

## The Reverence Movement by Aqeela Sherrills

Transcript of Aqeela Sherrill's TEDx talk below

It's been a great deal of time, since we've seen an effective movement that possesses the power and the capacity to address the deep and seemingly fixed flaws in our society and culture's core.

And I believe that we now exist in a time where the heart has been prepared for a new movement. Where love becomes a practice as opposed to an idea. Where vulnerability and humility becomes strengths as opposed to weaknesses. I call this the Reverence Movement.

I'm the youngest of ten children defined by the poverty that surrounded me, raised in a war zone in the Jordan town housing projects, witnessing things that no child should ever be subject to.

Between 1983 and 2003 there were over 20,000 gang-related deaths in the city of Los Angeles. That doesn't include those permanently maimed or incarcerated for the rest of their life. The children suffer from traumatic stress disorder, hyper-vigilance, vicarious trauma. I mean, I understand violence as a public health issue but because many of the perpetrators and the victims are black and brown youth and young adults and we live in a society built on implicit bias and systemic racism, their cries have fallen on deaf ears.

In 1987 I went to college to escape the war in the neighborhood. There I had a transformative experience that was my introduction to the reverence impulse. In my first semester of college I met this beautiful woman that I fell in love with, who I perceived was everything I wasn't. Throughout our courtship I was insecure and immature and I kept asking myself, "Why would a beautiful girl like her want to be with a ugly guy like me?" In the process and through that wound I would violate her privacy by reading her diary because I wanted to see who she was writing about. I would leave class early sometime to listen at her door because I was going to catch her-- because I just couldn't believe that that she could love me. And then finally I perpetrated the ultimate betrayal which was I slept with another girl. I contracted an STD and I passed it to her. And of course she confronted me about it and I denied it, but harboring the shame and the guilt from my actions you know, they just ate at me. And in a drug-induced contemplation I asked myself, "Why did I do this to this woman who had been so good to me?"

And on top of all of that I was struggling with being a young father. I had my

first kid at 15, my relationship with money was shot and so you know I was getting kicked out of the dorms because I hadn't paid my rent. I really felt like I was falling off the deep end. So one day I'm high out of my mind and I'm laying in my bed and I started to reflect on my childhood. What we didn't have in material possessions we made up with our imagination. So we used to talk about this thing we call the story. And the story was about how we would be walking and something would open up in the street and it would suck us down this hole and there we would meet this Chinese master who blessed us with these special powers and gifts and he charged us with changing the world. And my sister she told the best stories-- she would assign each one of us powers and we would take turns and embellish upon the next and we told the story so much like four and five hours a day that it became my mantra. I believed that I would grow up and do something great. I believe that I would have a seat at the table at the changing of the world.

So as I lay in my bed high out of my mind I was like "God I'm supposed to grow up and do something great-- now's the time to let me know what I'm supposed to be doing." So I fell asleep and I woke up the next morning feeling refreshed and I decided to do the first noble thing in my life-- which was to tell this woman the truth. So I invited Lisa to the lunch and I sat across the table from her and my hands were sweating and my heart was pounding. I'm sure she can hear it and I said "I'm sorry it was me." And she was like "Why did you do this to me? I love you." And I was like "I don't know why-- maybe it has something to do with what happened to me as a kid." And she was like "Well what happened?" And I shared with her that I was sexually abused as a kid. Now when those words left my mouth, my whole life like this flashed in front of my eyes and I was immediately transported back to that place, third grade promising that I would never tell anybody about what happened to me. And I realized that I never questioned any of the violence that I saw in the neighborhood because ultimately it meant to question the sexual and physical abuse I experienced in my own household and I didn't have the language or the courage to confront it.

In the weeks that followed, that shame turned into anger and that anger turned into rage and I started asking "Why didn't anybody save me? And who else had been victimized in my household?" In my search for answers I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and it politicized me. I read James Baldwin's *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* and it encouraged me. And that rage gave way to an epiphany. I saw the intrinsic connection between the violence that I experienced in my house and the violence that was happening in the hood and I began to believe that if I could heal myself that I could be a vehicle for the ending of the killing in my own neighborhood. This is what I understand as the reverence impulse.

So the Reverence Movement is built upon five principles. It's healing and insight. I believe that where the wounds are in the personal life the gifts lie. Number two is attendant observation that it's not always what we say that has the capacity

to change a life, it is sometimes what we allow ourselves to hear. Number three, compassionate service and an investment in service. Meaning that we have to learn to get out of our own way, so that we can actually give our gift... I am just having a moment, so bear with me. [audience applauds] See the reverence movement's common denominator intersects at the movements of all of the past, whether it be civil rights or social justice, environmentalism or human rights. There's a need to restore the vitality of the human spirit, because people are the proponents of these movements. So in the summer of 1988 I returned home imbued with the hero's journey and I began to infect others in the neighborhood with my passion to end the killing-- most notably my brother, who was a key player in the violence in the neighborhood.

