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Tavis Smiley and Cornel West: authors, thinkers, friends

By AUDRA D.S. BURCH

They talk all the time, in person, on the phone, at hot dog stands, these men, best friends, who have used their voices to move the national African American agenda forward. Cornel West and Tavis Smiley, best-selling authors and great thinkers on the race narrative, talk about living in a promised America, a country free of racism, inequity, poverty and despair. It's a conversation made more urgent by one black man's unlikely bid, then inspired election as the first black president.

This elevated conversation and other social, economic and political themes comes to South Florida on Sunday as Miami Book Fair International's opening-night "Evening with . . ." headliners.

"We try to keep each other accountable and moving," says West, an intellectual and social critic who authored the epic *Race Matters*. "As an elder person, part of my role is to try to keep alive in his mind and heart and soul, the preciousness of history. And he gives me a real sense of the nuances of the new conditions."

West, 55, a Princeton University professor, and Smiley, 44, a syndicated talk-show host, forged their bond more than two decades ago, largely on the belief that they must serve the black community by speaking directly to the people, to the times.

West's *Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom* (SmileyBooks/Hay House USA, \$19.95), a poignant new collection of insights and challenges, was born, in some ways, of his friendship with Smiley.

"I have learned over the years to never be with Cornel without a pen, because he is always saying something brilliant," Smiley says. "I write what he says on anything I can get ahold of: napkins, airplane tickets, notebooks. Half the stuff he says in *Hope on a Tightrope* came from those conversations."

The Miami Herald interviewed West and Smiley, mostly about the issue of race, last week's presidential election and their own professional projects. Here are some of their responses:

Question to West: What inspired the title of your book, *Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom* (2008: Hay House, Inc., \$19.95) ?

Answer: I thought the term captured the sense of the emergency and the urgency in America today. The title is a metaphor for America's condition right now with the economy nearly collapsing and the war. Our new president will be talking on a tightrope, a slippery rope and he is going to need dexterity, prudence, concentration and the ability to focus.

Question to West: Now that Barack Obama has triumphed, what next?

Answer: Obama will be on the tightrope. The world is watching to see if he comes through. The key is we, the people, have to help him stay on the rope. In the end, we make him and he makes us.

Question to West: What does Obama's election mean on matters of race?

Answer: We will all have to adapt to a new terrain. We will be looking at what black leadership means as a whole. There is some sense that Obama is not a black leader, rather an American leader who is black. There is still room for brothers like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson who are focused on the specifics of racial abuse. When a Jena Six comes up, we still need a Sharpton. Obama being in the White House does not mean white supremacy won't be around.

Question to West: Why Obama?

Answer: People were so hungry and thirsty for something new and novel, someone that could inspire. The Democratic Party had sister Hillary Clinton, who is a very good politician, but she is tied to an older generation. So here comes this young, brilliant brother, with genius organizational skills and [the movement] just took off. It was not just a spark; he executed this in a serious way.

Question to West: What happens now to the national black agenda, which includes economic, political and social concerns?

Answer: Our agenda still requires a highlighting of the disproportion of suffering and misery of black people. We are not the only one suffering abuse, white, brown, red, women, the poor and gays are all wrestling with issues of injustice that require attention. The issues are not identical but they are on a continuum. In an Obama administration, I hope he is receiving good advice, that is in no way downplaying racism. We are going to have to put pressure on to let him know we are part of his public interest, too.

I would like to see Barack Obama aspire to the leadership stature of an Abe Lincoln in this serious crisis. And I see my calling as an attempt to aspire to the work of Frederick Douglass. He kept the pressure on Lincoln though they had a deep love and respect for each other. I will speak and I will organize and I will mobilize and be part of pressure groups seeking justice for black folks, but never stopping there.

Tavis Smiley's latest book is *Accountable: How To Make the Covenant Real* (2009: Atria, \$24.95) in which he challenges the United States to set a new standard of responsibility for its leaders and their followers. To be released in February, the book is the third installment of his bestselling Covenant series. Fans can also revisit the last four years of Smiley's radio commentaries on a new four-CD set, *On Air: The Best of Tavis on the Tom Joyner Morning Show 2004-2008* (2008: SmileyBooks, \$23.95)

Question to Smiley: Tell us about your latest project.

Answer: If you listen [to the CD set] you get a pretty good sense politically, socially, economically and culturally of what it was like to live in that time period. The trip back down memory lane reveals times that were beautiful and profound, scary and disappointing.

Question to Smiley: Will Barack Obama's historic campaign and election change the paradigm of race relations?

Answer: Let me first say that with Obama's historic campaign, there is much to celebrate. I believe the best thing that comes out an Obama campaign or election is that progressive possibilities are unleashed because of his success; that progressive ideas may be revealed and the doors opened. I believe his campaign [and election] moves us one step closer to creating an America that is as good as its promise. My sense is that black, white, inner-city, suburbs, rich and poor all want an America that lives as a nation. As Americans, we all want the same thing. Nobody is asking for more or settling for less.

On the other hand, there are some concerns about whether because of Obama's success that people are going to rush to now make the case that we live in a race-transcendent, race-neutral, post-racial America. Those of us who talk about disparities and racism know there is still work to be done. We don't want an Obama victory to distract from the work that needs to be done.

Question to Smiley: One of Obama's greatest strengths was his ability to organize and mobilize the larger vote. Up to 85 percent of the population nationwide voted on Tuesday. What now?

Answer: All the engagement and excitement generated around Obama's campaign and the possibility of a black president . . . I call that the engagement dividend. The key is: What are we going to do with the dividend? I want it to be spent and invested well. People think this was about getting a brother in the White House, but the larger project was the engagement and how to use it to address problems unique to black Americans, such as income disparities and the achievement gap and the digital divide.

Question to Smiley: What do you want your own public service legacy to be?

Answer: Really, this is about loving and serving my people, its about trying to find a way to deserve to be here, paying the rent or mortgage if you will, for the space we occupy.

I often think about, talk about my calling, my vocation, my purpose. Dr. West once said to me many years ago: "You can't lead the people if you don't love the people; You can't save the people, if you don't serve the people." I have taken that as my mantra for all my work. Every day I ask myself, how can I love more deeply today and service more richly?

• **No tickets currently available:** Smiley and West will speak Sunday, Nov. 9, at 7 p.m. at in Chapman (Bldg. 3, second floor.) There are currently no tickets available, but there is a designated "Stand-By" line outside the session; attendees will be admitted to the room on a first-come, first basis if seats are unclaimed by ticketed guests 10 minutes before the session.