

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 73 – Don Taylor – A Brother's Tale

Becoming X

And now a personal word,

Don Taylor made me laugh when he told his story of becoming Donald X when he was a student at Cheyney State College in the early 1970s. I laughed because of the way he told the story and because it had become humorous to him, but the point he made about black folk bearing the names of former slave masters is not funny at all.

In a July 2017 article in Medium.com entitled “Hey, Black America, Let's Ditch Our Slaves Names,” author Zaron Burnett III asked what if all black Americans went to the courthouse on the same day and changed their last names as a great act of protest. He wrote, “It would be a massive act of freedom for Black America. It would force the nation to confront the legacy of slavery. Most white people in America have never considered what it means to walk around with the name of the family that once owned your family.”

In the online article, Burnett included a video clip of Malcom X answering questions from a panel of white journalists. I suspect the interview was recorded around 1964. The journalist asked Malcolm what his “real name” was before he changed it. Malcolm responded that he didn't know what his real name was and neither did his father or grandfather. Malcolm said, “The real names of our people were destroyed during slavery.”

Burnett added this comment: “A century and a half after the end of slavery, and I'm still identifying with the name of the slave owner who once owned my family. ... That's a bone deep pain, one hidden and held in the letters of my last name.”

During the black consciousness movement of the 1960s and '70s, many black Americans abandoned their slave names, adopted newly chosen names, at least for a short time, and more fully embraced their black heritage. Permanently abandoning long-established names became complicated for many black Americans, but as Don noted, heightened black consciousness remained.

I imagine Don Taylor feels as I do that “becoming X” means more than changing one's name. Becoming X also means becoming all that one can be freely and intentionally. That's the true work Don is involved in as an educator. He is in the business of helping

students realize their potential no matter their starting points. He is in the business of identity and possibility formation. I've seen him at work. No one does it better than Don.

There is a song called "Becoming X" by a British trip hop band called Sneaker Pimps. Trip hop is a downtempo fusion of hip hop and electronica with elements of funk, soul, R&B, and house music. Think 1990s electronic psychedelica. As one unattributed online comment about trip hop noted, think "dark/futuristic '90s dope." The lyrics of "Becoming X" suggest shedding into something new. The song suggests metamorphosis or becoming very nearly something to see until one is seen.

I think of Don Taylor in the classroom. He raises his voice. He moves around the room. He confronts. He challenges. He says the most provocative things. And his students love him. They love him because he is real. They love him because he entertains. They love him because he believes in them.

If there is a point to this life, it is in the alchemy of it. Don Taylor has transformed his life, and he transforms those he meets.

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