the Mason-Dixon line. Black kids - with bright eyes and unconditional smiles - had come to spend a summer with their Northern cousins. Excited pre-teens had just hopped off these buses, stealing their first glimpse of New York City's bright lights.

Not yet teenagers, my new-found friends brought with them a lively way with language. One word, in particular, I developed an affection for was "ain't!" Combine it, with a distinctive southern drawl and nothing matches its energy. Its raw power, dwarfs the word no. Uncustomary, yes! Considered uncouth, perhaps. But ain't possessed an edge, a

posture unmatched by any other word I'd heard before. In my mind, ain't lived as a virulent form of saying no!

My Southern friends barked out ain't with a spirited freedom. It wasn't uncommon for them to use the word in the form of declaration while simultaneously waving a finger in the air and gyrating their heads back and forth. "I ain't doin' this! I ain't doin' that!" and "I ain't goin' here! I ain't goin' there!"

My playmates conjugated ain't in as many ways as the father of the bride in the hit movie, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," had found for using Windex. The word offered a new form of push back, and I embraced it as my private personal way of protest.

But my liking it didn't matter much in my world. Ain't not a welcome addition within the four walls of our residence. Considered slang by my mother, she corrected me often "It's improper according to the King's English," she insisted.

I thought, "Who is this King fella anyway?" I'd pipe up, (in my mind). We're not ruled by some chubby, white haired, wig-wearing member of the Royal Family. "Don't bring that foul, gutter talk into this house. You hear me?" "Yeah, yeah Mom," I'd cower back, mocking the conversation under my breath. Even the threat of a scolding was useless in deterring my use of it, especially among friends and when family was neither seen nor heard.

Underneath, I sensed ain't held a deeper meaning for my friends than me. It suggested a freedom of sorts, one now more available to them in the North than down in the South. In the City, away from being second-class, black kids expressed themselves with no inhibition, no fear of reprisal, and no threat to their mortal health.

Ain't became their emancipation, their proclamation. It meant, you can't tell me what to do anymore. Damned up for decades in the hearts, souls and minds of their parents, those

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## Reflections: November 2006 WCAN\* Meeting

### Boardroom Bound: Successfully Navigating Your Next Career Move

Last month, I was invited to a forum with seventy women of color. The meeting was held at a leading Silicon Valley software giant and major supporter of them and their work.

The day's topic was to discuss strategies for women of color to navigate corporate white water. In other words, how could women of color thrive as well as lay the groundwork for their success?

The moderator started by posing three overarching questions to the six panelists. Of them, four were women of color and two African American men. The questions were asked in the following order: First, what were their personal definitions of success? Second, what enablers fostered their success? And third, what barriers inhibited it?

After a few rounds of sharing by panelists, the moderator instructed audience participants to explore these identical questions for 45-minutes. In a round robin format, eight of us took turns swapping personal stories of our workplace experiences. In less than an hour, I deepened my understanding of these women's perspectives of successes and failures in the corporate work environment. Despite our gender differences, many of their experiences resembled mine - as a former professional in the fields of both health care management and higher education administration.

The feelings of isolation, having your competence challenged, and persisting stereotypes of co-workers were just a few of the commonalities. Key differences seemed to be in their approaches to manage male versus female employees, their desire to spend less time taking care of others, and their assuming roles outside of their expressed brilliance.

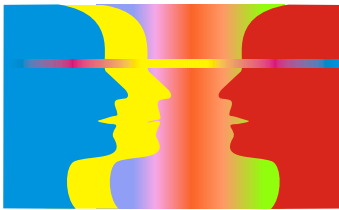
In their life-long journeys, work seems to define what they do, but it is not all of who they are. They're not just a bundle of competencies, a family of skills or an accumulation of knowledge. Their lives represent more, a larger purpose.

I was intrigued, but not surprised, by the pattern of their career paths. At first, many focused their attention on career. Their intention and energy was directed at being the best in their jobs, receiving recognition for their efforts, and getting promoted into a position with increasing responsibility. Then, at a critical juncture - somewhere between their mid-forties to early fifties this formula, for some, lost its appeal and the promise of this particular career path became secondary.

