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## Know Thyself

**D**o you know yourself? Really? Before you try to help your child find the right life path, it's a good idea to take a close-up look at yourself first. Your beliefs and attitudes, your background and experiences, and your upbringing all play a role in how you guide your children to a successful future.

A personal inventory like the one in this chapter allows you to come to grips with the question: "Who am I?" Not "Who was I reared to be?" but "What happened to me?" and "Who have I become?" It pushes you to ask yourself difficult questions about how your own experiences have affected you, what you believe in, what you want for your children, and what you're prepared to do to help them reach their full potential. These questions will help you more clearly see if you provide them with opportunities or obstacles in their journey to adulthood. To strengthen the foundation of your family support program, use this self-assessment to evaluate your assets and liabilities. You may be surprised to find that you have strengths you didn't realize, as well as areas of weakness that may be holding your children back.

Ask yourself the questions posed in the following five sections before you go on to other chapters. Think about them carefully and honestly. Then, before you let yourself be satisfied that you truly know yourself, get some feedback from others. Talk to your siblings

about their recollections. Talk to your spouse or your child's other parent even if you're not living together. Ask your parents and friends to give their opinion. We tend to see ourselves one way, whereas others who know us may not see us that way at all. You might even ask your kids for their thoughts and opinions if they are old enough to have an idea of who you are and where you're coming from. You do not need to sit down with a clipboard and pen, but in casual conversation talk about your upbringing, the special problems and issues that you might have had, your strengths and weaknesses, and your hopes for the future. Finding out if others see you the same way you see yourself can be interesting.

This chapter gives you an introduction to many of the topics that are explored in more detail throughout the book. Find out first where you stand and where you need to go.

### **Five Sections of Self-Assessment**

- A look at the past
- A personality assessment
- A reality check
- The bottom line
- Looking ahead

## **A LOOK AT THE PAST**

Each one of us is a product of our past, for good or bad. That's why we can't really know who we are today unless we take time to consider where we came from. It is a gift to our children when we make the effort to reach back and celebrate how far we've come. The following questions will help you begin to think about the relationship between your own upbringing and your child's future.

## A Look at the Past

- What issues and problems related to race did my parents face when they were growing up?
- In the community where I grew up, what kind of expectations and messages did young blacks receive regarding the potential for education, training, work, and careers?
- Did my family encourage me to work hard and reach high?
- What kind of career coaching did I have when I was growing up?
- What obstacles have I had to overcome in order to achieve my dreams?
- How have things changed from my parents' generation, to my generation, to my children's generation?

*What issues and problems related to race did my parents and grandparents face when they were growing up?* Because of the civil rights movement, most young black parents today and certainly their children have no idea what living in a segregated society was like. Not many people today remember knowing someone who was actually born a slave. Only some of us may recall a grandfather or great-grandmother who actually lived through that terrible legacy. But that doesn't mean you should shut the book on that page in your family history. That heritage runs through you to your children. If your family members have been closemouthed about their trials and tribulations, ask them to talk to you. Tell them you want to know about the sacrifices they made, the struggles they survived, and the racism they faced. Knowing these things gives you a legacy to pass on to your children that they can honor and respect by conducting their own lives with pride and a sense of responsibility.

This can be an extremely motivating factor in raising black children and inspiring them to reach high in life. Use this information to help your children understand that because their ancestors succeeded with so much less than what is available today, they have an obligation to their legacy to do the best they can. After all, if their grandparents and great-grandparents could prevail against such odds, how can they do any less?

*In the community where I grew up, what kind of expectations and messages did young blacks receive regarding the potential for education, training, work, and careers?* I was lucky. I grew up in a community where my family and neighbors made me feel that I had a responsibility, a duty, to fulfill the expectations of my rural Mississippi community and my race. I clearly remember one example of how that expectation was communicated.

On report card day, all the mature women in my neighborhood would stop me on my way home to inspect my grades. They gave me a dime for every A I earned, and they always told me that I was going to be somebody when I grew up. It didn't matter that they themselves probably hadn't finished grade school or that I was someone else's daughter. They showed me that they had high hopes for the progress of my generation.

This community interest in the upbringing and ultimate success of its children continues today in many areas. I remember one young man from Milwaukee whom I had the opportunity to know when I was president of Howard University. On the day he was to graduate with a degree in engineering, his mother and father arrived with an entire busload of hometown people. This young man was a community investment made by church members, neighbors, former teachers, and extended family members. They were all there to share in his success.

