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I Am Trayvon Martin By Dr. Richard Sheldon Koonce, PhD BC Guest Commentator

I am Trayvon Martin.

This became the rallying cry among thousands of protesters throughout America who called for the arrest and prosecution of George Zimmerman, the man who shot and killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin.

This simple, declarative statement carries a profoundly provocative message, particularly for young African-American men. Essentially, it symbolizes the deep-rooted frustration of millions of black men who so often feel there is no escape from the collective gaze of those with racist psyches within American society.

The phrase, "I am Trayvon Martin", says that whether you are a black teenager with a pocket filled with Skittles or bubble gum, or you're a 30-year-old black man who works two minimum-wage jobs for 60 hours a week to help support two children, that you too could be lying cold in a coffin for merely being perceived as a burglar, rapist, robber, thief or car-jacking thug.

The statement, "I am Trayvon Martin", sends a resounding message that it doesn't matter whether you're a black ex-convict recently released from a maximum-security prison or, like me, a black man with a doctorate degree., that you also can meet an untimely death, just for walking in a predominantly white neighborhood where the perception might exist that you are a criminal.

The words, "I am Trayvon Martin", speak volumes about how some police officers will treat black men, whether they are accused of a crime or whether they claim to be victims of violence or crime themselves.

If they are accused of committing a crime, of course, they are considered guilty until proven innocent. And in these cases, they must be detained until their innocence is proven. If they are the victims of violence, on the other hand, some are likely to assume that they must have been doing something wrong or committing a crime. Therefore, they deserved whatever repercussions resulted from their own actions.

This is the poisonous venom of racism, and far too often, very few people are able to make the connection between this psychotic mindset and the negative attitudes and self-defeating behavior of too many young black men who begin to accept and live out many of the same stereotypes that exist about them.

This behavior can be exhibited in various ways by young men in their late teens and 20s to older men in their 30s and 40s. Many live out the stereotypes by referring to women in derogatory and demeaning terms. Others fail to take ownership of their lives, and instead, live to party, get drunk or numb their collective pain through the use of drugs. Sadly, this kind of behavior often can escalate to violence and even death.

This behavior, by the way, is not limited to black men. It crosses racial, ethnic, societal and cultural boundaries. As it relates to black men, however, a significant part of the problem is how such behavior is perpetually normalized, glamorized and continuously depicted by our nation's largest media conglomerates in juxtaposition to who and what black men really are. Many of us have heard the saying that "art is a reflection of life." In essence, what has happened over the past half century, life has become a reflection of what poses as art via popular culture, music, television, film and various media.

Is it any wonder that too many young black men live lives that appear to teeter on the edge of self-destruction? It reminds me of the song, "Inner City Blues" by the late Marvin Gaye: "It makes me wanna holler and throw up both my hands." In fact, the behavior of far too many is reminiscent of the old-school rap classic, "The Message", by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. "It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from going under."

The irony is that a young black man in America is more likely to be murdered by another black man than he is a racist white one. The harsh reality is that had Trayvon Martin been killed by a black man under similar circumstances in most places in America, the story would not be considered national news. If that were the case, most Americans would not even be slightly familiar with the story of Trayvon

Martin. In cities like Detroit, Cleveland and Chicago, for example, this kind of story would be limited to the inside pages of these cities' major newspapers. Why? The answer to that question can indeed be found in the resonant phrase, "I am Trayvon Martin." The collective meaning of the statement for most black men in America is that our lives have been deemed less valuable than the lives of anyone else. It carries the poignant message that we, too, can find ourselves in Trayvon Martin's shoes at any moment - dead at the hands of either racist whites or self-hating blacks in America.

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