Questions from a Black Man (Open Letter to America from Royce West)

Why are you afraid ... of ME?

Is it because of the color of my skin?

My APPEARance?

The way I talk or walk, or dress?

Are you set off by my mannerisms?

Or have the lessons taught about me at YOUR home, crept outside?

Do lessons learned at school, or in some books paint the pictures you see when you see ME?

Or is it the awful images of me portrayed by television programs or in videos?

In your heart of hearts, what preconceived beliefs do you have about me as I stand before you?

What baggage do you arrive with?

What about me frightens you?

Why is it that when you approach me, you feel a sense of insecurity? And when I approach you, fear shows in your eyes.

If I ask you a question and WE disagree, why do you feel disrespected?

Is it the tone in my voice?

Or my demeanor during our discussions?

Is fault found with the words I use?

What is it?

Does my age not matter?

If I respond politely to your inquiry or not, what changes?

How is it easier for you to grant men of other ethnicities the regard you deny to me?

Why then, is your first response to my misstep, the label of criminal.

No matter my test score or achievement, no level makes me worthy, or successful in your eyes.

Why?

If I have done the work and earned a place at the table, why is it difficult for you to listen to my recommendations; often discarding them only to agree when someone else restates my idea?

And, why am I condemned for wanting the same things you desire? Respect,

A family.

Access to a first class education,

A job where I can make a decent living and a contribution, and

To be secure in my home and community.

Can you understand why a grown man would not like to be called "boy?'

Will you OPEN your HEART to feel what I feel?

Can you OPEN up your HAND and reach out for mine?

Can you OPEN up your MOUTH and speak the truth?

Will you OPEN up your MIND to my experiences and in doing so OPEN your EYES to your reality as ME?

Maybe then, you wouldn't be afraid.

We've asked these questions for generations. I hope and pray that our sons and grandsons don't have to ask them again.

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State Senator Royce West District 23