If, when you think back on the community's influence on your upbringing, you see that there was a history of high expectation and support, you too are one of the lucky ones. You know how important this support was to you, and you're now in a good position to

make sure you continue that kind of traditional support system for your child and other children in your neighborhood.

But if you feel that you were not encouraged by your community, you are part of a radical departure from a long-standing black community tradition passed down through the ages. It's time to bridge that gap. Reach back into an earlier time and grab hold of the tradition that was denied you. Even if you did not benefit from the strength of community support, it is not too late to reach out for that legacy. I believe very strongly that an integral part of future success for our black children is in reestablishing a community expectation of achievement.

*Did my family encourage me to work hard and reach high?* If you grew up knowing that your family expected you to earn good grades in school, graduate, get a good job, and be a self-sufficient contributing member of society, then you know how influential these expectations have been on who you are today. You will very naturally pass on this model of ambition to your own children.

On the other hand, if your family did not place a premium on education and achievement, then you need to think carefully about how this influenced the outcome of your own life. You might wonder if life would be better or different if your parents had sat you down and watched you do your homework each night, if they had punished you for bringing home failing grades, or if they had insisted that you take a college prep program in high school rather than letting you load up on vocational courses.

If your parents were not actively involved in your education and goal setting, you may be letting this fact influence how you raise your own children. Look this situation directly in the face and recognize the need to take a different course with your own children. Tell your children, "Even though I did not have someone to push me or show me the way, I can and will do it for you." If you do not communicate this desire to give your children more than you had, your children may grow up thinking, *My parents didn't go to college, why should I?* or *My mother had her first child when she was sixteen; why shouldn't I?*

Family support for reaching high goals is vital. If you look back and realize that you did not have this advantage, promise yourself that it will not be denied your children.

*What kind of career coaching did I have growing up?* The answer to this question will help you avoid the negative and repeat the positive of your own upbringing. This question asks you to think back and trace the steps that brought you to where you are today. In some families parents map out a life plan for their offspring without ever asking for the child's input. Did this happen to you? Were you expected to follow in your father's footsteps? Were you expected to uphold a family tradition or meet established expectations whether you wanted to or not?

Other parents leave their children alone to find their own way. Ask yourself: Did you head down a life path without guidance or companionship? Did you have to figure things out for yourself? Did you fall into the first job that came along, without any long-term plans?

Some parents suggest possibilities and then give the children the resources they need to explore each one. Did your parents use your interests and talents to guide your career options? Did they talk to you about your hopes and dreams? Did they encourage you to reach high?

How, if at all, did your family guide you? Examine this part of your upbringing; then pull out the good and leave the bad behind.

*What obstacles have I had to overcome in order to achieve my dreams?* We all live through various ups and downs that get in the way of our life plans, but try to identify the things that were most difficult for you. Was it lack of money, bad peer influence, weak family support, bad advice, or your own poor attitude or stubbornness? The possibilities are endless. Which ones stand out in your life?

In some instances your greatest obstacle may have been the color of your skin. Before you begin to help your child navigate around the obstacles of racism, think about your own experiences. Being black in a white society may have caused you to be treated unfairly. Maybe you were sometimes the victim of public humilia-

tion or even physical violence. Did the attitude and actions of white people in your life deny you opportunities? Did you ever feel unwelcome or scorned in your own school or community? Have you experienced the degradation of discrimination in housing or employment? Although you may have overcome the problems, that fact doesn't diminish their importance in the big picture of who you are and how you will parent your own children.

Honestly assess how you handled these obstacles. Did you successfully overcome them, or did you fall short? Take time to think about how a situation, person, or event has affected where you are today. Knowing and facing your own life obstacles is the best preparation for steering your children around the same roadblocks in their own lives. If you've been there and recognize your mistakes as well as your triumphs, you will have empathy for your children's difficulties but little tolerance if they try to use them as excuses for not achieving.

*How have things changed from my parents' generation, to my generation, to my children's generation?* This question is particularly important in black families. Things have changed so dramatically over the last few generations that it's essential to be aware of how these changes affect who you and your children are today. Although black children are now more assimilated into America's mainstream, they still carry the burden of history—the legacy of slavery and the continuing burdens of racism and discrimination. They also owe a debt to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. They should know this.

