A Father Illustrates “The Talk” and Touches on the Debt Owed to Black Boys

Every Black and Brown parent dreads having “the talk” with their children. It is a dreaded right of passage that signals a loss of innocence for their sons in order to protect them from a system that targets them. Darrin Bell is an acclaimed cartoonist, author, and commentator. In his graphic memoir, The Talk, he illustrates his own encounters with racial profiling and discrimination. Bell also gets real about what is owed to Black boys who navigate a world where their lives are constantly at risk. Reported by Juleyka Lantigua.

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Pamela Kirkland: I'm Pamela Kirkland, a reporter and producer. The conversation around reparations can seem both overwhelming and contradictory. On one hand, it's hard to imagine how our country could ever fully atone for the centuries of injustice and atrocities committed against Black and brown citizens. On the other hand, there's the belief that reparations are not only achievable, but essential to healing and moving forward. What we know is that reparations are owed to descendants of the enslaved, and frankly, the bill is past due.

Every parent dreads having to have the talk with their children. That talk can mean different things for different families. For Black parents, the talk is a loss of innocence for their sons in order to protect them from a system that's stacked against them. Darrin Bell is an acclaimed cartoonist, author, and commentator. He started drawing political cartoons as a reaction to the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012. In his graphic memoir, The Talk, he illustrates his own encounters with racial profiling and discrimination. Our series creator and co-editor, Juleyka Lantigua, interviewed Belle about what is owed to Black boys who navigate a world where their lives are constantly at risk.

Juleyka Lantigua: Hi, Darrin. Welcome. Thank you for being here.

Darrin Bell: Oh, thanks for having me.

Lantigua: I'm raising two little Black boys, 11 and 13, and I've had several versions of multiple talks with them throughout. About two years ago, right in the middle of the pandemic, my oldest one was online playing this video game with a couple of his classmates, and he's laughing uproariously. I'm within earshot, so of course I'm like, "Oh, I want to know what's so funny." Right? He puts himself on

mute with his little headset and he goes, "Oh, they decided that because I'm the strongest, and I'm the best player, they sold me into slavery."

Bell: Oh, God.

Lantigua: Right. And he thinks this is a brilliant strategy. By the way, he's the only Black kid in the foursome who's playing this with two white kids and an Asian kid. He thought it was brilliant. So I said, "Get off the game immediately." And basically the oxygen went out of the room. He gets off and I go, "OK. Explain everything." So he explains to me the entire thing, what they're playing, who the teams are, what different skills everybody has. So then I said to him, "First of all, you're not allowed to play with those kids ever again. Period, end of story. Secondly, why do you think that I'm upset?"

And he's like, "Ah, because I'm the only Black kid, and they sold me into slavery?" And I was like, "Congratulations. You get it." And we had this entire conversation about how he cannot let those things happen because they're never innocent. And so this is why I'm so thankful that you wrote your book. What was the impetus besides you having gone through all those experiences yourself? Why did you think that we needed this right now?

Bell: Well, George Floyd had just been murdered by the police, and the conversation for a lot of white people was academic. They suddenly realized that he was human, and it took watching the man lie there for over eight minutes with somebody's knee his neck for them to realize that. And as relieved as I was that they did seem to realize it, I couldn't shake the feeling that, "Damn. It shouldn't have taken this. And it shouldn't have taken us being in the middle of a pandemic where we were on lockdown and they had nothing to distract them from it."

I think if the pandemic hadn't happened, this would've been a one-week story, just like all the countless others, and people would've moved on. And people would've talked about how he had it coming, and he should have complied, or whatever. I had just sold a different graphic novel to Holt Publishing, and my editor called me when all this happened. She said, "Maybe we should do another book first, something that deals with all this." She said, "Do you have any ideas?" And the first thing out of my mouth was, "I don't know how I'm going to explain this to my son." I was hoping I could have it finished by the time my son was old enough to read it and appreciate it.

Lantigua: OK. And how old is he, and how old was he when you started?

Bell: Well, he was six.

Lantigua: Oh.

Bell: He was six, and I was six when my mom gave me the talk. I didn't know how she did it because I was dreading having to give it to him. Because he's so innocent,

and happy, and feels like he belongs in this world, and the world belongs to him just like it belongs to all his friends. And the last thing I wanted to do was rob him of that innocence.

Lantigua: Oh, I am so with you. I wrestle with that all the time, which is how much is enough for them to be safe, and how much is too much for them to become jaded? How much do I want to racialize my Black son's existence? Right?

Bell: Yeah.

Lantigua: Because this is how they walk in the world. So let's pull it back a little bit because the entire book is really a cry out about the over-policing of Black bodies. And we know historically that the over-policing of Black bodies goes back to the fact that the whole concept of police emerged because bounty hunters needed to be legitimized when they went out to capture runaway slaves. Right?

Bell: Yeah.

Lantigua: So there's a direct line that is undeniable between today's policing structure and the enslavement of Black bodies. But people want us to be post-racial, and you have to grapple with that in the book. They think that Obama fixed it. So tell me about the ways that you conceived and then actualized that in the book.

