

'Happyness' and the Will - Will Smith is Hip Hop

Written by faisal X tavernier ID3183
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“Happyness” and the Will (Will Smith is Hip Hop) - by faisal X tavernier

“I believe in God! I believe in Destiny! Not destiny in the sense that all our actions are predetermined, but destiny in the sense of our ability to choose who we are and who we are supposed to be.... That’s why I go light on my vices.” - Will Smith, Born to Reign

Beneath his charming yet sometimes goofy smile and the Hollywood façade of special effects and the mountains of money he’s acquired, there is a simple philosophy that guides Will Smith. It’s the same mystery treasure in him that has steered great men of history. We all have it, but very few learn to ever control, master and impose it on the world to get out of life what we want. That mystery force is what separates us from the beasts of the field. Mr. Smith was blessed to be named after it. It is called the Will. By exploiting his namesake in as many ways as there are definitions for the word “will,” Mr. Smith has become one of the most recognized individuals on the planet earth. Above that and to his great credit, he has walked a path through the blasphemous world of Hip Hop and entertainment for two decades squeaky clean and scandal-free while making people smile and feel good.

Will Smith is one of those rare individuals blessed at birth with that inborn light of faith possessed by prophets who are raised to show the world the power of the human “will.” It’s that power that allows him to believe in himself and force Will’s “will to be done on earth.” How else can a Black kid out of Philly (America’s most impoverished city in 2006) with a silly grin and jerky demeanor charm racist Hollywood into opening the door to become the top international actor in the world commanding \$20 million (and counting) a movie. He’s just launched a new deal with the multi-billion dollar Indian Bollywood industry to make and release films in India.

Might I mention, Smith was the first to be receive a Grammy award for a rap song in 1989. Rap was a new and incomprehensible art form to them white-bred Grammy folks back then. So, the rap category was pushed off of the live telecast and was scheduled to air during the pre-ceremonies. In militant fashion, Will Smith (yup, the Fresh Prince) and a slew of other rap artists boycotted the awards show and Smith sacrificed his performance slot on the internationally televised show to express his outrage over the Grammy folks’ failure to acknowledge Hip Hop.

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Will Smith's name is a brand synonymous with "cha-ching." His unrelenting drive to be the best at what he does has made him a one man box office blockbuster and arguably Hip Hop's greatest ambassador to the world. While chumming around with Oprah Winfrey on her show, he leisurely hinted at his ability to become the President of the United States in the future. Keep it real, if Will Smith ran for President, who has more money, fame or love of the people to beat him? (Will, please hush up before you "get got" before you get going.)

Smith teamed with Nelson Mandela and became AIDS ambassador for the Nelson Mandela Foundation where he's vowed to play a critical role in reaching young people in South Africa. The horror of AIDS is wiping out millions of Africans across-the-board. Smith and Mandela have been spotted on numerous occasions wearing black shirts bearing the number 46664; Mandela's prison number during his 27-years of imprisonment for resisting the racist apartheid rule of South Africa's white minority.

In March of 2002, Smith said that his perception of Hollywood changed after meeting Mandela. "Mandela told me that in prison, he was only allowed to watch one movie every six months and he looked forward to it more than anything because he saw hope in cinema," said Smith. "It revealed the worst human tragedies and the greatest human possibilities. He told me never to underestimate the power of what I do - to make people laugh, cry and think," said Mr. Smith of his iconic mentor Mandela (who went from a prison cell to be president.)

One of Smith's most popular songs was Miami, a fantasy island-ish ode to the third poorest city in America. Ironically, under pressure from Miami's Cuban exile community over Mandela's relationship to Cuban Leader Fidel Castro, the city formally rejected and snubbed Mandela's world tour after his release from that hell hole (prison) in South Africa.

The word Tao (or Dao) is an ancient word which defines the secret to success and fulfillment in life is to renounce one's own (personal) way and follow the Great Way. Wise man Lao Tsu taught that this method required 'non-action'; not inaction, but rather a harmonization of one's personal will with the natural harmony and justice of Nature. This is the Tao of Will!

On a beautiful Thursday afternoon we sat with Will Smith at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel to discuss life, philosophy and his new movie the "Pursuit of Happyness"; a truly universal story of courage, hope and uplift. The movie co-stars his son Jaden Smith (son of Jada). What we found

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in those few moments together was a man whose phenomenal success in life was tied to a very simple belief wrapped in a whole lot of faith.

The true life story of Chris Gardner which is chronicled in the Pursuit of Happyyness is the epitome of the American dream. The familiar title is taken from the very document that birthed this nation, the Declaration of independence. "After seeing the 20/20 piece on Chris Gardner" said Smith, "what resonated with me is the principle that this country is founded upon. The idea of the poor, tired and huddled masses who can come here with nothing and create a life. When I looked at the story," says Smith, "this is the only country that Chris Gardner is possible; where someone could have an idea and be willing to endure to see it come to life. However foolish or naïve it might be to have that type of an idea, it is the basis for why this country works. This is the promise of what America is supposed to be and I wanted to make a movie about that promise in a time when we need to turn that promise into practice. The promise is beautiful, but sometimes our practice isn't as beautiful as the promise."

At the core of this love story (a man in love with his child and his vision) is the greatest life lesson we all must learn. Unfortunately, most people go to the grave blind never believing in themselves and realizing their power.