Take a stroll down memory lane and think about how different your life and your children's lives are from those of previous generations, thanks to the hard work of those who came before you. Pull out stories about your parents and your grandparents and share them with your children. Let them know where they come from and how far they've come. Draw on the strengths of your ancestors that have been passed down to you. What survival skills did they have? How did they take a salary of thirty dollars a week and raise

eight children (as my father did)? And be honest about the failings in your family line that you expect your children to avoid or overcome. We now live in a society that does not practice legal discrimination but still harbors vestiges of racism. What in your family history will help you teach your children how to live in this kind of world and still reach their full potential?

## A PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT

Your innate personality can influence your parenting skills. Your personality creates a comfort zone around you, dictating what you're likely to do as well as what you may be unwilling to do. The following three questions focus on traits that affect your ability to advocate for your children and make sure they have all the resources and opportunities they need to reach adulthood successfully.

### A Personality Assessment

- Do I reach out or keep to myself?
- Do I stand up or sit down when I see a problem?
- Am I self-confident or fearful and anxious about my children and myself?

*Do I reach out or keep to myself?* To borrow a phrase from Hillary Clinton's book, it does take a village to raise a child. Not even the most educated and accomplished people I know try to raise their children without help. We all need to be proactive in finding the people, the programs, the organizations, and the institutions that can help our children. We need to network with other parents about parenting strategies, school information, the college application process. We need to be active in groups like parent-teacher organizations, church lay ministries, and community boards. Raising your child effectively comes down to who

you know, how you can work the system, and how well you hone your networking skills. You can try to go it alone, but a community network out there can give you the advantage—if you reach out to it.

This is especially true for black parents. Until thirty or forty years ago, black neighborhoods were very stable, and families shared such information informally. This segregated community formed strong bonds that made sure each child knew what was expected of him or her, and each family knew it could rely on the help of neighbors, church members, and an extended family to guide its children through to adulthood. But as these neighborhoods became integrated and close friends and extended families moved apart, many black families were left proud and independent—but alone. They had to find support beyond the black community.

Black parents now need to get out of the house and use the resources that are available to all Americans. They have a responsibility to their children to hunt down all resources that can help their children. If you have not been making this effort, you need to reexamine your reasons for holding back. Doing this will challenge your comfort level if you have had no experience with outside organizations and programs, but you have an obligation to your children to go beyond what is comfortable and reach out for assistance.

*Do I stand up or sit down when I see a problem?* Traditionally, black parents have tended to defer to those in a position of authority. In the past the number of professional careers open to blacks were so restricted due to racial discrimination that those with professional ambitions grew up to be preachers, teachers, undertakers, or small-business owners. These people became revered and highly respected figures in the community, and their word wasn't questioned. In some homes today this tradition of passive respect has been passed down, and some black parents still hand over their parental authority and control to those in positions of authority. This is especially so for less-educated parents who still see these people as having more knowledge and wisdom.

Be honest with yourself. Do you simply accept what those in a position of authority say? What would you do or say if a teacher said your child should be left back a year (or even jumped ahead a year)? What would you do if your child were put in a class for learning disabled children? When these and thousands of other questionable events happen in your child's life, what will you do? Will you stand up and get involved to find out all the details and to make sure that the person in authority is considering your child's best interests? Or will you sit back, assuming that those in charge know what they're doing? The choice you make will affect your child for life.

If you expect to be a positive influence on your child's future, you have to stand up and be heard. You have to feel empowered to act on your child's behalf. You have to be able to determine if the person in authority is acting in a positive way on behalf of your children or in a way that exploits them. You can do this only if you give yourself permission to examine and when necessary challenge the views of authority figures. Are you ready to do this?

*Am I self-confident or fearful and anxious about my children and myself?* Child development experts tell us that if we want our children to be emotionally strong and self-confident, we must model that behavior ourselves. That sounds reasonable and doable—unless you're a black parent. The black community has a long history and sound reasons to be fearful of white authority figures, and it is very difficult and maybe even unwise not to pass this cautious feeling along to our children. The days when a black male in the South would not look a white woman in the eye for fear of losing his life are not far in the past. Many were lynched for the slightest smile, eye movement, or perceived act of boldness. This fear is not easily forgotten.