Bell: Yeah, the chapter where I experienced Obama's campaign and his election with the rest of the country, I knew it was going to end with something that actually happened that night. We were walking home after the election, and there was such a profound sense of relief. I really thought things were turning the corner. I came across a white man I'd never seen before, and he seemed to be just as happy as I was. But in the back of my head I had to wonder. "I feel like this is the beginning of fixing things," that's what I felt that night. And I had to wonder, "Does he feel like this is the end of fixing it?"

Lantigua: Like, "We're done."

Bell: Like, "We're done now. Now you people have nothing to complain about."

Lantigua: Right. "We gave you a president."

Bell: Right. Yeah. "Don't get greedy people."

Lantigua: That's hilarious.

Bell: I suppressed that notion because I just wanted to believe that the country had turned a huge corner, and I purposely ignored what deep down I knew was going to happen. I knew there was going to be a massive backlash. I knew people were going to lose their damn minds about this, and sure enough, they did. The very next president we elected was a white nationalist.

Lantigua: Let's go back to something, because you are of mixed heritage. Your mom is white, your dad is Black. And in the book, as a mom I will say this, that I experienced this as a mom, your instinct was always to protect your mom from the things that you experienced as a Black boy.

Bell: Right. Well, one reason my instinct was to protect my mom was because I didn't see her as being exactly white. She's Jewish, and the same people who despised my father because he was Black, a lot of them despise my mom because she's Jewish.

Lantigua: Because she's Jewish. Yup.

Bell: I mean, she told me more stories of the discrimination she faced growing up than my father ever did. My father chose to ignore all of that and focus his attention on other things. My mother thought I should know what might be waiting for me around the corners. She wanted to prevent me from experiencing any of the discrimination she did. She was called all sorts of anti-Semitic slurs, prevented from playing with little kids. Her father went into the wrong neighborhood and they stabbed him. Told him, "Go back to the Jew neighborhood."

Lantigua: Wow.

Bell: And she didn't want me to face any of that. I was worried that someday she would suffer some consequences. I didn't want to see that happen, so I kept a lot of things from her. I've told her a lot since the book came out. I've told her a lot of things that happened when I was a child, and she's just heartbroken that I never told her back then, because she wished she could have fixed it for me.

Lantigua: Of course. I wondered what she thought after she read it, and I wondered if she felt the pang of not having been able to protect you because she simply didn't know.

Bell: She's in a nursing home now, and she calls me every day. We usually don't talk about it, but every once in a while I can tell she's crying, and she apologizes for not having known about all that stuff.

Lantigua: Yeah, I can see that. I can see that, absolutely. I tell my sons every day that there is nothing that I wouldn't do for them. I remind them every single day, whether it's with a joke, whether it's with an earnest look. But every day they walk out the door knowing that they have a warrior in their back.

Bell: You know what? Keep in mind that they're probably protecting you from some things too.

Lantigua: I'm sure.

Bell: You probably have a couple little warriors on your hands.

Lantigua: I know. I do. They're pretty tough cookies. I don't want them to ever feel like they're out there battling on their own because some of the stuff is just astounding. So Darrin, at the same time that you're dealing with your racial like core identity building, mostly due to external factors by the way, you're also developing as an artist. You're coming into your own. Were those two things ever in conflict for you? Or how did they synchronize to get you to be who you are?

Bell: It ebbed and flowed. There were moments where I saw it as a perfect form of exploration. I could break my consciousness into a number of characters, and I could have them debate notions of race and identity, and I could kind of figure myself out through these characters while I'm making people laugh on campus. I was doing my cartoon for The Daily Cal at UC Berkeley. That's where my comic strip ran. At the same time, I also started freelancing editorial cartoons. The paper started using me regularly when I began drawing cartoons about Proposition 209, where they were repealing affirmative action.

The more I drew, and the more hate mail I got, and the more venomous it was, the more I realized, "Oh wait, I am Black. I really am." I was getting all these reflexive like prejudiced, bigoted comments flooding my inbox, people saying I was just lazy and I wanted handouts. I'm sure a lot of these people were legacy students who got in because their parents had been there. I would write back to these people, and I would try to establish a dialogue because I was really young. I was 19. I was optimistic.

I thought I could change the world if I sent people links to the right facts. It took me maybe 15 years of beating my head against that wall to realize people just are increasingly oblivious, like willfully oblivious to these things. They don't want any counter narrative challenging their prejudice, the prejudice that they're comfortable with. It doesn't matter what facts I tell people. Logic doesn't matter. Argument doesn't matter. They're just waiting for me to stop talking so they could send me some more insults.

Lantigua: So many of the tough topics that people like me wrestle with vis-a-vis existing in a Black body in the United States. What is owed to a kid like you who at six years old had to be told, "You're Black and the world will never see you in any other light." And then you spend the rest of your life existing in that reality. What do we owe the tens of millions of kids?

Bell: I think the first thing we owe them is to tell them, "You're not crazy. This is actually happening to you." This country is very, very good at gaslighting people, and it's very good at thinking that expressing a little bit of empathy is enough. We don't have to actually fix the underlying problems. And I don't think people realize how narcissistic that is.

