

(Reprint of letter to Mr. Harry Belafonte on July 17, 1993)

Mr. Harry Belafonte
Belafonte Enterprises, Inc.
157 West 57th Street
New York, NY 10019

Dear Mr. Belafonte,

Tonight I had decided to go to bed early, but instead stayed up to watch Charlie Rose. To my surprise, you were the guest. I had absolutely no desire to sleep, once I saw your face and listened to your message. In fact, I immediately wanted to write to you about some of my thoughts on the ideas you presented.

My name is Althais Jones Aka; I am a substitute teacher, social worker at a group home, artist and photographer. My father, Donald Frederic Jones, Sr., worked as a Regional Secretary in the NAACP for 15 years, during the 40's and 50's. My mother, Althea McMorris Jones, was a teacher in New Orleans before their marriage, worked as a secretary after we were of school age, and returned to teaching when we moved to Los Angeles in 1957. Daddy knew that his salary of \$5000 a year would not be sufficient to put his four children through college, and that fact precipitated our move to L.A. Daddy had worked in New York, Dallas, and Cincinnati in the NAACP. Thurgood Marshall was our "Uncle Goodie."

As an undergraduate at UCLA, studying math and art, I was fortunate to see you perform at Royce Hall. I will never forget the joy you communicated to me and obviously to the rest of the audience.

I could write volumes about the incidences and experiences in my life, (perhaps a correspondence between us could begin to reveal that), but let me just say that I've had extremely high and low points in my life, which have given me some understanding of the different levels of society in this country.

You mentioned tonight about the need for mass demonstrations now in the 90's. Certainly, they helped to bring attention to our plight, not only in

unifying us as a people, but in creating curiosity and/or compassion from the population in this country and around the world. The country now, in my opinion, is in a far more serious state than it was before the 60's. I am not, in any way, discrediting the dilemma of black people—segregation, discrimination, lynchings, lack of education, housing and opportunity—that existed before that time, but we as a people, also had great strengths and a real motivation to improve our situation.

My concern is that demonstrations would be ineffective today. I am finding that there is great lethargy among educated blacks of all ages, and the uneducated are in a critical state, plagued by disorganization and hopelessness, leading to violence, drug-abuse and self-destructiveness that did not exist to such an extent during any previous point in history.

You cited your dissatisfaction with President Clinton, for not standing behind his campaign promises. I, in fact, did write to him, encouraging him to stick to his goals that our support was for him. In that letter, I pointed out that no matter what government does (and much direction is needed) it can only do so much. Not to abrogate his responsibilities for needed changes, I stresses that his greatest assets were to remain focused on the goals and to call forth the 230 million points of "light" (all of us) to join in the struggle for those goals.

Though LBJ put through most of the civil rights legislation in the '60's, it was our dedication and hard work that forced him to do so, and we were the ones, implementing the programs with such verve that white America was scared to allow such programs to continue. So, little by little, (or not so little by little), the programs were cut.

What I am trying to say is this: we black people forced the country to change its' policies, at least for a while, and we implemented the programs. There are enough of us who are in a position, whether it be with money, time or talent (or all three) to do something about the situation ourselves. Nelson Mandela was in this country, you stated, to raise money to prepare his countrymen to vote and to begin taking part in the running of South Africa.

Not long ago on KCET, I saw a program where groups of black actors, of which South Africa has many, were touring communities and villages there, acting out the voting process and having their audiences practice, too. We have actors, galore, singers, too, who could be touring our schools and communities, addressing some of the problems we have and encouraging hope in students and others in the community. I am sure that you, yourself, know several people, capable of organizing such tours.

I remember in 1974, after having seen Nina Simone in one of her dynamic, earth-shaking performances in Washington, D.C., I exited the Kennedy Center, feeling that I could conquer the world! Powerful performance has a potent influence of lifting the spirit, in recognition of that within us all.

Not that performances are going to do it all. There is a point at which rolling up ones sleeves and doing the hard work over the long haul that great progress is made. Daddy had worked in the Post Office and edited his own newspaper in New Orleans before he started working with the NAACP in the late 30's. It wasn't until we were living in Cincinnati from 1951 – 1957, that I realized how Daddy had been so successful, significantly increasing membership.

Just like a postal clerk, he had amassed maps of the city, outlining where black people lived. He had meticulously organized each block with a block captain, who was responsible for getting his neighbors to become members. A ten-block area was overseen by a neighborhood captain. Daddy met with all his captains, in groups and individually. Can you imagine the effort that it took on his part? (The year that we left Cincinnati, there were over 10,000 NAACP members, city wide).

I know our urban centers are huge areas; thousands of dedicated people would have to be identified in Los Angeles, alone. But, I am sure, if addressed and motivated, they exist, aren't you?

There aren't many positive things to do in the inner-cities of our country; in LA there are no movie theaters, no bowling alleys, hardly any community centers and few Department of Recreation activities. A few months ago, I called several Big Brother agencies for the boys in the group home where I work. I was flatly

told, that it might take a year or two to get them Big Brothers, since no one wants to come near South Central.

What we need is revitalization of our own organizations to address our problems. I am sure that if we, not Clinton and not the government, would come together and work on our problems, recognizing that we can creatively create jobs, teach our talents, convey our enthusiasm, and ignite the lights of our own people, a difference can be made.

I am encouraged by the appointment of Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis as Executive Secretary of the NAACP. Not that Benjamin Hooks' leadership and work were unappreciated, but Dr. Chavis seems to be more community-oriented in his approach. He spent time in the housing projects of Los Angeles when another riot seemed imminent, and organized the gang summit in Kansas City, to encourage communication and a lessening of violence.

All of our civil rights organizations must become more involved in the community to assist in training, education and development. After Dr. Chavis' appointment, I called the NAACP offices in LA and Pasadena, to inquire of positions that might be available. I was told that, except for the secretaries, all positions—including the directors—were volunteer positions. They pointed out that the national budget is only \$13 million, and that paid workers were out of the question. In no way am I here to belittle the work, nor deny the need for dedicated volunteers but how can branches, with no paid staff, be accountable for providing the vision and direction for necessary programs and the ever-present requirement of increased membership, the very source of needed revenues?

You have worked with many civil rights organizations over the years, for which I applaud your efforts. Would it be possible for you to utilize your influence to address these groups collectively and individually to help us "collectively get off our individual butts?"

President Clinton has suggested our using former military bases, as job training centers. This is an excellent idea and should be encouraged. In addition, with so many of our boys and men in prison, shouldn't real education and training be taking place, there, too?

I have never met Nelson Mandela, nor did I have the opportunity to meet Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., for that matter. (Mr. Belafonte has said in the Charlie Rose interview that Mandela and MLK, Jr. were our only leaders). I believe that you identify with their clarity, because it speaks to the clarity within you. Let us not rely solely on a few leaders. Once they are gone, we lose direction). We have so many resources and connections, so many great people who give, while not even trying, effortlessly. Yet we know that their "effortlessness" is borne in preparation, mistakes and experience. Many of us are not strong enough, or confident enough, to make the mistakes that allow us to grow.

We, who have been freed up to develop at least some of our talents, must join up, pool our energies and resourcefulness, and assist our people to uncover and recognize their own powers of greatness.

My best wishes to your wife and family.

Yours in true affection,

Althais J. Aka

P.S. I am enclosing my resume, not necessarily for a job, but just so you'll know a little about where I'm coming from.