I am a self-confident woman, but I cannot help feeling fearful as a parent. The 1955 death of Emmett Till in my home state of Mississippi was a defining moment in my life, and I don't think I will ever be able to separate that experience from the way I parent my son. I was twelve years old when fourteen-year-old Emmett from Chicago came to visit his uncle in Money, Mississippi. One day he

and his cousins went to a local grocery store owned by Roy and Carolyn Bryant. Carolyn was working in the store while her husband was away on a trip. It was alleged that Emmett made a pass at Carolyn Bryant by asking her for a date. He had boasted to his cousins that in Chicago he dated white girls. They challenged him to make a pass at Carolyn Bryant, and he did. When her husband returned a few days later, he learned about the incident because the news had circulated widely in the community. Bryant and his step-brother J. W. Milam went to Emmett Till's granduncle's home and over his protests they took Emmett away with a warning to the uncle that his life could be endangered as well. They took young Emmett to a barn and beat him to death. They also shot him once in the head, then tied a cotton-gin fan around his neck to weigh him down and threw his body in the Tallahatchie River. His uncle and other black people began to look for him. His body surfaced three days later on the banks of the river. I was scared to death that the same thing might happen to one of my brothers. That is an indelible experience, and I will never be free of the fear I felt.

This fear has passed through me to my son, and experiences in his own life have added to this sense of anxiety. He once told me that his defining moment came when he watched the video of Rodney King being beaten by the police. Even in this integrated and supposedly enlightened era, we have reason to fear for our children's safety as long as some people harbor the stereotypes and myths about black inferiority.

Yes, we can be both self-confident and fearful at the same time. The key is to take time to examine how we feel and to try to make our sense of confidence balance our sense of fear.

## A REALITY CHECK

Day in and day out we go about our lives in an often blind routine. We don't realize that the things we do and say each day without really thinking can have a profound effect on our children. It's good

to do a reality check once in a while to see if basic life occurrences like work, marriage, and daily experiences are all working together to benefit rather than hinder our children's growth. The following questions will help you sort out how your own daily actions trickle down to affect your children.

### A Reality Check

- Does my marital status affect my child's chances of success?
- If my child's other parent and I both work, how does that affect my relationship with my child?
- Am I letting my own disappointments influence my expectations for my children?
- What kind of role model am I for my children?

*Does my marital status affect my child's chances of success?* Your marital status does affect your children, not necessarily only for good or only for bad. Children are influenced in many ways by whether you are single, separated, divorced, married, or remarried. Whatever the situation, it's important for you to stop and assess whether both parents are meeting your child's needs; if you are not, assess how you can improve the situation.

Many black families are now headed by women only. If you are one of these women who is head of the household, ask yourself how this may be affecting your child's future. It is my belief that even the best mother cannot take the place of two parents. You have a parental obligation to do everything you can to give your children the benefit of having both parents or their surrogates.

Being married, on the other hand, can benefit your child—but only if you make the effort to make sure both parents are actively involved in the child's life. Whether married or not, take inventory. Ask yourself: Are both parents involved in this child's life to the

greatest extent possible? Are we both consistent in our expectations of our child? Can I do anything to help the other parent become more informed about what's going on in our child's life? Can I do anything to improve the state of my marital situation to help our child?

If, for whatever reason, your offspring's other parent cannot be involved in the child's upbringing, then you need to assess how you can fill the gap left by the absent parent. If you want your child to have all the advantages in the world, you need to start looking outward to community resources that can help you give your child the positive advantage of both male and female influence.

*If my child's other parent and I both work, how does that affect my relationship with my child?* It is likely that both parents work in many black households, just as in any household these days. If this is so in your family, you'll have to be careful that this factor not be a negative influence on your child's upbringing. When both parents work, they will have less time and energy for cooking a sit-down evening meal, for volunteer activities, for parent-teacher meetings, for interacting with others in the community. These are the facts; what's important is what you do about them.

If you are not putting in adequate family time, reevaluate how you can. Ask yourself if you can pencil in appointments with your kids every single day. Can you give up some of the overtime you work? Can you travel less? Can you muster the energy when you come home to call your children to your side and talk about their day? In order to influence the future of your children, you have to spend face-to-face time with them. There is no way around this.

