

# FOUR KEYS TO COMMUNICATING AND CREATING A COMMUNITY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND RACIAL EQUITY

*We need to get together and stay together and avoid the social and political weeds as much as possible. We need to weed out the people, ideas, programs, and attitudes that attempt to divide us and hold us back. I still believe that the answer to many of our issues are in our own hands.*

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*“If you are too big to do the small things, you are probably too small to do the big things.”*

Each time that I visit the Bunch of Grapes Tavern in the Ohio University Inn, which is about once a week these days, I remember interviewing in that room for a position at Ohio University in February of 1992. At that time, I never dreamed that I would move to Athens, Ohio and that I would still be here. In my recent publication entitled *From the Back of the Bus to the Front the Classroom: My Thirty-Year Journey as a Black and Blind Professor* (Monday Creek Publishing, 2019), I discuss in chapter three how I got to Ohio and why I stayed. One thing I did not mention in that publication provides much of the substance and content of this presentation. In some ways, I probably should have included the word “maintain” in the title of this presentation because in many ways, our present community is a strong reason why I am still here in Athens.

My initial exigent in creating this presentation was to decide how I developed my “four keys”. After some contemplation, I decided that since I am a singer and musical performer, why not tie the presentation to four of my favorite musical keys. For me, those would be the keys of C, E-flat, F and G.

## The Key of C: Communicating and Connecting

*“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”—George Bernard Shaw*

*“The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn’t being said.”*

—Peter Drucker

This is one of my favorite keys in terms of signing. This is the key that I sing the song “Amazing Grace” in the old down home way. This key allows me to comfortably reach some of the higher ranges of my musical skills and it allows me to achieve an effective connection with my audience.

Much of this work and productive community conversation starts with effective communication and intentional connection. As I sat at the Ohio University Inn on February 6, 2020 during the question-and-answer session of the Thriving While Black forum, I was struck by the fact that it seemed to me that many of the people in the audience did not really know each other. More importantly, many of us had no idea of the relevant endeavors and community contributions that had already been made and were presently being implemented. It was probably then that I blurted out, “I think its time to have a Black summit!”. Little did any of us know, that in March of 2020 our world would encounter a pandemic and a political upheaval of historic proportions. Despite this, several people in that audience heard my words and caught my vision and committed to help make it happen. It is because of them that we are here tonight, especially my colleagues Dr. Lewis and Dean Middleton. I dare say, that because of our planning activities, and frequent conversations and preparations for this event, we now know each other better

than we did before. You see, if we do not communicate with and connect with each other, it has the capacity to hamper our ability to empathize, challenge, encourage, and fight for one another. We must talk together, walk together, and just hang out sometimes.

Additionally, this key of C employs us to be consistent and continuous in terms of our support and sharing with one another. Let me be very clear here, caring, sharing, and support is generally not a one-time only deal. It must be consistent and continuous. So lets not be satisfied with just one march, one protest, or one fundraising event. Our mindset needs to be as long as it takes, and as often as is required, we will be there for each other. In my work in many churches over the years, I have observed church communities and other organizations implicitly and sometimes explicitly sending the message to an individual or a family: “its alright to be sick, its alright to be down, but please don’t do it for too long”. We have to commit to this issue of social justice and racial equity for as long as it will take. And the more of us that make that commitment will ensure our ability to care and share equally and equitably.

## The Key of E-Flat: On Equity and Equality

*“If equity is not diversity, inclusion, or equality, then what is it? It describes something deeper and more complex. It is about each of us getting what we need to survive or succeed—access to opportunity, networks, resources, and supports—based on*

*where we are and where we want to go*  
—Kris Putnam-Walkerly and Elizabeth Russell, Stanford Social Innovation Review

I love this key. And I love singing a song entitled, “We Don’t Know About Tomorrow” in the key of E-flat. It is probably my most natural key, and it allows me to do musical performances and compositions ranging from gospel to classic R&B. In fact, it is the key that I do my favorite Marvin Gaye song as well, “Let’s Get it On”.

As the quote above indicates, many have made the distinction between the issues of equity and equality. I believe that both can be addressed simultaneously when appropriate. The day that we cannot separate the two will be a beautiful time in all our communities. Clearly, we do not all start from the same place nor at the same time. But our basic humanity should never be questioned or challenged based on our socioeconomic status, skin color, or hairstyle.

When I came to Ohio University in 1992, this campus had an extremely aggressive and effective affirmative action policy and program. Therefore, there were many faculty, students, and staff of color on campus and in Athens. Over the years, I have observed those numbers dwindle at an alarming rate. Sadly, as people left, they were not replaced, and I think it is interesting that we find the finances to do what we really want to do. I had the privilege to serve on a committee with President Ping who was president when I was hired. I bluntly asked him how that aggressive and effective affirmative action policy was developed and why it was so successful. He basically said to me, “It was just the right thing to do and we did it”. Recently I heard someone say that a budget should be a moral document. I thought this was a very powerful statement. Remember the phrases, follow the money, and put your money where your mouth is.

The key of E-flat also suggests to me that elections have consequences. And we must be involved in

the election of those who have our best interest at heart and those that we feel will be positive influences on our goal of achieving social justice and racial equity and equality. This cannot be a one-party thing in my opinion. If I had my way, people of color would comprise 40 percent of the Democratic Party, 40 percent of the Republican Party, and 20 percent of independents. This might ensure significant political equity and equality for our community in the long run. Also, in terms of running for office, what about you and I putting our hats in the ring? It is one thing to stand on the sidelines and cheer and jeer, it is another to roll up our sleeves and get in there to make sure the job gets done right. We need our voices both heard and represented on city council, school boards, county commission, police force, and community foundations. Let’s not wait until some grave injustice to get active. Let’s be proactive, because there is a difference from sniping from the outside and running the ship or flying the plane. If we are to see the day when equity and equality become one, we must walk the talk and put our hands and feet together with our hopes and dreams. Equity plus equality equals opportunity.