I don't care about your thoughts and prayers. I want you to stop passing laws against me. I don't care whether you feel guilty about the past or not. I want you to make us whole for the generations of wealth that was stolen from us. You can go on hating Black people if you want to, just cut the check. We don't really care what you feel on the inside.

Lantigua: OK. Who gets the check?

Bell: I think people who identify as Black and can trace their lineage to people who were enslaved, and people who identify as Black and can at least trace their lineage to people who were hampered by Jim Crow and the Black codes, and redlining, and the refusal to allow Black people to buy houses in the suburbs after World War II.

Lantigua: Yeah. OK. What about the people under Clinton, Three Strikes, You're Out, the people who went to prison for 40 or 50 years for a dime bag?

Bell: First of all, they should be released, and then they should get a check. And if they've died in prison, their descendants should get a check.

Lantigua: OK.

Bell: Reparations isn't just financial. To me, it would mean undoing the war on drugs, which Richard Nixon basically began in order to keep Black people in their place. I don't know how many, but there are so many Black people who've been incarcerated over the past several decades in the prime of their lives when they should have been out building wealth, and building families, and making careers and lives for themselves.

You've removed hundreds of thousands of people from that and left their children with nothing. If they're nonviolent offenders, they should be released from prison. If their children are alive, you should compensate them for what they lost. You can never compensate them for the time that they lost with their loved ones. The only thing you could do is compensate them monetarily, and that should be done.

Lantigua: What do we do with the current state of policing as part of a reparative effort? Because a lot of what you experienced was having to do with white male authority in uniform.

Bell: I had a problem with the defund the police slogan. I thought what we needed to do was either reboot the police or reimagine the police. Because the police, as we talked about earlier, was rooted in 19th century slave patrols. And those people, just like white people who were given all those land grants in the 1860s who were able to pass down wealth, slave patrollers were able to pass down their culture. And the culture of policing has been one of policing Black bodies, putting Black people in their place, keeping them from being too uppity, and keeping them from being where they're not supposed to be.

We need to uproot that culture entirely. We need to reinvent the police, and it should begin with testing people to see what biases they have. People who are posting white supremacist ideology online definitely should not be considered for the armed forces, or for the police, or for any position of authority in this country, especially one where they have a license to kill. We should also demilitarize the police immediately. Because when we treat them like soldiers, when they have equipment that soldiers have, they start to see themselves as soldiers.

And what do soldiers do? They occupy enemy territory, and so it reinforces the already preexisting notion that we are the enemy. That has to go. And qualified immunity has to go. There's no reason why a police officer should be above the law. The notion that it's a dangerous job is no excuse. Police shouldn't get that privilege. They've proven generation after generation that they don't deserve it.

Lantigua: So here's a complicating fact. They tried to recruit more Black and brown people into the blue ranks in an effort to combat this bias, and that's not what happened. Is this part of the reboot, or did the reboot fail?

Bell: I think it failed because the culture is what has to change. When you become part of a culture, even if you're Black or brown, you find that you can't help but be infected by it. There were Black people on slave patrols, and it's because they're infected with the white supremacist culture that dehumanizes the people that they're policing. I dealt with that in the book.

I mentioned one incident where I was profiled by a security guard, and the security guard happened to be Black. It was a situation where he let the kid who wasn't Black go even though that was the kid who was committing the crime, and he just focused entirely on me. He knew I didn't do it. See, he was telling me that I must have corrupted that kid, that I led that kid astray.

Lantigua: My last question, just to bring it back to where we started, what are the conversations like with your son now that he's a little bit older? A couple years in, your book is out, you've had a lot of time to talk about the book and reflect.

Bell: He was dying to read this book because I'd been doing it for two years. But when he started to read it, he loved it. He loved the first several chapters that covered my childhood. When it got to the teenage years, he started to get a little bit more upset at what he was seeing. So we ended up talking about things that were happening to him, things that he thought nothing of when he was younger but that have been bothering him more and more, like the way certain parents react to him when they see him playing with their kids.

He didn't notice that at all when he was three, even though I did, and he's starting to notice it more. I think the book seems to comfort him because he thought that he was being foolish for imagining these things. And then when he saw it on those pages, he thought, "Wow, it's not just me." It seemed to be a relief to him. Even though it troubled him on some level, it was a relief.

Lantigua: So that's a little bit of the damage repaired.

Bell: Yeah.

Lantigua: Right? A little bit.

Bell: A little bit. As we were reading it, I saw him grow up a little bit over the course of reading that book. He didn't grow hateful or resentful. He still likes police cars and all that. But he's more aware of the subtext that surrounds him, and he's less willing to go along with things like what your sons experienced.

Lantigua: Yeah. I think that we still have to remain vigilant for their sake, and it's the kind of exhausting work that you just wake up to do every single day. So I am deeply, deeply thankful to you as a vigilant parent for giving me this tool and this instrument. I plan to read it with my kids this summer. So thank you, Darrin. Thank you so much.

Bell: You're welcome. That feels really good to hear.

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