*Am I letting my own disappointments influence my expectations for my children?* You may have faced many obstacles in your life that have prevented you from achieving your goals. It's possible that those disappointments are affecting the way you guide your children into the future. If, for example, you were denied certain opportunities because you were black (even though you worked twice as hard as white people), this can make you bitter. You may pass this bitterness on to your children without knowing it and affect their life

expectations. If you say, “Look at what happened to me. I could never get a break in this world. Nobody will let a black person be successful,” what will this lesson mean to your children when you later say, “I expect you to do well in school”? Why should they do well if they have understood your implied message that the world is going to hold them back anyway? Passing on a “chip on the shoulder” does no child any good.

When I think back on my life, there are many instances of discrimination that I have faced that all these years later could still negatively influence my expectations for my son. I have faced prejudice in my education, my work, and my social life. But, most particularly, I remember how I felt when discrimination against black voters continued long after the law gave us the legal right to vote. By law, I was “allowed” to vote, but in my home state of Mississippi I first had to pass a very difficult literacy test that white voters did not have to take and that most black people failed—including myself when I was a senior in college. Of course, this made me very angry. This kind of disappointment could have turned me away from the system and given me a very harsh attitude about being an American. I could have become very cynical and decided that I would never jump through hoops again for these people who were no better or more educated than I was. But if I had, could I possibly expect my child to go out and fight a good fight against today’s forms of discrimination and racism? My disappointment would have kept him from moving forward, and that would have served no purpose for either of us. In fact, it’s those who fought against the injustices that led the federal courts to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

This is not to say that we should shield our children from our experiences with racism and discrimination. We need not deny the past or tell our children that life is completely fair and equal. They need to know what we went through and how we managed. They need to know, in the appropriate context, about our disappointments and the things that hurt us badly. But they also need to know how they can emulate the positive things we did to

counter these disappointments and avoid our negative or nonproductive reactions. Our children should gain a sense from our conversations that life disappointments are painful, but if we let them, those disappointments can make us stronger and more determined. Remember: if your past disappointments dictate the way you live your life now, you're not likely to rear your child with a sense of optimism about the relationship between good outcomes and hard work.

*What kind of role model am I for my children?* Later in this book I will talk about the importance of giving your children positive, realistic, and tangible role models. But we cannot overlook the fact that you are your children's first role model. What does your life say to your children about your values and your own ambitions? If you have earned a college degree and have worked your way into a good life position, you are modeling the kind of life you most likely wish for your children. Talk to them about your experiences, your difficult times as well as your victories. Talk about your decision to go to college or the reasons you did not go to college. Show them through your actions and deeds the kind of life you want them to also enjoy.

If you feel like you haven't achieved anything worthwhile for your child to copy, you will have a hard time convincing your child of the value of hard work and accomplishment. You must look at your strengths, in whatever life position you hold, and use those strengths to encourage your children. My own mother finished only the fourth grade in school. She dropped out because her family needed her to work on the farm. But she was a wonderful role model. She never allowed her low educational achievement to limit her ambitions for her children. Eight of her nine children finished high school; seven of us went to college and are successful in life. My mother always told us that if she had had the opportunity to finish school, she would have become a nurse. (If she were alive today, she would be telling us she would be a doctor.)

Falling short of your life's ambition does not make you a failure. Having ambition is what is most important. Let your children know

what your dreams are and why you may not achieve them. Let them know that you will not let these same obstacles stop them from reaching their goals. Determination and optimism may be the most important life model you can pass on.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

When talking about life goals and future dreams, it's impossible to ignore the fact that being black in America adds a degree of challenge to the journey. Take some time to consider how you have been influenced by your heritage by asking yourself the questions in this section.

### The Bottom Line

- What did my parents teach me about being black in the United States?
- What kind of discrimination or racism have I faced in my own life?
- Am I happy with my life?
- What is my attitude about being black in America?

*What did my parents teach me about being black in the United States?* Think carefully about the answer to this question. Undoubtedly, you were raised with certain attitudes and beliefs about your race and how it would influence your chances of success. Through direct instruction, implied messages, or their actions and behavior, your parents gave you certain messages about what it means to be black in America. What were they? Do you still carry those messages with you? For good or bad, are you passing them on to your children?

