

Heeding the Messages of our Ancestors

Written by James Clingman
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You would think that since the end of slavery and through the ensuing years Black people in this country would be further along in our economic evolution than we are today.

As I read the powerful words of our ancestors, both men and women, I hear the very same messages coming from them over 100 years ago. I hear them saying to our people who lived during that time, “Let’s build our own businesses.” “Seek for ourselves.” “Save our money and work together.” “Be producers.” It goes on and on.

The question that arises is: Why haven’t we heeded the messages of our ancestors? We are still trying to implement some of the economic principles they lived by many years ago. They had far fewer resources than we have today; they were quite limited when it came to transportation, communication, and education. Yet they developed and followed principles that if practiced today, would propel us toward the reality of true freedom.

A collective effort that should have been a natural evolution from generation to generation, among Black people, has now become a much-needed revolution. Don’t get me wrong. Revolution is all right, but our economic destiny should not be in such bad shape that it now takes a revolution to correct it. Our economic demise is the direct result of a lack of evolution. If we had followed the natural path of economic growth for Black people in this country, from the early 1900s until today, we would have evolved into one of the most powerful groups in the entire world. All we have instead is the dubious recognition of having an annual income that, if we were a country, would make us the tenth largest in the world.

Revolution or evolution? We always seem to gravitate toward revolution – and, admittedly, in most cases it has been very necessary. But as far as economic empowerment is concerned, we

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now need a revolution simply because we failed to have an evolution.

There was a time, John Sibley Butler's "Economic Detour" premise notwithstanding, when Black businesses flourished, even without access to the general market. The National Negro Business League, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and other Black business organizations helped create not only new entrepreneurs, they also stimulated a Black business psyche that encouraged our people to support one another, to do for ourselves, and to work for economic self-sufficiency. We were producers and landowners; we developed our expertise in all fields of endeavor; we created jobs for ourselves; and we circulated our dollars among our own people.

I hear so much talk about an "economic revolution" for Black people. Unfortunately, "revolution" in this case deals more with "revolving" than it does with "revolt." It simply means that we are getting back to a point where we were before, as in a circle. Are we running in circles when it comes to economic empowerment? I truly hope not. Economic revolution must be conceived and grounded in "overturning" our situation, not "returning" to it.

Black business is not a revolutionary idea; it is an evolutionary construct that moves from an infancy stage through various growth periods and cycles, and eventually becomes a Johnson Publishing Co. and a Motown. Evolution would have moved us from the models we saw in Durham, N.C., Tulsa, Oklahoma, and other cities, to a \$1 trillion business segment rather than the current \$150 billion segment we have today.

Revolution or evolution? When we walked away from our brothers' and sisters' businesses after we "won" integration, the proper evolution of our businesses was thwarted. Now we are faced with starting an economic revolution. We must now move to a place where some of us do not want to be, despite the fact that we were all there once before. We already had what we are now trying to win back. Evolution would have maintained what we had, but now it will take revolutionary thinking and revolutionary action to cause us to work together for true economic and psychological freedom.

Revolution or evolution? We can have both. We should have both. Strong Black-owned businesses still exist in this country, despite the buyouts we have witnessed in recent years. Evolution is paramount to their existence. Revolution is necessary for those of us who are consumers, small business owners, and advocates. We must change the way we do business. Specifically, we must change the way we spend our money. If we have revolution and evolution, Black people will make the progress we need to gain a much higher level of economic

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empowerment.

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