### **The Key of F: It is STILL a Family Affair**

*“What can you do to promote world peace? Go home and love your family.”*

—Mother Theresa

This was the key that allowed me to train and lead many of my choirs when I was younger. It is the key that I do the song “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” by Thomas Dorsey in as well as “It’s So Hard To Say Goodbye to Yesterday” by Freddie Perren. It is simultaneously a solemn but uplifting key for me.

In terms of our discussion, the family in my opinion is still the root of it all. As a community, we are as strong or as weak as our families. My wife and I were able to raise our two daughters in the Athens community. We tried to

teach them to treat people as human beings first, and not to discriminate against them because of their race or ethnicity. We also try to demonstrate and practice social justice and racial equity and equality in our home on a daily basis. Our overall experience as a Black family in Athens has been primarily positive. But there were times when we needed the strength and support of each other to deal with some of the external pressures and events in the community. My wife says that there were clear instances of racial injustice and overt racism that she shielded our daughters from. If charity begins at home, then so must the respect and love for social justice. No one comes into this world as a racist. It is learned and often imitated behavior. As the story goes, there was a woman talking on the phone to her friend as her five-year-old child stood by. The doorbell rang and she went to answer it along with her young child. As her guest entered the house, she said, “have you heard the news about our friend Georgia?” The mother replied, “no, but Georgia is such a great person”. Before her guest could reply, the five-year-old retorted, “Mommy, is Georgia the one with two faces?”

Our families do come in many shapes and compositions, but they should all be committed to inspiring, educating, and empowering all members to be committed to issues of social justice and racial equity and equality. Not just when the cameras are on or at a board meeting or political rally, but even when talking on the phone and you think no one is listening.

In addition to family, where would we be and how far could we have hoped to come without our faith in God? In many ways, it is a miracle that many communities of color not only survive but continue to thrive. Yes, this is personal to me, and I recognize that not everyone who reads this presentation is either a Christian or perhaps believes in God like I do. But as I look back over my life as a father and husband and professor, I thank God for being able to pray and seek

his guidance when I need to. There is a song entitled “There Will Never Be Any Peace (Until God is Seated at the Conference Table)” by The Chi-Lites. What is my point here? Many of our external community challenges have more to do with our hearts and souls in addition to politics and economics. Therefore, a heart and soul change is a vital key to our ultimate goal and success in achieving a community of social justice and racial equity and equality. I am unapologetic here.

### **The Key of G: Get it Together**

*“When all think alike, then no one is thinking.”—Walter Lippman*

I gravitated to this key when I first learned to play the piano and guitar. I think it was because it allows me to hit the high notes. One of my favorite gospel songs in this key is “Lord Help me to Hold Out” by James Cleveland and of course the classic song “You are so Beautiful” by Joe Cocker. This key suggests to me that we must avoid groupthink and replace it with genuine inclusion and diversity. We must fight for that which unites us and fight against that which divides and keeps our eyes on the prize. We cannot afford to let anybody or anything divide us, especially based on labels. We need Black conservatives, as well as Black liberals, to unite when necessary and for the good of us all. We should not let anyone speak for us,

including me and you. We are not a monolithic community. We will disagree, but if our ultimate goal is the restoration and validation of our community, we should join forces as often as is possible. Divide and conquer has always been a strategy for those who do not have our best interest in mind and at heart.

We need to get together and stay together and avoid the social and political weeds as much as possible. We need to weed out the people, ideas, programs, and attitudes that attempt to divide us and hold us back. I still believe that the answer to many of our issues are in our own hands. I understand that systemic racism is real and that there are forces seemingly always at work to negatively impact our progress. There will probably be a time when something will happen in Athens that will require our immediate and forceful attention. It is my hope that if we can come together before such an occurrence, and really get to know each other, our response to such an incident will be proactive and reactive.

One of my favorite stories seems to be the best way to end this presentation for me. There was a wise man that lived in a village that was known for his extraordinary wisdom and intelligence. He just seemed to have the answers that individuals, families, and the community needed. His fame was known far and wide and at some

point, it reached a younger man who felt the need to challenge him. This young lad came to town and said to the wise man, “I heard about your wisdom and intelligence. Meet me in the town square at noon tomorrow. I will propose something to you, and we will see just how smart you are.” Of course he said this before as many townspeople as he could, and as you might expect, at noon the next day they were all there. The young man approached the wise man with his hands behind his back. He said to him, “In my hands I have a bird, tell me old man, is he alive or dead?” A hush fell over the crowd and many wondered how the wise man would respond. After a few minutes, the wise man looked the young lad in his eyes and said, “Interesting question,” he continued, “if I say the bird is dead, you will open your hands and let him fly around. If I say he is alive, you will just kill him by squeezing your hands. Therefore, young man, the answer is in your hands.”

Are these four keys all the answers or solutions the challenges in our community? Absolutely not. But perhaps these few words will embolden others to build on them and to fill in the gaps. I can only hope that this will not be the first and last Black Summit and that we will find constructive ways to turn our rhetoric into constructive action. God bless the United States of America and God bless Athens, Ohio.

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