When I think back, I remember that my parents were very direct in their teachings about what it meant to be black. They made sure

that my brothers and sisters and I knew that being black did not mean being dumb, dejected, or less able than anyone else. They also warned us when we grew older that we might be treated unfairly in the workplace because of our color. But we went out into the world knowing that black people were not responsible for the racism perpetrated against them and that our parents would never accept racism as an excuse for lack of achievement. My mother taught us that we were to play the hand we were dealt: we were to recognize it and fight against it but never allow it to cripple us. I have carefully passed these same messages on to my son and hope that he will do the same if he has children of his own.

If you were taught these kinds of lessons about your race, make sure you pass them on. Don't expect that because your children live in a more integrated world, they don't need to understand that being black can affect their life in a negative way—if they let that happen. They need to hear you say that you will never accept the prevalence of racism as an excuse for failure. Let them see through your own convictions that being black in America may be a challenge but never an excuse.

When you ask yourself this question, you might find that you were one of the children of the post-civil rights movement who was raised to see yourself as a victim of a racist society, without the power to change your life. Some black people bought into this mindset and allowed others' view of them to determine their own outcome. If you grew up with this victimized view of black people's role in society, you may or may not have fallen in line with this self-defeating outlook. But either way, by recognizing the power of attitude in your own life, you'll be in a far stronger position to pass on to your children a more empowering attitude that will allow them to take control of their lives and never be victims.

*What kind of discrimination or racism have I faced in my own life?* If your child comes home crying because he was jumped by a group of white kids or because he was not accepted into an advanced-student program even though his academic record made him eligible, you

face a tremendous parenting challenge. Your response to these kinds of situations will have a lot to do with your own experiences with racism and discrimination. Seeing the hurt that prejudice causes your own child can bring back strong feelings that you may have thought you left behind a long time ago. You may get angry or feel an overwhelming sense of sadness or resentment. What will you do with those feelings when your child looks to you through his or her tears?

You'll be in a better place to react with empathy and wisdom if you have already thought carefully about your own experiences with racism, taken the time to understand how these experiences shaped who you are today for both good and bad, and determined how you will use those experiences to teach your children how to deal with what is still inevitable at some point in a black person's socialization, schooling, and employment. When you have given serious thought to your past experiences, you can offer empathy when you say, "That happened to me too when I was your age." And then you can talk about how it made you feel and how you reacted—being careful not to pass on your own anger or prejudice.

You must be careful, however, not to allow your experiences with discrimination to cloud your judgment. White and black kids get into fights for reasons other than race. Your child may have been kept out of a school program for legitimate reasons. Your child may be playing the racism card where no racism exists. But it's hard to consider these things when your own experiences cause you to jump to race-issue conclusions. Pain and emotional assaults that you have buried deep down within you may surface unexpectedly when your child says, "My teacher doesn't like me." You may immediately assume it's because of your child's color, but don't let your own past vulnerabilities and natural sense of suspicion dictate how you respond. Go with the facts; focus on what happens to your child in each instance.

When you do this, you'll be able to decide how best to use your own experiences as a positive teaching tool. If you did not get your dream job because of racial discrimination, if you have been

unfairly accused of shoplifting, or if you were randomly stopped by police while driving, think about how you will explain these experiences to your child. Will you use them to discourage her from dreaming about reaching the top and becoming successful in order to avoid the frustration of racial roadblocks? You would probably not do this intentionally, but that's the message she may receive if you haven't yet learned to deal with your own disappointment. It's very easy to inadvertently pass on the message that there's no point trying because racial discrimination will beat you in the end anyway. Think carefully about your own experiences. Deal with them emotionally now and prepare yourself to encourage and support your child despite these obstacles.

*Am I happy with my life?* The way you feel about your life—your situation, your job, your progress—has a tremendous impact on how you raise your children, because children model what they see. If you go off to work every morning saying, “I hate this job, I wish I didn't have to go to work,” your children will adopt their own negative feelings about work. If you are upbeat or at least optimistic about your future, your children will learn to hope for the best for themselves too. Pay attention to what you say and how you act; you're being watched very closely.

The reality is that you may not like your position in life. Being honest with your kids and letting them know that you don't feel fulfilled can be good. But whining and complaining don't move your children to feel for you and comfort you; these actions move them to create their own negative and hopeless view of the world. Instead, use the facts of your discontent as a base on which to encourage your children to reach higher, do better, and have more than you. You can talk about the circumstances that have put you where you are and use that information to guide your children down another path.

