



Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud

Cornel West

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When reading one of Cornel West's books, it is easy to imagine you're listening to a professor, philosopher, preacher, or even an uncle. His words are clear and passionate, and his ideas about literature, philosophy, music, race relations, and service are thoughtful and well researched. His message for the masses, to "...love our crooked neighbors with our crooked hearts," sums up his philosophy of life.

West's father, who worked at the McClellan Air Force Base, and his mother, a teacher, raised their four children in Sacramento, California. A youth spent attempting to bring social justice to the playground by beating up the fortunate and giving their goods to the less fortunate seems predictive of the type of man West would become. He writes, "Even at that age [third grade], I had issues with America." His behavior concerned his parents, but soon Christianity, sports, music, literacy, and philosophy became the mix the author needed to propel him to graduate magna cum laude from Harvard in three years and go on to graduate school at Princeton.

The author's most interesting and revealing stories involve his less-than-perfect romantic relationships. Whether he was dating "the magnificent coloratura soprano," Kathleen Battle, or married to Elleni Gebre Amlak, an AIDS activist, his point of view remained the same: "...everything comes second to your calling." West's calling is to "...touch the souls and unsettle the minds of people be they in prison, classroom, church, or on the block." This dedication to service contributed to the end of three marriages.

West is equally frank about other challenges he faced: financial woes, missed opportunities to be a constant physical presence in his children's lives, sporadic blackouts in public places, and his fight against cancer. One challenge received national attention: his conflict with Harvard president Larry Summers. Yet obstacles never prevented him from writing well-received books or securing a post at Princeton.

When *Race Matters* was published in 1993, West, who was already well known and respected in academia, became the topic of discussion in the White House and around dinner tables all over the country. According to West, his volume of essays about the Rodney King verdict, black leadership, Black-Jewish relationships, and so on, "...was the right book at the right time." This book is, too. In *Brother West*, readers will find a portrait of a man who has committed his life to being a part of the human family. (October) *KaaVonia Hinton* (November / December 2009)

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