Together we challenged the hood, we began to ask the homies who was winning the war that we was waging against each other in the community, every time somebody died we hit they name up on the wall, we poured out a little 40 ounce in their remembrance but no one was there to provide direction and guidance for the children that were left behind. So we did a few things that led to what I believe was one of the most significant events since the 1965 riots.

We began to march across all of the housing projects, meeting with our so-called enemies, talking to them about a peace process. We partnered with Jim Brown who we met at the top the killing tour that was going across the country and we co-founded the AmeriCan program which was a short course in human development that became the foundation of the peace movement. We created jobs where none existed, and those efforts culminated in what became the Peace treaty between the Crips and Bloods in 1992. It changed the quality of life in our neighborhood in the first two years of the peace treaty, gang homicides dropped 44% and dominoed throughout the city. From 2004 to 2014 we experienced ten consecutive years in a row of decrease in violent crime and murder in the city of LA, and I credit the peace movement with that work. I have labored for sixteen years on the frontline of the movement. At the height of AmeriCan's work we were in 15 cities across the country saving lives, we've traveled around the world to war zones, and I've shared my experience about how to create sustainable peace efforts in urban war zones, but nothing ever prepared me for what was to come next.

In 2003 my oldest son Terrell graduated from high school and went to Humboldt State University on a scholarship. It's proudest day in my life was driving this kid to school, enrolling him in his classes, because I knew that Terrell would be laying the foundation for his seven siblings who would be coming behind him. He came home on winter break, he went to a party in an affluent black neighborhood on the Westside of Los Angeles and was shot to death at the party. I mean, I'm no novice to violence and death, I have witnessed it all my life, but nothing ever prepares you for the loss of your child. And as I drove to the scene where Terrell was shot, and then to the hospital where they pronounced him dead, I just kept repeating this mantra in my mind, that "What's the gift in this tragedy?" You see in my neighborhood the conditioned response to murder is to take a life. And I understand all too well that this eye for an eye,

tooth for a tooth philosophy that we live by, has left us all blind and toothless.

So I reached out to my friends and family members, and I shared with them that that this wasn't Terrell's legacy, that I wanted to harness the essence of Terrell and do something much more profound with it. And in the coming days I had an opportunity to go on America's Most Wanted and I implored the young man to turn himself in because I know how relentless the streets can be. Then I found out that it was a 17 year old kid who was the perpetrator, so I forgave him and not because I condone what he did, but because I don't believe that people are their experiences. The things that we've perpetrated, the things that have been done to us, they don't define who we are, they only inform who we become. I just didn't see him as the perpetrator, I also saw him as a victim. That this black boy was a victim of a culture that doesn't see him as human, a victim of a society that doesn't understand love as a practice, it sees it as an idea.

And my life is so serendipitous that I know that one day I'll meet him and I'll be able to ask him, "What happened to you that caused you to have this calloused heart that you would take another human being's life?" Because you don't kill someone and the next day you're skipping and dancing. You experience your victim's face and dreams and imaginings and flashbacks. So his life is intrinsically connected to Terrell for the rest of his. And his ability to live somewhat a balanced life in this world hinges on him reconciling what he did in his own heart. So I hold space for his healing. I hold space that is transformative, because I believe in the divinity of human beings.

Given the opportunity, this young man can give back ten times that of the average person because of his initiation. You see, forgiveness it's not about condoning or forgetting, it's a creative exploration and analysis of the circumstances that brought you to that place. It's a metamorphosis of the given idea about the experience so that it serves us as opposed to working against us.

We've harnessed the essence of Terrell in many ways but I just want to name a few in service to his legacy. The first thing is that in 2007 I launched the Reverence Project to create an intentional space, a sanctuary to support people to talk about the deep secrets in their personal life as a way of accessing the gift of who they are. In 2012 I joined California's for safety and justice and co-founded the Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice Initiative which has passed some of the most progressive pieces of criminal justice reform legislation, most notably Prop 47 in California, the Trauma Recovery Center bills, in which we put eight trauma centers in urban neighborhoods where you don't have to have a relationship with law enforcement in order to access services, and also the Survivor Peaks conference. And talking about the gift in the wound, a week after Terrell was murdered we found out that his girlfriend was pregnant with his child.

Last month I celebrated Heavenly Terrell Cheryl's twelfth birthday. I mean she's the love of my life, and my investment of love

and time in that relationship is my commitment to Terrell's legacy.

You see the Reverence Movement is a movement of the heart. It's a shift in perception from seeing the glass as half-empty to half full. It's about giving new meaning to old ideas. It's not the what of observation, it's how we actually choose to see. It's a beholding not a judging. It's a holding of this space for the highest possibilities and probabilities to emerge from our experiences. You see I believe that unless we help people to balance the gift in the wound in their personal lives, all of the other aforementioned movements just become barriers for us to hide behind. So I ask you to join The Reverence Movement, and to be reverent. Thank you [Applause]

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For more inspiration, join this Saturday's Awakin Call with Aqeela Sherrills. RSVP info and more details here.