Some suggested the pursuit of their success still lives within a corporate environment; others spoke of finding this same success on the outside. And yet, others were unsure. I had a hard time attributing this sentiment of ambivalence in their career paths to any one factor. But, my impression was a deeply felt need to define themselves, their lives, by something more than work alone.

Afterwards, I came away thinking that this impressive group of women hoped to find a road map and compass to propel their careers through corporate white water. In many ways, the

# Face-2-Face



# Digest

Planning the future of your organization ... now!



## Black and White Glossy

No matter how small the stage, any venue can become a theater for change. I never could have imagined our front door as a single flash point in the 1960s civil rights movement.

As a youth and even today as an adult, my reputation for keeping late hours precedes me. Allergic to retiring early for bed, I've always made a concerted effort to experience life to its fullest. But, on this one day when history was being made, I fell asleep at my post. Somehow Gordon slipped into town and then back out without my noticing.

In my collegiate library, I dragged an unwieldy photo collection from the civil rights movement to a study table. As I flip through pages, captivating photographs burst to life in black and white glossy. Each image so true it could don the covers of Time, Newsweek, Life, or National Geographic. Gordon's work often made the front pages of these and other national publications.

With the click of a shutter and pop of a flashbulb, the photos reveal more than a struggle for civil rights. Close ups, in black and white, capture a reality far from my life's experience. Photos rekindle stories, told to me in my

youth, by my parents, my uncles, my aunts and my cousins. Coupled with the images, their stories now had an enlarged meaning as did my understanding of the movement.

I drink in the full range of human emotions from each photograph, not missing a seemingly insignificant detail. My imagination takes flight; I'm a passenger along for the ride. Not one but all of my senses absorb the images. I hear voices; I sense strife and I feel struggle. I gaze into their telling eyes and solemn faces. Their gazes leave me feeling I'm there with them. I empathize with their arduous journey. In black and white glossy, Gordon captures the essence of their souls and their life stories.

As the images wash over me, I stumble across one particular snapshot half way through the collection. I'm speechless. Everything in this photo rings familiar. I know the street, this storefront. And these faces, I recognize them from somewhere close. No, this is not Birmingham. Nor is it Selma; and neither is it Jackson. It's New York. It's on the front doorsteps of our tenement. When did Gordon set his sights on our inconspicuous little place, when did he point and click, and where was I?

Pickers, with "slum landlord" scrawled all over white, oak tag placards, denounce the butcher shop owner. His store lies at street level; we live one story above his

*Black and White Glossy: continued on page 4*

## The Rules of Ain't

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frustrations, now lived in the hopes, dreams and spirits of their kids. Now, with their first glimmer of self-expression, they bellowed to the top of their lungs, "I ain't!"

Just recently, I've been noticing that ain't has been creeping back into my vocabulary. I seem to use it as a substitute, a placebo if you will, for some stronger four-letter words. I suspect that the trials, tribulations and frustrations of being a "certified minority business" seem to evoke my use of the word.

Being a certified minority business means playing by a certain set of rules, and often, the rules designed to land contracts seem more likely to frustrate rather than free-up opportunities. Being a certified minority business means completing paperwork to retain certification; it means waiting on an eligibility list for potential contracts; it means completing requests for proposals for consideration of contracts; it means networking your business to state agencies and corporations.

What it doesn't mean is having a road paved with golden contracts.

My wish to see more minority contractors land more business ain't reflective in the numbers. My hope for the process to work better ain't necessarily the case! And my desire to see state agencies and corporations go beyond their current efforts ain't my idea of successful outreach. No wonder I'm left grumbling.

After all these years, I had thought of ain't as long gone, a figment from the past. But under my breath I catch myself saying, "I ain't filling out all those papers! I ain't going through this protracted process. I ain't going to those vendor fairs. And I ain't having my firm's name stuffed into a computer base, never to be heard from again!" I ain't playing by these rules.