How you feel about your life will determine to a great extent how your children view your role in life and life in general. So think hard about the attitude about life you're passing on.

*What is my attitude about being black in America?* Some black parents are very comfortable with their blackness; others are still struggling to fit into their own skin. Obviously, where you stand on this point affects how your children feel about being black, and this directly affects their future. So it's important to take time to honestly assess, from your point of view, the assets and liabilities of being black.

If you find that you are happy and comfortable being a black person, your children have a great advantage in their efforts to achieve their goals. They will know from watching you and listening to you that being black is not an obstacle or an excuse. They will be raised knowing that their black skin is a source of family pride and a reason to feel empowered to reach high.

However, if you harbor strong resentment because you feel you are a black person in a racist white world, you will pass on a legacy of hate. You will rear children who themselves practice prejudice and believe in stereotypes. You will give them an excuse for failing. You will teach them to expect nothing. To raise happy, accomplished, and successful children, you need to deal with your own anger and resentment. Face it, name it, and then try to replace it with more positive and optimistic expectations for your children. Sure, let your children know that their parents and grandparents were the victims of discrimination, but encourage them not to repeat the wrongs that so deeply hurt their own kin. Point out that they now have opportunities to rise above the racism of some, *if* their judgment is not flawed and hardened by resentment and hate.

## LOOKING AHEAD

The personal insights you gain from self-assessment give you a good foundation for looking ahead. They can help you see more clearly where you want your children to land and how you can help them get there. Ask yourself the following question before you begin the hands-on job of career coaching: Do I have clear expectations for my children?

Of course, as parents we all say we want our children to be successful and happy. If you have reached a level of personal and professional success, you expect the same for your children. But do they know about these expectations? You must tell your children what you expect. Think about and try to remember if you have directly told your children things like this: "I expect you to get good grades." "I expect you to behave in school." "I expect you to meet all the academic requirements to get into a good college." "I expect you to be a self-supporting adult." Have you assumed that your children know these things? If you have, then it's time to speak up: tell them what you expect and then tell them over and over again.

If you do not feel personally or professionally successful, ask yourself if you have let that influence what you expect of your children. You may feel that you want them to accomplish more than you have, but that doesn't mean you really expect them to reach that goal (although you may never have admitted this out loud or even to yourself). Without meaning to, you may be conveying messages such as this: "This world just won't let a black person get ahead. What's the sense of trying?" Or "I tried so hard but just kept getting knocked down, so why should I expect my children to do any better?"

You can't let that happen, no matter how disappointed you may be with your own life or with society in general. My earliest memory is the day my mother took me to school when I was three years old. She asked the principal, Mr. Travillian, if I could go to school with my sister Dorie, who was a year older than me. It seems that I wanted to go to school, and my mother saw no reason why I shouldn't. "If you have this little girl bring me a cigar tomorrow," said Mr. Travillian, "I'll see what I can do." So the next day, my mother dressed me and my sister Dorie up in ruffly dresses and patent leather shoes. And then she bought a cigar, and we walked to the school. I looked up at this tall and imposing man and gave him the cigar. He then called for the teacher, who took me by the hand to the classroom, and I was in!

My mother, who had to drop out of school in fourth grade to help on the family farm, let us know from our earliest age that school was the most important thing in the world. I would feel guilty if I even thought about the possibility of not becoming successful. She also told us directly what she expected. She told us straight out that she did not want us to end up like so many of the girls in our area of Mississippi who dropped out of school, married early, and had kids at a young age. Her high expectations were clear: “You’re going to make it out of high school.” And eight of us did.

In past generations black parents expected their children to do better than they had done. But I don’t see that tradition continuing in some black families today. Instead, I see parents burying their children early due to violence in our streets. I see parents who have given up on themselves and therefore on their kids. I see parents who are afraid to tell their children “no.” I see parents who blame society for their children’s failures. These are the things that now keep black children back more than racism, more than the repeal of affirmative action laws, more than standardized tests that are biased against poor black children. The push to success must begin in the black child’s home, and that is why I have written this book.

## TAKING THE NEXT STEP

Each of the points highlighted in this self-assessment test will be discussed in greater detail throughout the book. But first, the following chapter will help you take a good look at your children to better know who they are, what they need, and where they’re headed.