That belief in "self" exemplifies the similarities between Will Smith and Chris Gardner, says Smith. "I think we both have that same naïve belief. I don't want to get too metaphysical but there is a film entitled "What the Bleep Do We Know," says Will Smith. "In that movie, there is an idea that things exist based on your acknowledgement of the existence of that thing. So, a barrier is there if you believe that a barrier is there. If you don't believe that a barrier is there, then it literally is not there. That's an idea that I have never been able to put words to, but I've always felt it. I've always felt that where I am and where I am going and how to get there is COMPLETELY in my control. There's no racism that can hold me back. There's no army that can hold me back. If I decide I want something, I will demand that the universe go in that direction. It's a bizarre concept. It's probably naïve, but your parents are always telling you that 'you can do anything' and it's a cliché that we hear a lot. It's faith! I believe that if I follow the rules of God or Allah, Jehovah or Buddha or whoever you follow, I believe that if I fall in synch with the rules, there is a certain amount of command over the universe that I can have. "

Acknowledging the privileged position from which he says this, he goes on, "It's easy for me to say that in the situation that I am in now, but I've always believed that. With someone like Chris Gardner to lay on the floor of a bathroom of a subway station homeless with his child and experience that ultimate parental failure and still be able to wake up in the morning and regenerate that great belief in himself (and go on to become a millionaire success story); now

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that's THE THING. When I look at Chris Gardner, Muhammad Ali or Nelson Mandela; people in the face of what felt like the entire universe against them, yet they still stand strong with their chest out and make it go the way they desire it to go is a magic human power. I believe this movie illustrates the beauty and magic of that power. That's the reason why I chose to do this movie," said Will the philosopher. That philosophical belief coupled with the religious practice of running and reading to fine tune the body and mind keeps this man in Black continuously shattering limitations.

In one of The Pursuit of Happyness' greatest moments, Smith/Gardner chastises his young son for putting too much thought in becoming a pro basketball player. In a moment of clarity, he realizes he's just killed his son's dream and apologetically says, "Son, when you got a dream, you better protect it. People think that cause they can't do it, you can't." It's pearls of wisdom like this that make this movie so important to see for all men who crave a better life; especially Black men.

The young Mr. Smith (Jaden) delivers a solid performance reminiscent of little Raven Symone when she was doing her thing on the Cosby show. "I didn't exactly bring my son on," says Smith. "He saw Jada and I reading the script one night and he was laying in the bed with us and said 'tell me the story daddy.' So I told him the story and he said, 'I can do that.' I said 'Really?' So Jada took him to the auditions and when he got down to the last 10 kids, I was like 'Shoot, I might need to start paying attention.' The director loved him. He was the best! He's got a special gift, It's just really good semen," he jokes. "Nah that was inappropriate," he says. "As much as I want to take credit for it, he came here (on the planet) with it. My grandmother used to say, 'He's got an old soul.'"

In describing the process that allowed the father and son team to work together Smith states, "He prepared on his own with Jada while I went away and prepared myself. What we decided was that on the set, Jada was his mother and I was his co-star. So, if there were things about the scene, he and I would deal with it. If there were other issues, things he was dealing with emotionally, Jada would handle that. It was hard for the first two weeks, then one day the director Gabriele Muccino said, 'Will, you worry about your performance and I will worry about Jaden's.' You know, that's my son, so I'm in the scene telling him 'Son, pay attention.' You know I want him to win so I'm working really hard on him and that deteriorated my performance. So we got to the point where I really entrusted the director to work with him and I focused on me," said Will.

The turning point for Will Smith in playing Chris Gardner occurred when he went to that bathroom in Oakland that Gardner and his son slept in that first night that they were homeless.

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“When I walked in that bathroom, I got it. When we shot the scene and I had my son on my lap, I understood what he must have been thinking and feeling and I was embued with the essence of Chris Gardner and I started boo-hoo crying.”

In a time when homelessness and housing scandals are at an all time high, the question is raised, “Can this movie change people?” Smith says, “Well anytime you create a piece of art you hope that it has inspirational qualities. At the end of the day, for some people it will just be a movie. But as an artist, you hope that it sparks someone and reminds them of the idea of who they are supposed to be. For me, it brought an understanding of the path to homelessness and I realize how close a lot of people live to homelessness; like two bad breaks away from being in Chris Gardner’s situation. Chris plays Reverend Cecil Williams in the movie and he’s one of the most knowledgeable people on the plight of homelessness. He makes two really good points. One is the fact that there is almost always drug use. That is the hope killer! That is the most difficult to get around. If someone isn’t in the right frame of mind, it’s difficult to lead them to a situation where they can get a leg up. The other difficulty is when homelessness comes down through the generations. Meaning that if one person in the family gets a place, then you always have a place to go and lay your head or get something to eat. (That somehow robs ambition). He said that it’s more an issue with the generations than with the individual. I asked him (Gardner) what is the answer,” says Smith. “This is a man who has given more than 25 years of his life to this cause and he says that the answer is always with people. It’s not with dumping money in a system. It’s with people who have an idea to fix it and then people have to make it happen,” said the Fresh Prince of Bel Air.

Of course we had to know whether or not the Rubik’s Cube scene was real or pre-fixed special effects. Smith replied, “I can do a Rubik’s cube in under 2 minutes and 15 seconds.”

Will Smith is a great example for us all. We can look at him and his life with star struck eyes and come up with a million reasons why he can and we can’t! But in reality, we all have will power to be what we want to be. What will you train your will to do for you? The Pursuit of Happiness is everyone’s story!

For questions or comments hit faisal@souljah.com

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