So, if you see me grumbling ain't under my breath, don't mind me. It ain't you. Perhaps I ain't seeing the current rules for small minority contracting as the proper way to generate real participation for small minority contractors.

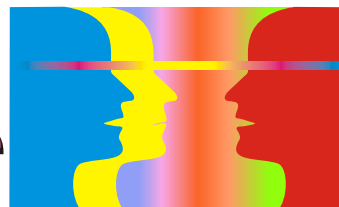
But I ain't giving up either.

### The Rules of Ain't

Ain't is a powerful narrative sometimes holding us hostage from our personal goals and objectives. We may be holding a conversation with ourselves about the way things should be versus the way they actually are. Where in your life or work is ain't show up? Are you aware where it lives in your world?

### 30-Day Observation Practices: Closed or Open?

1. In what ways were you closed or open today?
2. What was the catalyst for your being closed or open today?
3. What were the results from your being closed or open today?
4. What possible strategies might you take from these observations of yourself?



# Black and White Glossy

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business establishment. He doesn't own the building, but apparently owns run-down tenements in adjacent neighborhoods.

This one photo jogs faint memories to life. Protesters paraded his storefront, the entryway to our apartment, for days. Now I remember, as a teenager, trying to slip past protesters blocking my path to our front door without crossing their picket line and without causing too much of a stir.

Reporters, photographers, and journalists stood nearby. Why did this man's storefront become a flashpoint? What actions caused my neighbors to picket him and his business? No blacks could be found in his store over these days and for weeks to come.

Our front door became a staging ground for a peaceful demonstration in the civil rights movement. To see picketers protest on TV or in the newspaper was one thing. But to see picketers, neighbors you know, at your front door step is another.

As for Gordon, I never did see him during the demonstration. His trademark wavy black hair, dark skin complexion, handlebar moustache on a wiry body frame stood out in any

crowd. He's unmistakable.

Perhaps he assembled his photographic equipment in the mall across the street. Or perhaps, he took refuge behind a tree in the parking lot. Then again, he might have positioned himself atop the bank building opposite the demonstration site.

Any great photographer captures a subject's essence without interference or being obtrusive. This photograph, like the others, engendered in one black and white glossy the complete emotional landscape of human struggle. It had to be close-up.

Over those days I may have missed seeing the late Gordon Parks, famous photographer and filmmaker. But his presence was felt by the images he left behind. This one photograph left me with a sense that even a rag tag band of disconnected, yet committed neighbors with a single purpose can not only change their destiny, their history, but their worlds. Shortly thereafter, the butcher closed his doors forever.

## Black & White Glossy

A never seen before black & white

## Boardroom Bound

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forum did that. And, it also served as a reminder for them to live life with the same enthusiasm as their pursuit of a success career in the workplace. If the conversation did just that then what could be more important?

\* *Women of Color Action Network*

### Boardroom Bound: Successfully Navigating Your Next Career Move

The next rung on the career ladder is always within reach. Sometimes to pause and give thought to the question, what am I really up to in life beside my work is worthwhile? It may reveal

something more expansive than by just defining ourselves as a role at work.

### 30 - Day Observation Practices Feeling Alive in Your Life

1. *In what ways are you fully alive in your life?*
2. *In what ways does your expression of being fully alive bring meaning to your life?*
3. *What interferes with or dilutes your expression of being fully alive in your life?*
4. *What steps might you take from your observations?*

glossy photograph in a college library rekindled memories of the influence a small group of local citizens can have on their lives and the lives of others. Each day, we have an opportunity to live as empowered human beings. Where in your life, your work, or in your community do you live this way? Where is your presence being felt?

### 30 - Day Observation Practices - Feeling Empowered

1. *Around what event did you feel powerful today?*
2. *What was it that empowered you today?*
3. *In what ways did you rely on living in this empowered way of being today?*
4. *What are you beginning to see about yourself?*

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*For Information on the topics in this newsletter, or to arrange for training or speakers in the areas it discusses, please contact at us:*

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