

Gates case: Teachable moment for U.S.

Written by Rolland Robinson
Wednesday, 09 September 2009 15:05



We all saw what happened: facts of the case. Fact. Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. is photographed being led by police out of his own house in handcuffs. Fact. Policeman James Crowley in the line of duty encounters a belligerent man who is resisting arrest and considered a potential threat as more police are called for assistance. Mistaken fact. Breaking and entering was not the case, though a neighbor reported someone breaking in to Gates house. She did not know it was Gates, who had forgotten his key and a his driver who were trying to get into the house. Fact. Charges dropped.

We all know what happened: motives exposed. Motive. Gates accuses Crowley for racial profiling and threatens a court suit and demands an apology. Motive. Police Sgt. James Crowley is supported by fellow police officers, both black and white. As one columnist wrote, “We regularly ask Officer James Crowley and his colleagues to carry out one of civilization’s most chilling and daunting tasks, to approach an unknown, potentially dangerous bad guy who’s been reported to be breaking into a house.” Another columnist writes: “Overrepresentation of black’s among lawbreakers is the results as much as it is the cause of our (black) overrepresentation among the imprisoned—a fact about which the conventional racial narrative has too little to say.”

What we do not see nor know: Kenneth Burke, literary critic and philosopher offers an insight to the drama that underlines the ongoing conflict between police and the Black community. First let us examine Dr. Burke’s proposition. He states, “Physical sciences are a calculus of events; the social sciences are a calculus of acts. And human affairs become dramatic criticism.”

Kenneth Burke is a wordsmith and a logician so we need to begin by looking at the different meanings of the word “calculus” Dr. Burke uses in two separate instances. Most of us know something about calculus. It is a method of calculation of higher mathematics. But not taking the class we don’t know how to calculate using the symbols of calculus. Dr. Burke makes the claim physical sciences with the methodology of calculation and analysis of properties and their relationships are best equipped to present objective evidence. That is why the physical sciences are called in to calculate the various strands of evidence of a crime scene. Dr. Burke’s proposition offers the telling clue to the conflict between police and the Black community. It is a potential crime scene where someone’s civil rights will be violated or the human right to life will be taken.

Dr. Burke goes on to say the social sciences are equipped to make calculations of acts. The evidence of a crime scene doesn’t necessarily address the question of why. Social sciences

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seek to understand human motives. The methodology of the social sciences is logical as it argues from a given hypothesis. Its argument gives us clue to what lies behind the act itself. Social sciences offer the motives that lurk behind the confrontation between police and the Black community. Social sciences show how violence is the fruit of such confrontations, the act that turns an event into a crime scene.

Yet with this knowledge of potential violence why does the confrontation between police and the Black community continue to take place? Dr. Burke's proposition makes the unusual claim that dramatic criticism can best provide us with an answer. In other words, to see the whole play of forces between police and the Black community we must see it enacted on an American stage.

Here the wordsmith changes his terms. The word "calculus" is replaced with the word "become." In philosophy this term is tied to ontology, the study of being. Human affairs is a history of becoming, human nature ever evolving and yet primordially caught by an ancient fault and flaw that produces murder. In biblical terms it is the story of Cain and Abel, the hand of violence raised against one's brother that marks humankind's progress. We can add a third definition to the term calculus. It is a diseased condition and, like the stone itself, is galling to the human body and personality. It is the acidic accumulation of events and acts creating a chain of human dramas not welcomed nor anticipated, yet binding us tragically together.

What comes out of a president's mouth cannot be taken back. It is a voice of power that once inscribed on the public mind is impossible to erase to the regret of any person who ever took up residence in the Oval Office. President Obama knows his Bible and he knows how the Bible has a way of telling on a person. The words of James must haunt him after his comment that police officer Crowley "acted stupidly" in his arrest of Harvard Professor Gates. "The tongue is a little member and boast of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!" A fire storm has been set over the question of race that our first African American president cannot dampen or put out. Nor should he.

A columnist wrote, "We've been down this road before many times." He names names. Reverend Jeremiah Wright (2008)...Jena 6 (2007)...Hurricane Katrina (2005)...death of unarmed African immigrant Amadou Diallo (1999)...dragging death of James Byrd (1998)...assault of Abner Louima with a plunger handle (1997)...trial and acquittal of O.J. Simpson (1995-95)...beating of Rodney "can't we get along" King (1991)...riots after the acquittal of police officers (1992) etc. Then the columnist adds these words: "All of these events sparked national soul searching on race. And then nothing...."

The Bible speaks of God that places a nation, such as ours, under divine scrutiny who as judge of human affairs laughs at our pretensions without holding anything against our aspirations. It is the Bible's ironic perspective that distinguishes the Gates/Crowley exchange from being pathetic where no one takes responsibility for their action as well as it distinguishes the exchange between police and the Black Community from being tragic where acts are not a conscious choice but an unconscious weakness.

The president's comment on the Gates case raises a deeper question than his own personal bias. It is the question of the role of governing in such issues of police and Black community

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confrontations. The authority of government does not primarily come from the authority of law nor does it come from the authority of force. The authority of government rests in a democracy on the people, on the authority of the community itself. Laws, to be obeyed, must have the allegiance and support of the community. The community looks upon laws as corresponding to its conception of justice. We say the rule of law depends on the consent of the governed, and when that consent is not fully given, than the rule of law enforcement cannot take it back. The problem facing every Black community is they do not always believe the laws and the way laws are enforced correspond to their sense of justice. It is here where police power becomes a political liability. For where the body politic is in pieces, the arm of government, such as the police, cannot repair it. It is not that law and order are not wanted in the Black community, it is whose version of law and order is being enforced.

Dr. Gates knows how difficult racial profiling can be proved in a court of law as race must be proved to be the sole cause. Whereas cases such as affirmative action where reverse discrimination is charged, the law permits race to be used as the dominant cause in the debate over enrollment quotas based on race. It is this deceitful double standard that reveals justice may be blind; yet the criminal justice system is proving all too often that persons such as Dr. Gates, who expect justice, find themselves blindsided.

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